

## Walter Benjamin's Theory of Fortune

Tupac Cruz

A passage from the second of Walter Benjamin's theses "On the concept of history" should perhaps give us pause for thought:

[T]he image of happiness, that we cherish (*das Bild von Glück, das wir hegen*), is thoroughly colored (*tingiert*) by the time to which the course of our own existence has assigned us (*verwiesen*). There is happiness—such as could arouse envy in us—only in the air we have breathed [...]. In other words, in the representation of happiness pulsates inextricably that of redemption (*Es schwingt [...] in der Vorstellung des Glücks unveräußerlich die der Erlösung mit*)<sup>1</sup>.

The last lines of this passage unveil a relation between two 'representations,' of happiness and of redemption, one of which 'pulsates' in the other. We are not told just what *kind* of representation these are, whether they are, for instance, the concepts to which these two words refer, or the intuitions that, as we might put it, 'schematize' those concepts. If they were concepts, to see one representation as 'pulsing' in the other would be to see them as logically related. Since the sequence of statements that make up the passage have as their subject the 'image' of happiness, Benjamin's assertion is most likely about the intuitions that schematize these concepts. If so, his point might then be rewritten as follows: we cannot schematize one of these concepts, or grasp it in intuition, without the other concept being involved. Perhaps Benjamin uses the term 'representation' vaguely, but affirmatively so, as though to say that, at least for these thoughts to be thought, a wandering or passage, from concept to image and from image to concept, is what we are called to do. In any case, it seems clear that this involvement, or entanglement, between two words and their conceptual and/or intuitive matter, is not something like a confusion that Benjamin would want to dispel, or to be undone once unveiled. Instead, if what is unveiled is an inability for thought to isolate these representations from each other, it is an inability that should be captured, affirmatively, in our doings with these words.

Now, the asserted relation between the representations of happiness and redemption is a conclusion of sorts: it functions, in any case, as the culmination of the preceding sequence of statements, which are statements about our 'image' of happiness. According to these statements, which would then function as premises, our 'image' of happiness is determined by what, for us, has been: the air that we have breathed is an example of something that has already passed, in this case through rather than to us, and Benjamin claims that it is out of such materials, grammatically signaled by the use of the perfect as descriptions of 'completed' states of affairs, that our grasp of happiness is

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<sup>1</sup> GS1 693, SW4 389 (translation by Harry Zohn, modified). Throughout: GS# = *Gesammelte Schriften* (Suhrkamp), SW# = *Selected Writings* (Belknap).

formed. What has happened—*what is, as it were, done happening*—determines our image of happiness, and it is by being so colored by *the done* that the representation of happiness is, for Benjamin, pulsed through by the representation of redemption. This tells us that, for Benjamin, the subject of redemption is just that: *what is done happening for us*. The logical structure of the passage can then be rendered as follows: **if** the image of happiness is permeated by *the done*, **and if** *the done* is the subject of redemption, **then** the representation of redemption pulses through the representation of happiness.

Surely, as a thesis about the representation of happiness, this one is worth thinking twice, since we might be inclined to understand happiness as something that we expect or look forward to, rather than as something that we remember or look backward to, as we do with what is done happening. But we have already gone too fast, perhaps, in translating the word *Glück* as ‘happiness,’ for this word can also be translated, in certain contexts, as ‘luck’ or ‘fortune.’ For instance, a question from Benjamin’s early essay, ‘Fate and character,’ clearly places the word in the second kind of context, for it appears alongside its antonym, *Unglück*, whose semantic range seems to gravitate towards ‘misfortune’: “Is fortune, as undoubtedly misfortune, a constitutive category for fate?”<sup>2</sup>. This word, *Glück*, buds here and there in Benjamin’s writings, and it seems fair to say that there are no clear guidelines by which to determine whether the distance between its two possible English translations is the distance between two ways of determining the same concept or the distance between two different concepts linked to the same word<sup>3</sup>. Indeed, while the concept of happiness refers us to the possible ‘states of being’ that determine the ‘how’ of living beings, the concept of fortune seems to refer us to events that have the capacity to make or allow a living being to pass from one of these states to another. Although it might not make sense to ask whether Benjamin’s thoughts lead in one of these directions of *Glück* rather than the other, it does seem worthwhile, for those of us who are interested in the theory of events, to examine just how important the second might be for Benjamin’s thinking.

In the following pages I will try to show that what buds when this word buds is, indeed, a ‘theory of fortune,’ and that it is not only an important dimension of Benjamin’s thought, but also an interesting contribution to the theory of events. I will not, however, derive this theory from a coherent synthesis of all, most or

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<sup>2</sup> GS2 174: “Ist das Glück, so wie ohne Zweifel das Unglück, eine konstitutive Kategorie für das Schicksal?” (my translation).

