

MAKING A MARK

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ABSTRACT

Walter Benjamin believed it was possible “to read what was never written.” His own writing and practices sought both to explain and model how a person might undertake this historical project. Benjamin’s essay “On the Mimetic Faculty” provides a through line for the papers collected in this theme issue, which is designed to prompt further work and inquiry into how words—and historical materials broadly construed—might be read not only for their content but for insights about the past that may be evident in their arrangement, appearance, texture, or location. Scholars from history, philosophy, literature, anthropology, and beyond look at cases ranging from premodern Japan to present-day South Africa to consider how and suggest why scholars might want to “read what was never written.” Together, the articles and commentaries are offered as a record of what has been done, in the eager anticipation of reading what has yet to be written.

Keywords: Mimesis, historiography, nonsensuous similarity

“‘To read what was never written.’”²

1. The articles and commentaries in this issue build from a workshop held on “Writing as Historical Practice” in May 2017 at Vanderbilt University. I am grateful to the director of the Robert Penn Warren Center for the Humanities, Mona Frederick, for feeding our bodies and minds at the RPW Center during the workshop. Special thanks to Julie Perkins for arranging the logistics for the conference and for expertly producing the theme issue. Kyle Romero oversaw every detail of the local planning with skill and patience. Several scholars greatly enhanced the discussion at the workshop and the final papers published here: Matthew Eddy, Manpreet Kaur, Matt Grohowski, and Bryan Lowe. Finally, I extend my personal-scholarly thanks to Ethan Kleinberg, Gary Shaw, and Michael Rossi for their feedback on earlier versions of this introduction.

2. Walter Benjamin quotes this phrase, from Hofmannsthal, at least three times in his published work, including in “On the Mimetic Faculty,” which is the touchstone for this essay (Benjamin, “On the Mimetic Faculty,” in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 2: 1927–1934*, ed. Michael W. Jennings [Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999]). Benjamin writes: “‘To read what was never written.’ Such reading is the most ancient. . . . In this way language may be seen as the highest level of mimetic behavior and the most complete archive of nonsensuous similarity: a medium into which the earlier powers of mimetic production and comprehension have passed without residue, to the point where they have liquidated those of magic.” Note that Rosalind Morris also quotes Benjamin quoting Hofmannsthal’s phrase in her article in this issue, citing a different piece from Benjamin (see Morris, footnote 13). Gabrielle Spiegel explicitly defines the historian’s task in the terms set out by Benjamin in his use of the Hofmannsthal quote. Gabrielle M. Spiegel, *American Historical Review* 114, no. 1 (2009) xiv. <https://doi.org/10.1086/ahr.114.1.xiv>. In *Haunting History*, Ethan Kleinberg analyzes Spiegel’s approving citation of Benjamin’s quotation of Hofmannsthal. Ethan Kleinberg, *Haunting History: For a Deconstructive Approach to the Past* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017), 51-52. I thank Ethan Kleinberg for pointing out these additional connections.

The aim of this theme issue is to give confidence to the idea that written words—“writing” as a noun—can express historical knowledge that exists in addition to the words’ apparent verbal meaning. For Walter Benjamin, the material world told a history of the present, and one element of the material world is writing. If rarely observed, this history would be apparent to anyone who cultivated what Benjamin felt was an innate capacity to perceive in the shape, arrangement, or brute texture of words their extra-verbal insights, and in doing so “to read what was never written.”

It is little wonder, then, that Benjamin was enchanted by Edgar Allan Poe.³ Separated by an ocean and an era, Poe and Benjamin shared a fascination with graphology, physiognomy, and other sciences of the surface, in which the goal was to read messages in matter.⁴ In this theme issue, John Tresch reads Poe not (only) as an author but as a theorist of composition. “Poe reflected on printed letters’ aesthetic effects, their ability to convey and divert meaning, and their power to make and transform worlds,” Tresch explains. “The shapes formed in the contrast between black and white, between blank paper and sharply contoured ink, set relations between falsity and truth; type’s endless movability and the fixity and endless reproducibility introduced by mass printing opened a wide field of philosophical puzzles.” Tresch demonstrates the very theory that he argues Poe articulated graphically by applying it to Poe’s own texts, showing that “[for] Poe, the transmutations effected by type fused literary invention, technical construction, and divine creation; typography was a crucial site for the conversions and exchanges between spirit and matter.” The differences in how words materialize, whether by intention or convention, raise questions about the effects and new potential for interpretation when expression changes format or is made reproducible—a quintessentially Benjaminian concern and one as close to Poe’s mind as his hand to the printing press.