<sup>3</sup> Consider two passages: “Denn im Glück erstrebt alles Irdische seinen Untergang, nur im Glück aber ist ihm der Untergang zu finden bestimmt” (‘Theologisch-politisches Fragment,’ GS2 204). “Es gibt nun aber einen zwiefachen Glückswillen, eine Dialektik des Glücks. Eine hymnische und eine elegische Glücksgestalt. Die eine: das Unerhörte, das Niedangewesene, der Gipfel der Seligkeit. Die andere: das ewige Nocheinmal, die ewige Restauration des ursprünglichen, ersten Glücks. Diese elegische Glücksidee, die man auch die eleatische nennen könnte, ist es, die für Proust das Dasein in einen Bannwald der Erinnerung verwandelt” (‘Zum Bilde Prousts,’ GS2 313).

even some of Benjamin's uses of the word *Glück*: I will instead present the theory as we find it in one single use. I do this in part because this use appears in a short text, relatively self-contained, and in part because—as I hope will become clear—this is an important text, loaded with a compact and overflowing wealth of thoughts. The text in question is a brief notebook entry written during Benjamin's stay on the island of Ibiza in 1932, and published later that year as part of 'Ibiza sequence,' a group of *Denkbilder*. In that note Benjamin clearly places the word *Glück* in a context that calls for 'fortune' as translation:

That in the morning the pupil knows by heart the contents of the book under his pillow, that the Lord gives to His own in their sleep, and that the pause is creative—to give this room for play is the alpha and omega of all mastery, its characteristic. This, then, is the reward before which the gods have placed sweat. For work which promises only proportional success is child's play, compared to that which summons fortune. Just so, Rastelli's stretched-out little finger summoned the ball, which hopped onto it like a bird. The decades' worth of practice that came before in truth brought neither his body nor the ball "under his power," but brought this about: that the two came to an understanding behind his back. To weary the master through diligence and effort to the limit of exhaustion, so that finally the body and one of its limbs can act in accordance with their own reason: this is what is called "practice." The success is that the will, in the body's interior space, abdicates its power once and for all in favor of the organs—the hand, for instance. So it happens, that someone, after looking in vain for something that is missing, gets it out of his head, and then one day looks for something else and in this way the first object falls into his hand. [The hand has taken on the matter and in feeling its way about it has come to agreement with the object which had withdrawn itself from the dogged will]<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Translation by Rodney Livingstone, considerably modified. I quote the version published in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* as part of "Ibiza sequence," which diverges slightly from the notebook entry. However, the last sentence in my quotation, in brackets, restitutes the version found in the notebook entry. The German text of the published version follows, with some notable variants from the notebook entry [**in brackets and bold type**]:

Daß der Schüler den Inhalt seines Buchs unterm Kopfkissen am Morgen auswendig weiß, der Herr den Seinen im Schlafe gibt und die Pause schöpferisch ist - dem Spielraum zu geben ist das A und O aller Meisterschaft und ihr Kennzeichen. Dieser Lohn eben ist es, vor den die Götter den Schweiß gesetzt haben. Denn Kinderspiel ist Arbeit, welche mäßigen Erfolg verspricht [**variant 1: erzielt**], mit der verglichen, die das Glück herbeiruft. So rief Rastellis ausgestreckter kleiner Finger den Ball herbei, der wie ein Vogel auf ihn heraufhüpfte. Die Übung von Jahrzehnten, die dem vorherging, hat in Wahrheit weder den Körper noch den Ball »unter seine Gewalt«, sondern dies zustande gebracht: daß beide hinter seinem Rücken sich verständigten. Den Meister durch Fleiß und Mühe bis zur Grenze der Erschöpfung zu ermüden, so daß endlich der Körper und ein jedes seiner Glieder nach ihrer eigenen Vernunft handeln können – das nennt man üben. Der Erfolg ist, daß der Wille, im Binnenraum des Körpers, ein für alle Mal zu Gunsten der Organe abdankt – zum Beispiel der Hand. [**variant 2: Es ist eine posthypnotische Suggestion, die hier, im Binnenraum des Körpers gleichsam, wirksam wird, indem der Wille ein für alle Mal zugunsten der Organe abdankt: zum Beispiel der Hand**]. So kommt es vor,

In the following sections I will attempt a detailed analysis of this text. My analytical premise will be that this text is a *Denkbild*, and that the thoughts brought to shape here are produced through operations in both concept-space and image-space. I will artificially isolate these operations, and divide my analysis in two parts: first I will examine a group of conceptual operations by which Benjamin introduces the concept of fortune into the theory of action; then I will examine the three examples that ‘schematize’ these operations: the student, Rastelli, and the person who looks for something. By so ordering my analysis I do not presume that there is a priority, in the coming to shape of a *Denkbild*, of concept to image.

## I

### I.1

In its published version the note bears the title ‘*Übung*,’ or ‘Practice,’ and this indicates that the core of the *Denkbild* is Benjamin’s definition of that concept. The note is, indeed—or rather feigns to be—an account of ‘what we call practicing’ (*das nennt man üben*), that is, of the way in which the concept of practice functions in everyday speech. This fiction is perplexing, since it is not easy to hear, in what Benjamin says, any dominant hues of ‘what we call practicing.’ In everyday speech, ‘she is practicing’ is a possible answer to the question: ‘what is she doing?’, and this suggests that ‘practice’ is understood as a form of activity, which we specify as preparatory activity, as when we say that musicians and athletes practice *for* an event (a performance or a game). About practice thus understood Aristotle observes, in *Metaphysics*  $\theta$ , that it is exceptional among forms of activity. Forms of activity are *energeiai*, ‘uses’ of *dynameis* or ‘capacities,’ so that to run is to use one’s capacity to run, or for that capacity to be *in energeia*, ‘in use’ or ‘at work.’ Now, Aristotle takes brief notice of practice because it presents a difficulty for the application of this pair of concepts. Although one may have a *dynamis* without putting it to use, it is nonetheless the case that one has the capacity *so that* one may put it to use, which entails that *energeiai* are prior to *dynameis*. As Aristotle puts it, “those who are contemplating ( $\theta\epsilon\omega\rho\omicron\upsilon\sigma\iota\nu$ )” do not do so “in order to have contemplative knowledge ( $\acute{\iota}\nu\alpha\ \theta\epsilon\omega\rho\eta\tau\iota\kappa\acute{\eta}\nu\ \acute{\epsilon}\chi\omega\sigma\iota\nu$ ),” i.e. the capacity to contemplate, but rather they acquire the capacity to contemplate so that they may engage in acts of contemplation—“unless,” Aristotle adds, “they are

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daß einer nach vergeblichem Suchen das Vermißte sich aus dem Kopf schlägt, dann eines Tages etwas Anderes sucht und so das erste ihm in die Hand fällt. Die Hand hat sich der Sache angenommen und im Handumdrehn ist sie einig mit ihr Geworden **[variant 3: einig mit dem Objekt geworden, das sich dem verbißnen Willen entzog]**“ (GS IV 406-407 [**notebook: GS VI 453**]; SW 2.2 591 [**notebook: SW 2.2 643**]). Livingstone includes **variant 2** in his translation of the published version, where it does not appear.

practicing (εἰ μὴ οἱ μελετῶντες).” Indeed, those who are practicing are active, but they seem to be active *so that* they may have a capacity. However, according to Aristotle, this is not a case in which the capacity would have priority over the *energeia*, but rather a case in which the *energeia* is improperly grasped as such. In fact, Aristotle then explains, those who are practicing contemplation are “not really contemplating except in a limited sense (οὐχὶ θεωροῦσιν ἀλλ’ ἢ ὥδι)” (1050a 10-11). This argument, however frail or robust, may be said to capture an aspect of the concept of practice as it is used in everyday speech: if I am practicing for a run *by running* this is, in a sense, not my act of running just yet. Certainly, an exercise of my capacity to run is an event that may be attributed to me as agent, and thus an action. But my practice runs are determined as proto-events, even though what I do when I practice is the same thing that I do when I properly run. This distinction between proto-events and events is possible because the practice runs cannot be described accurately without referring to what I am preparing for. One may also say that my capacity to run, then, is not fully in *energeia* when I am practicing, for in such cases the action is one by which, in fact, I am looking to acquire a capacity that differs from the one I already have: the capacity to produce an event (here an action, an event that can be attributed to an agent)<sup>5</sup>.

Now, it seems clear that Benjamin does not consider practice as preparatory activity, and he does not quite build his account on examples like Aristotle’s. (We can ask why it is that he feigns to be shedding light on ordinary usage—why not say: *das nenne Ich üben*, ‘this is what I call practicing?’). Instead, Benjamin seems to regard practice as a form of activity in its own right, and describes it, moreover, as a kind of work (*Arbeit*), which is to stay, as a species of the genus ‘productive activity.’ A form of activity is productive when its description refers, implicitly or explicitly, to a result. Accordingly, in order to distinguish practice from other forms of work Benjamin attributes to it a specific kind of result, and this constitutes the heart of his definition of the concept: to practice is “[t]o weary the master through diligence and effort to the limit of exhaustion, so that finally the body and one of its limbs can act in accordance with their own reason.” According to this definition, practice is not an activity to be understood only as preparation for an event, but is a form of activity that can produce a specific kind of event. As Benjamin puts it, this would be an event that must be attributed to an agent’s body (or an organ of that body) rather than to the agent.

There are, of course, many events that we can attribute not to an agent, but to her body or an organ thereof, such as the twitch of an eye. If these were the kind of events that Benjamin had in mind, his definition of practice could be rewritten as follows: practice is a form of productive activity whose specific kind of result is an involuntary action. Indeed, Benjamin describes practice as a form of activity by virtue of which an agent’s will “abdicates in favor of the organs (*zu Gunsten der Organe abdankt*).” Nonetheless, there is reason to think that Benjamin is not

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<sup>5</sup> For more on Aristotle’s account of practice, see Jonathan Beere, *Doing and being. An interpretation of Aristotle’s Metaphysics Theta* (Oxford UP, 2009): 306-7.

interested in involuntary action in that sense: his examples, after all, do not seem to place us in the realm of twitches or the like. We may assume, then, that the image according to which a will “abdicates” dominion of a body as a result of practice points in a different direction, although it will take some work to determine which direction that is. For the moment, we may say that an event that can be attributed to an agent’s body, in the sense that interests Benjamin, is not an event bearing no relation at all to the agent’s will, and that it is not, in that sense, an involuntary action.

## I.2

Benjamin’s interpretation of the concept of practice is linked to an interpretation of the concept of success (*Erfolg*), which is the concept of a kind of result. Practice, he tells us, is one of two species of work, and this division of the genus ‘work’ in two species is linked to the division of the genus ‘result’ in two species. Now, to describe an action by referring to a result is to establish a criterion in light of which an action can be said to fail or to succeed. If the proposition ‘I am breaking this branch’ is true, the action that is now underway will be said to have succeeded in some sense when the proposition ‘I have broken this branch’ comes to be true. When the first statement is true, and the second false, we will say that my ‘branch-breaking’ miscarried, went unfinished, or simply failed. To say, as Benjamin does, that there are two kinds of result, is then to say that there are two kinds of criterion by which an action can be said to succeed.