There is good reason to be suspicious of Benjamin’s account of the origins of writing, which he locates in a divine nature that also conferred on people the “gift” to produce and to perceive the messages of a creator—a religious and naturalistic gloss on what might be seen as the practical work historians carry out every day.⁵ Accounts of the origins of writing, as David Lurie argues in this issue,

3. For example, Benjamin wrote a critical essay on Poe’s “Man of the Crowd,” a story of a face that turns away, never allowing itself to be read. Benjamin’s essay indicates their shared interest in techniques for reading messages in matter. Graeme Gilloch, “Benjamin’s London, Baudrillard’s Venice,” in *The Hieroglyphics of Space: Reading and Experiencing the Modern Metropolis*, ed. Neil Leach (New York and London: Routledge, 2005), 43.

4. For example, Benjamin writes: “The most recent graphology has taught us to recognize in handwriting images—or more precisely, picture puzzles—what the unconscious of the writer conceals in his writing. It may be supposed that the mimetic process which expresses itself in this way in the activity of the writer was, in the very distant times in which script originated, of utmost importance for writing. Script has thus become, like language, an archive of nonsensuous similarities, of nonsensuous correspondences” (*Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, 697). To contextualize this quotation, see chapter 5 of Esther Leslie, *Walter Benjamin* (London: Reaktion Books, 2008).

5. Benjamin supposed that “Nature creates similarities. One need only think of mimicry. The highest capacity for producing similarities, however, is man’s . . .” (*Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, 720). Benjamin calls people’s capacity for producing similarities and seeing resemblances the mimetic faculty. “This faculty [the mimetic faculty] has a history, however, in both the phylogenetic and the ontogenetic sense.” Thus, for Benjamin, written words were replicas of “nature”—or at least

are always evidence of the historical milieu in which histories of writing were themselves composed (see also Tyler William's article herein). Lurie juxtaposes ancient Japanese accounts of the origins of writing with classical texts and with modern ethnographic accounts of indigenous people's first encounters with writing, such as Claude-Lévi Strauss's account in *Tristes Tropiques*. In documenting the similar structure of these origin stories, Lurie questions "how accounts of the advent of writing serve as parables or allegories about present concerns of their authors," and as a result are best read not as veracious accounts of the past about which the authors take themselves to be writing, but as evidence of the hopes and expectations about writing in the historical moments in which the authors were working.

Setting the issue of origins aside, the questions that animate this theme issue are how the skill of mimetic reading might operate and why this knack for "the divination of the secret from the surface"⁶ might be useful for historians. They are questions Benjamin asked himself.⁷ For example, in his piece, Jaume Aurell uses Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope to consider how those rare few history texts manage to accomplish "durability." In addition to the well-known inequities in who wrote history books and in the modern academy's assessment of quality, Aurell shows that some texts endure also because they elicit a sense of nearness. Whether Herodotus or Natalie Zemon Davis, durable texts create an experience of the present in the past by rolling together two experiences of time in one physical object (the text), which defines the quality of the trace. (See also Morris's development herein of an analytic technique based on Benjamin's notions of nearness and the close-range). Likewise, David Carr gives an overview of how faith in an experience of the past through the trace (such as the archival document) has functioned in historical theory and practice.

Writing was also a practice of historical actors—a verb as well as a noun. The steady words that scholars later read, hear, or touch as historical evidence are materialized time, passing on the order of seconds and minutes. As such, it is possible to extend the approach that historian Monique Scheer developed for a practice-based history of emotions to other activities that people did with their body-minds, including writing. Scheer builds on the work of Pierre Bourdieu to argue that "practice theory also encourages us to read textual sources for traces of observable action."⁸ In kindred spirit, Tyler Williams sensitizes historians' eyes

replicas of something prior that was made by a creator, whether natural, divine, human, or all of the above. For Benjamin, the similarity between words and their signs is linked through the "sensuous area of similarity." One need not accept his teleological, progressivist, and broad-brush account of the history of writing to consider the methodological usefulness and theoretical plausibility of his ideas that stem from this origin story.