Benjamin describes the two species of the genus ‘work’ as follows: (1) work that “promises a proportional result (*mässigen Erfolg verspricht*),” (2) work that “summons fortune (*das Glück herbeiruft*).” The first kind of result seems familiar enough: an action of the genus ‘work’ succeeds when it produces the state of affairs that the agent wanted to bring about by ‘doing this’ and then ‘doing that,’ when ‘doing this’ and ‘doing that’ can be described as ways of bringing about that state affairs. Benjamin describes this kind of work as “child’s play” when compared to the second. This description sounds very much like a provocation, since typically we would not call an activity that ‘summons fortune’ work at all. Through this provocation, I suggest, Benjamin seeks to set up a conceptual shelter for a kind of event, so that we may come to grasp some events as the result of an activity that we are being challenged to consider as a kind of work. In other words: we are being called upon to think through a sense in which something like a *fortunate event* could count as the result of an activity, so that the activity can be said to succeed when such a fortunate event occurs.

To set up this conceptual shelter is, or is also, to reactivate the ruins of an abandoned conceptual building; such, at least, may be the point of Benjamin’s description of the result of practice as that “reward (*Lohn*) before which the gods have placed sweat.” By so describing its result Benjamin depicts practice as the fulfillment of a divine command or test, and accordingly places the concept of fortune in the vicinity of the concept of divine reward. However, the meaning of

the German word that Benjamin uses, 'Lohn,' is not restricted to the sphere of religion: a reward is certainly a species of the genus 'result of an activity,' and what specifies it is that it is a result that we would say was not achieved by, but rather given to the agent. Although 'gods' can function as the givers of such a reward, this is not a fundamental feature of the concept: in a section of his *Vocabulaire des institutions indo-européennes* devoted to this conceptual sphere, Émile Benveniste isolates the root from which the word 'Lohn' derives as designating the kind of result proper to activities that do not earn a salary, which in early Germanic texts is employed eminently in the military context of a raid:

The meaning of *lūcrum* is gain, benefit, with the idea that it represents something un-hoped for, an unexpected extra (*quelque chose d'inespéré, un surcroît inattendu*). [...] The point of departure for the German root *\*launom* [...] will then be "benefit produced by seizure (*bénéfice réalisé par prise*) [...]," [...] consequently gain, wholly different from the salary brought by regular work (*tout différent du salaire que procure le travail régulier*)<sup>6</sup>.

What Benjamin is out to reactivate, then, is the conceptual potential of this kind of 'lucre' and of the irregular form of productive activity whose result it is: something that could not be assumed or expected to result from an activity—and in that sense not a 'proportional' success, a *mäßige Erfolg*—but nonetheless the proper result of a form of activity. It is within this conceptual setting, then, that Benjamin installs the concept of 'fortune.'

Now, if we were to develop the allusion to the gods, fortune would appear, of course, as the 'divine giver' of this kind of reward. But Benjamin does not seem interested in the concept of such a 'giver,' but rather in the possibility of describing the result as 'given' rather than 'obtained.' In other words, this appeal to the concept of fortune suggests that Benjamin is interested in the logic of attribution. Typically, we attribute the result of work to the agent as we attribute to her the actions that produce that result; 'fortune' is a concept that we use when the result of her activity cannot be attributed to the agent in this way. We may say then that the result is awarded to, rather than achieved by the agent, and 'fortune' is our name for the awarder. Surely, when an agent obtains a result after doing what is to be done to obtain it, we would not say that fortune played a part, nor would we say that the result had been given. It would seem odd to us, in that sense, to attribute the actions to the agent without attributing their result to her as well. This is because we understand work as a kind of activity whose results are, as Benjamin puts it, 'proportional' to the actions undertaken, and by virtue of that proportion we regard the result as gained by the agent. The concept of a second kind of work, practice, is thus negatively determined as one lacking such 'proportion' between the actions and the result, which entails that the result could not be expected or be counted on by the agent. This is why the attribution of the actions to the agent do not entail, in the case of practice, the attribution of the result to the agent.

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<sup>6</sup> Volume I (Minuit, 1969): 169.

We may now reconstruct Benjamin's analytics of 'work' as follows: there is a kind of work that obtains a result (expected) and a kind of work that is given a reward (unexpected). Now, the fact that the second kind of result is unexpected does not mean that there is no relation at all between the actions and the result. That is to say that if, in this case, the result is not proportional to the action, there is nonetheless a relation between them, which we may describe as one of *positive disproportion*. To determine this relation, Benjamin describes practice as a form of activity that "summons fortune." If we consider this description, we see that Benjamin is not only expanding our understanding of productive activity, but also and through the same means narrowing our understanding of fortune. For to describe fortune as 'summoned' or 'provoked' seems to run against one possible interpretation of the concept, according to which it is properly instantiated by cases of what we may call 'sheer' or 'pure fortune.' Consider an example of 'pure fortune': if I am walking down the street and find a ruby sitting on the pavement, there is arguably no relation, proportionate or disproportionate, between my walking and my finding the ruby. At the very least it seems forceful to say that in this case my walking 'provokes' the appearance of the ruby. According to Benjamin's analysis of fortune-attribution, if a result is awarded by fortune, an agent cannot claim it as obtained by her. But what this example makes clear is that 'pure fortune' is not a result at all, for it would not quite make sense to consider the ruby as a given to me as a reward for taking a walk. Benjamin thinks that there are nonetheless actions such that it does make sense to describe a fortunate event as their result: 'practice' is his name for this form of activity, and 'summoning' captures the fact that in the case of practice the activity 'calls for' a result that cannot be expected, in a way that my walk did not 'call for' my finding a ruby. The concept of fortune, then, is narrowly interpreted as the concept of an event that can be grasped as the disproportionate result of an activity. The concept of work, in turn, is broadly interpreted as encompassing forms of activity whose results are not proportional to the actions that can be attributed to the agent. The thought that joins these two interpretations is the thought that a fortunate event, which cannot be attributed to the agent as the result of her action, can be attributed to her body. Benjamin's examples are a schematization of this thought.

## II

Let us now examine the three examples that schematize Benjamin's theory of fortune. Benjamin presents these as examples of what he calls 'mastery' (*Meisterschaft*), and before we examine them we must say something about his use of this concept. If we consider practice as a kind of work, and a fortunate event as a kind of result, it makes sense to consider mastery as the corresponding kind of agency. But if mastery names the form of agency that corresponds to practice as a form of action, it names a very particular form of agency: one whose results, when the activity succeeds, cannot be attributed to the agent, but to her body. And yet the mastery, in a sense, must be the agent's,



just as the will, whose abdication is sealed by the production of a fortunate event, must be the agent's.

This approach to the concept of mastery requires us to specify two characteristics that the concept of 'fortunate event' must be able to synthesize: a fortunate event is (1) the result of a practice and (2) an event to be attributed to the agent's body. How can we see these two as determinations of the same kind of event? Benjamin tells us that "the alpha and omega of mastery" is "to give room for play (*Spielraum zu geben*)."<sup>1</sup> We might say, then, that to give room for play is to summon fortune, or that fortune is summoned by a form of activity that gives room for play. And Benjamin specifies a recipient of this room for play, for 'play' is what 'the body' or 'one of its organs' do when the master's will is exhausted by practice. In that sense, the concept of a fortunate event *just is* the concept of an event that can be attributed to an agent's body as the result of a practice.

The three examples of mastery should present us, then, with a fully—at least duly—determined schema of the kind of event that Benjamin has in mind: events that result from instances of practice, which place the agent in the realm of mastery, and events that can be attributed to the agent's body. The examples appear in this order: (1) a student who masters the contents of a book during his sleep, (2) 'Rastelli,' who gets a ball to hop unto his out-stretched finger, (3) a person who finds something that she was no longer looking for while looking for something else. At first sight, the sense in which these are examples of events that can be attributed to an agent's body is not entirely clear; in fact, it will take some effort to clarify not only the meaning but even the content of the first two examples, which Benjamin in fact presents in extremely elliptical form.

## II.1

I will begin with the last of the three examples, for, on one the hand, it is the only example whose presentation is not elliptical, and on the other, it brings into view most clearly a structure that they all modulate in slightly different directions. This last example, of someone who finds something that she is no longer looking for when looking for something else, is also one in which there seems to be no ordinary sense in which we would say of the person described that she is 'practicing.' This tells us, again, that Benjamin's is not an account of 'what we call practicing,' and that his concept of practice is not necessarily schematized in those contexts where we ordinarily use the word: there is practice, the point would be, wherever there is a fortunate event. Benjamin accordingly describes the event of finding the object as follows: "The hand has taken on the matter and in feeling its way about it has come to agreement with the object which had withdrawn itself from the dogged will (*im Handumdrehn ist sie einig mit dem Objekt geworden, das sich dem verbißnen Willen entzog*)."<sup>2</sup> Note that there is an important difference between this example and the example of finding a ruby, namely, that the person here described had doggedly and unsuccessfully looked for the object before. What Benjamin calls an agreement between a hand and a

thing, then, takes place when the agent is *no longer* looking for a thing that she *had looked for* before. Indeed, this example of a fortunate event is structured by the fact that the agent *previously looked* for the thing that she has *now found* ‘by fortune.’ When she finds it, then, she finds something that she *once wanted to find*.

If this is an example of what happens when a will ‘abdicates in favor of the organ,’ we are now in a position to outline what this political image entails for Benjamin, and to establish the difference between the concepts of ‘fortunate event’ and ‘involuntary action.’ For it seems that in this example the agent’s will to find the object was not outright abandoned or relinquished, since for that to be the case we should be able to attribute to her something like an explicit cancellation or disavowal of the volition (‘I no longer want to find X’). But if we say of someone that she has ‘given up hope of finding X’ or ‘forgotten that she wanted to find it,’ we are not necessarily saying that there is no longer *any sense* in which she wants to find it, or that she doesn’t want to find it anymore. In other words, when a volition is no longer the one with reference to which we are doing what we are presently doing, this does not mean that the volition has been cancelled or voided. It follows that, if Benjamin’s example schematizes the concept of practice as a form of activity by which the will ‘abdicates in favor of the body,’ we need to understand abdication as something other than such a cancellation. For in this example it is clear that what fortune awards is something wanted by the agent, and doggedly so, although the volition in question bears a temporal index: it is an earlier volition, no longer active but not thereby cancelled. Although to capture the singular status of such a volition is not easy, I propose to define it as a *remnant volition*.

The concept of a remnant volition can be determined as follows: before abdication, a volition is linked to an expectation, and after abdication a volition remains, but disjoined from expectation, so that a remnant volition can be described as one that has *survived the expectation of its result*<sup>7</sup>. In this example, the agent forms a remnant volition to find X simply by forgetting that she wants to find it, but not by ceasing to want to do so: she has ceased to expect, or to count on finding X by ‘doing this’ and ‘doing that.’ Benjamin is clearly interested in the anomalous validity of this kind of volition, and in the way in which it affects the potential attribution of a volition to an agent. For if the agent in this example must be seen as having forgotten that she wanted to find X, what Benjamin describes as an agreement between her hand and X, and behind her back, determines *the hand* as the bearer, upholder, host or refuge of her now remnant volition to find X.

## II.2

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<sup>7</sup> From the point of view of the result—and following Benveniste’s reconstruction of an ‘originary’ conceptual distinction in the Indo-European context—we might say that the abdication of the will brings about a passage in its representation: from being grasped as ‘salary’ to being grasped as ‘lucre.’