6. Gilloch, "Benjamin's London, Baudrillard's Venice," 44

7. "The question is whether this can be developed and adapted to improve understanding," Benjamin wrote of the mimetic faculty (*Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, 334). "It must be borne in mind that neither mimetic powers nor mimetic objects remain the same in the course of thousands of years. Rather, we must suppose that the gift of producing similarities—for example, in dances, whose oldest function this was—and therefore also the gift of recognizing them, have changed with historical development."

8. Monique Scheer, "Are Emotions a Kind of Practice (And Is That What Makes Them a History)? A Bourdieuan Approach to Understanding Emotion," *History and Theory* 51, no. 2 (2012), 218.

to reading textual sources both *for* traces of how people wrote and—the major contribution of practice theory—*as* traces of people in the middle of the experience of writing. Williams's study of early modern India explains how written materials simultaneously document the utterances of illiterate poet-saints, which the texts were designed to capture, and also describe the scribe's disposition toward the act of writing: "illiterate, subaltern poet-saints were able to undermine systems of religious and intellectual authority by questioning the ontological status and epistemic utility of written language and by divesting writing of its aura." For the historian, then, it becomes possible to perceive the scribes' visceral experiences while they were writing down saints' prayers given saint's admonishments about the debasing effects of writing their words. "In apparent contradiction to the *nirgun* saints' devaluation of writing, the communities that venerated these saints . . . transcribed these poets' compositions, collated them into canonical scriptures, and produced many new religious texts." As Williams explains, in writing down the saints' words the faithful communities' "members understood themselves to be carrying on the saints' effort to change the meaning—in terms of both signification and significance—of writing as act and as artifact. They did so by emphasizing the historicity and even banality of writing."

The risk of dwelling (again!) on the written word as historical evidence is that it can reproduce a methodologically conservative and politically retrograde historiography. It risks new theories, methods, and insights springing up in an already lush patch of real estate: the archive. The intention here is not to point scholarly attention and energies back to a source base, a system, and a set of assumptions founded on, and often recapitulating, colonial, capitalist, and patriarchal structures of domination. Instead, this issue underscores Benjamin's sense that the capacity "to read what was never written" can be directed to any material, not only the papered world, and includes buildings, bodies, images, and topographies broadly construed. Rosalind Morris uses Benjamin's concept of "nearness" to critically approach the ongoing experience of settler colonialism in formally postcolonial South Africa and analyzes the service to which historicity is put in the historical present. Morris reads migrants' gestures, itineraries, and speech as they read exhausted gold mines, film about themselves, and fantasies of a future museum. In Benjamin, Morris finds a guide "to steer a course between two monstrous temptations—the Scylla of absolute origination and the Charybdis of uninterrupted continuity—that afflict both formal historiography and every account of social life that grounds itself in a recognition of the historicity of the present." In the process Morris offers "another form and method for producing a historical and dialectical anthropological understanding of postindustrial life." Also building on field work in South Africa, Nancy Rose Hunt critiques the way in which affect and material have been linked in recent scholarship. Hunt elaborates on Benjamin's historicist sensibility by developing the specific tools for research suggested by his teacher Georg Simmel. "Important historical theorizing may be had through formal attentiveness not as poetics alone but with aesthetic modalities that theorize historical and contemporary problems of structure or surface, using formal techniques to create shapes, suggest meanings and tones, confront enigmas, enable surprise, and even please the senses." Finally, Joshua Kates

invents the technique of “Talk!” to break the strange spell that the text-based archive has cast over historical practice since the 1970s. The problem for Kates is that conventional historicist interpretations of documents proceed in the delusion that the past is present in documents even though “a linguistics-based conception focused on documents can never make available the past as past.” Kates develops “Talk!” not to reject texts as sources but to observe history as “extended verbal performance” to rethink how scholars imagine the time(s), socialities, and materiality of communication—and therefore historical knowledge.

At its best, this theme issue will be the inspiration for many more words about words. The articles are accompanied by commentaries (published online) that draw out the tensions in the papers and in this collective project. Together, the articles and commentaries are offered as a record of what has been done and with the excitement to read what has yet to be written.

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