We can now look at Benjamin's first two examples. I have said that these two examples are elliptical, and by this I mean that Benjamin is signaling towards, rather than fully presenting, the examples in the text of the note<sup>8</sup>. To flesh them out, then, we must track down and examine the sources towards which Benjamin signals.

I will begin with the second example, which refers to a field of activity where there are masters in the traditional sense: the Rastelli mentioned by Benjamin is an historical figure, the Italian juggler Enrico Rastelli. A master juggler is someone about whom one could say that he has achieved, through practice, control over his body and, through it, the capacity to skillfully handle certain objects. This is the kind of master about whom we would say that he practices in order to further develop, or to maintain, a capacity already acquired. Unsurprisingly, Benjamin's understanding of what is at stake in practice, even in this case, is quite different. Benjamin approaches this example from the point of view of the result, by describing the fortunate event that would have been the result of Rastelli's practice: a ball hopping unto his outstretched finger 'like a bird.' We may presume that this is something that would have taken place during one of the juggler's performances, and that it is a stunt for which the juggler has carefully rehearsed, after coming up with a way of spinning the ball, for example, so that it seems to hop back unto his finger. But according to Benjamin "[t]he decades' worth of practice that came before in truth brought neither his body nor the ball 'under his power (Gewalt)'," but rather allowed the body and the object to reach an understanding behind the juggler's back. This example, then, like the example discussed above, schematizes the concept of a fortunate event as an understanding between a hand and an object reached 'behind an agent's back,' and it seems fair to assume that, here too, what the schema brings into view is the formation of a remnant volition, although the example, as Benjamin presents it, does not make it clear.

We can fill the gaps in the content of the example in light of a story written by Benjamin three years later, 'Rastelli erzählt...'. The narrator of this story retells a story heard from Enrico Rastelli, which allows us to see to what extent the note is elliptical: the outstretched finger is not Rastelli's own, but that of the anonymous protagonist of the story told by Rastelli. The protagonist of Rastelli's story is described as a legendary juggler who had perfected an act with a single ball. When he presented this act it appeared to the audience that the juggler's body and the ball seemed "attuned to each other, incapable of doing without each other"<sup>9</sup>. Although this appears to exemplify the agreement between the organ and an object described in the note, the story adds an element in no way hinted at therein: inside the ball there is a young dwarf, who works as the juggler's

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<sup>8</sup> The reason may be that it is, after all, a note—which tells us something about its published version: that it is a published note, rather than a note revised for publication.

<sup>9</sup> GS4 778, SW3 97. Translation by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, "on the basis of a prior translation by Carol Jacobs" (SW3 98).

partner in creating the conceit that the ball responds to his commands. This means that, at first sight, the “understanding” between the juggler’s body and the ball is illusory. It is only as the story develops that we understand the function of this example in the *Denkbild*. The juggler receives an invitation to present his act before a Turkish ruler. As usual, he and his assistant arrive separately to the place where the performance is to take place—a closely guarded palace—to avoid raising suspicions. The moment that Benjamin mentions in the note marks the culmination of the act: the ball, after seating nearly still on the floor, hops like a bird and settles on the juggler’s outstretched finger. But only the conclusion of the story brings the fortunate character of the event into view: as he exits the palace, the juggler discovers that his assistant had been unable to get past the guards and enter the palace, and that the ball was empty during this particular performance.

Clearly, the key to the example is the absence of the assistant, and just as clearly the example plays with our presuppositions about what genuine mastery amounts to. For in this case the master is someone who achieves an extraordinary result, but not through a form of action that would be directly conducive to the acquisition of the capacity to produce it. The absence of the assistant, then, plays the same function that forgetting played in the previous example, although in this case the agent does not forget his volition. Strictly speaking, the juggler wanted the ball to *appear* to hop like a bird unto his finger, and the volition to get the ball to *actually* hop unto his finger could not be attributed to him in the past. The master, in other words, was not practicing with the expectation of performing the act without the assistant: he achieved this, we would rather say, without wanting to, and we could even go as far as to say that he achieved it *because* he did not want to.

In this case, then, a remnant volition is formed not by being forgotten, but rather by being disregarded. As the agent does not consider the possibility of the ball *actually* behaving as it did, and practices so as to produce the proportional result of its *appearing to do so*, he has given his hand and the ball ‘room for play,’ just as the agent in the previous example did by forgetting that she wanted to find X and setting out to find a different object. While in that case the volition became disjoined from the expectation to find X, in the present case that expectation was never there to begin with. And yet, when the fortunate event takes place, it seems necessary to say that both volitions, the active volition to produce an illusion, and the remnant volition to produce an event that could not have been expected, can no longer be regarded as independent volitions. Instead, the remnant volition radiates over the active volition and, as it were, overtakes it, so that we may imagine the agent, in this case, to be brought by the result of his practice to wonder what it is that, in truth, he ‘wanted’ to achieve through his years of practice. In other words, a fortunate event would seem to have, in this case, the power to reveal to an agent a ‘true’ volition or the ‘truth’ of an active volition.

This example also adds another element to the schema, which points towards a concept that we have not discussed before, but which seems to be a crucial inhabitant of the logical space of practice, namely: the concept of repetition. In the context of 'what we call practice,' of course, we understand the repetition of an action or a sequence of actions as enabling the possibility of performing these types of action better. In that sense, what I have called proto-events *are* repetitions, whereas the event to which they refer is not, which entails that repetitions, as pseudo-*energeiai*, are ways of acquiring or strengthening the capacity to produce an event. Benjamin, in turn, argues that the proper result of repetition, in the case of the juggler, is not the acquisition or strengthening of the capacity to produce an expected result, but the 'abdication of his will in favor of the organ,' which is also the formation of a remnant volition. We might say that, in this sense, repetition is at least one, perhaps the pre-eminent medium for the formation of remnant volitions, but not because it increases an agent's capacity to achieve a result with her body, but because it enables the agent's volition to disjoin from her expectation to achieve a proportional result.

We may further develop Benjamin's interpretation of repetition in this context by comparing this form of repetition—call it practice-repetition—to compulsive forms thereof. The comparison makes sense to the extent that, in both cases, we may speak of a volition at play that is neither active nor cancelled, if we consider compulsive repetition as expressing the inability or resistance, on the part of an agent, to acknowledge a volition as her own. But nothing suggests that Benjamin's examples would call for the attribution of unacknowledged volitions to an agent; instead, although the juggler's volition 'abdicates,' it seems clear that the remnant volition, sheltered by his hand, is not one that he could simply fail or refuse to acknowledge as his own. As the fortunate event captures the remnant 'truth' of his active volition, a transgressively perfected version of a volition that he does acknowledge as his own and which amplifies what he wanted *beyond the strictures of expectation*, the agent in the example may find himself not knowing whether to acknowledge the remnant volition as his own, but just as surely he would be at odds to say that he did not want to do what he did. This indeterminacy in the attribution of the volition, which for the agent may well be a positive, even blissful component of the experience of a fortunate event, can nonetheless, according to Benjamin, be brought to determination: for it is because both the remnant volition and the fortunate event can be attributed to the agent's hand that the agent both can and cannot acknowledge the volition and the event as his own.

### II.3

To conclude, let us now turn to the example of the student, which functions in fact, in the body of the note, as a portal-schema, or as an image by going through which we enter the *Denkbild*. This portal-schema is elliptically rendered by Benjamin as follows: "in the morning the pupil knows by heart the contents of the book under his pillow." Now, the composite schema glimpsed through our

examination of the previous two examples allows to say that, in this case too, we must understand the student's mastering of the content of the book after a night's sleep as something other than the proportional result of a study session during the previous day. Benjamin marks this point by adding that in this case "the pause is creative," by which we are asked to imagine the student as having mastered the text during his sleep. Although we are not told as much, we imagine that the book is under the pillow because the student has placed it there, which suggests that he might have been trying to master the text until the very last minute, when sleep overtook him. This in turn suggests that here, as in the hand-schema, the remnant volition, which we can imagine as formed during sleep, coincides with the student's acknowledged and active volition to master the text. In light of the composite schema we must say, nonetheless, that the hours of study that may have preceded the student's sleep *did not* produce the expected result, as though the seeds of mastery planted during the day had sprouted into view after a night's sleep. If there were such hours of study, the schema compels us to see them as the student's way of exhausting his volition to master the text, and thus as a way of summoning or provoking fortune—even though the given reward is, in this case, identical with the expected result.

A closer look at the example will lead us further, for here too Benjamin is signaling towards an unnamed source text: Marcel Proust's *In search of lost time*. The example is, in fact, one to which Proust returns more than once in volumes 2 and 3 of his work, which Benjamin translated. This portal-schema, in other words, is gleaned from the work of Proust, where the image also functions as a recurring schema, that is, as the intuitive articulation of a thought. To determine what that thought might be, and to account for Benjamin's decision to place it at the entrance to his *Denkbild*, I will examine two passages where Proust develops the image in slightly divergent directions.

In the first of these passages, the Narrator is analyzing a perceptual event, his 'grasping,' for the first time, a musical segment heard many times before. To 'grasp' the musical segment is here to enjoy it or 'live it,' so that the Narrator can claim to have heard it many times, but never grasped it. If the segment is a phenomenon whose form of appearing is by being enjoyed, this phenomenon had never appeared to the Narrator until now, although he had encountered it more than once before. Now that he has grasped it, the Narrator asks himself what relation there may be between this perceptual event and his previous encounters with the segment, when it was heard but not grasped. The answer he proposes is that the phenomenon is so complex that it could not be grasped in one single act of perception, which entails that it can only appear by being repeatedly encountered in different occasions. Thus, those previous occasions, when it seems to the Narrator as though he had grasped nothing, nonetheless constitute a phenomenon that eventually made itself graspable only through them. The phenomenon, we might say, appears 'for the first time' only after a series of proto-apparitions, and without these proto-apparitions the experience of a 'first time' would be impossible. As a result, the Narrator interprets this as a kind of

phenomenon whose perception presupposes the work of memory. Thus, although the proto-apparitions are experienced as null when compared to the phenomenon's first apparition, their repetition is constitutive of the latter event. This is the phenomenological insight that Proust illustrates through the example of the student in the following lines:

If, as one thought, one had really not distinguished anything the first time one heard, the second and third would be so many first [times], and there would be no reason why one would have grasped something else the tenth time. What is probably missing, the first time, is not comprehension but memory. Because ours, with respect to the complexity of impressions to which it is confronted as we listen, is minute [...]. These multiple impressions, memory is incapable of immediately providing us with their recollection (*souvenir*). But the latter is formed in it little by little and with works one has heard two or three times, one is like the school boy who has re-read many times before falling asleep a lesson he did not think he knew and who recites it from memory on next day morning (*a l'égard des œuvres qu'on a entendues deux ou trois fois, on est comme le collégien qui a relu à plusieurs reprises avant de s'endormir une leçon qu'il croyait ne pas savoir et qui la récite par cœur le lendemain matin*)<sup>10</sup>.

Now, we may say that in these lines the Narrator is coming to terms with a kind of aesthetic commitment to a piece of music, a fidelity underlying his openness to listen to it many times in spite of the fact that it repeatedly fails to appear to him as an enjoyable phenomenon. In the absence of this fidelity, his final ability to synthesize the proto-apparitions into a 'recollection,' and to grasp the phenomenon, would not be possible. In that sense, Benjamin's appropriation of the schema brings into view a conceptual implication of the Narrator's analysis, which in a sense is also concerned with a form of volition. For we could determine this aesthetic fidelity as a will to perceive, as a volition to grasp a phenomenon, its charm or its power, which the Narrator interprets retrospectively as a volition to allow the phenomenon to repeat itself as many times as was needed for it to appear<sup>11</sup>. And the time of sleep, which the Narrator places between the student's efforts to memorize the lesson and his unexpected ability to recite it, signals the fact that here, too, remnance is at work.

Proust's interpretation of the work of remnance is more clearly in view in another deployment of the schema. Here again the Narrator ventures an account of his ability to grasp, after previous and unsuccessful efforts, a phenomenon determined as 'to be enjoyed,' in this case the talent of the actress Berma. But this time the Narrator, in turning again to the image of the student in order to schematize his account, develops an analogy between the time during which the student sleeps and a period of time during which he, the Narrator, had lost

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<sup>10</sup> Marcel Proust, *À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleur*. I quote from the one-volume 'Quarto' edition of *À la recherche du temps perdu* (Gallimard, 1999): 422 (my translation).

<sup>11</sup> We may take a step further and say that the repetitions that express the Narrator's 'will to grasp' can just as well be attributed to the phenomenon as the expression of a will to appear.

interest in grasping the phenomenon:

And then, a miracle, as these lessons we have exhausted ourselves in vain to learn during the night and which we find, known by heart, after having slept [...] Berma's talent, which had escaped me when I sought so avidly to grasp its essence (*quand je cherchais si avidement à en saisir l'essence*), now, after these years of forgetting, in this hour of indifference, imposed itself to my admiration with the strength of evidence<sup>12</sup>.

In these lines, the Narrator qualifies his volition to grasp a phenomenon as 'avid,' and argues that it is only once such avidity has waned that the phenomenon has room to appear. The phenomenon has room to appear when the avid search gives way to an 'hour of indifference,' and the schema beings the specific virtue of this 'indifference' into view. For the time during which the student sleeps is a time during which it would not make sense either to assert *or* to deny that he *still wants* to master the text that he had sought to learn to the point of exhaustion. And so we see that Proust's schema can be projected, without much distortion, into Benjamin's. The remnance of the volition during sleep, we would then say, survives the avidity with which the agent expects the result, and the phenomenon can only appear once an avid volition to perceive has been replaced a remnant volition to give the phenomenon room to appear—which the Narrator experiences, remarkably, as a form of indifference. Just as remarkably, the Narrator describes the appearance of the phenomenon as having "the strength of evidence," and it seems possible to determine the transformation of an avid volition into a remnant volition as one without which this form of evidence is not possible. The Narrator, in other words, could grasp the phenomenon only by becoming indifferent to it, and his experience of this phenomenon as evident, as not needing to be validated on the basis of anything else—and in that sense as enjoyable—is grounded on the positive character of this indifference, that is to say: on the remnance of his commitment.

### III

After looking at Benjamin's examples in some detail, it seems fair to say that the content of this *Denkbild* is far from exhausted by our reconstruction: the concepts of practice, 'fortunate event' and 'remnant volition' surely call for further development, and the place of Benjamin's 'theory of fortune' in the broader context of a theory of events remains to be determined. I will conclude with two summary points:

1. The realm of fortunate events is not a region of the realm of what happens regardless of what agents want, but a region of the realm of events that can

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<sup>12</sup> Marcel Proust, *Le côté de Guermantes*. I quote from the one-volume 'Quarto' edition of *À la recherche du temps perdu* (Gallimard, 1999): 782.



count as fulfillments of volitions, or as 'wanted happenings.' Practice, in turn, can be formally described as whatever form of activity allows an agent to form a remnant volition, and in that sense to disjoin volition from expectation. Now, since a fortunate event is defined (a) as the result of a practice and (b) as an event that can be attributed to the agent's body, we may still want to ask what more there is to say about the body's capacity to bear or shelter a remnant volition. As remnant volitions are forms of fidelity, Benjamin's analysis of practice present a sketch of what we could call the body's capacity for fidelity, but as surely as 'fortunate events' are rare we may wonder whether this capacity is ever a body's own.

2. We may also say something about what I have been calling a 'fortunate event': if an event that can function as the result of a practice is 'unexpected,' we can read this as pointing in the direction of the concept of a 'pure event.' But as with the concept of 'pure fortune,' Benjamin's *Denkbild* distorts the purity of the thought, since the fact that such an event *has been wanted* distorts the sense in which its arrival is unexpected: a fortunate event is unexpected only to the extent that a volition aiming towards it has survived the expectation of a result. For as long as the will was active the event was expected, and it has acquired, as it were, the capacity to be a 'pure' event only after the agent's will has 'abdicated' and the volition has undergone a transformation, a passage to remnance. As we have seen, this transformation can take different directions, some of these Benjamin briefly outlines, and there will surely be others left for us to investigate.