

**Palm reading:
Fazal Sheikh's handbook of death**
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For Judith Butler

Is there something to be gained from grieving, from tarrying with grief, from remaining exposed to its unbearable and not endeavouring to seek a resolution for grief through violence? Is there something to be gained in the political domain by maintaining grief as part of the framework within which we think our international ties? If we stay with the sense of loss, are we left feeling only passive and powerless, as some might fear? Or are we, rather, returned to a sense of human vulnerability, to our collective responsibility for the physical lives of one another?

Judith Butler, *Precarious Life*

Yes, he thought, between grief and nothing, I will take grief.

William Faulkner, *Wild Palms*

As Walter Benjamin so often tells us, there can be no image that is not about destruction and survival, and this is perhaps especially the case in the image of the dead. We might even say that the image of the dead tells us what is true of every image: that it bears witness to the enigmatic relation between death and survival, loss and life, destruction and preservation, mourning and memory. It also tells us, if it can tell us anything at all, that what dies, is lost and mourned within the image—even as it survives, still lives on and struggles to exist—is the image itself. This is why the image of death—again, speaking for all images—so often speaks of the death, if not the impossibility of the image. It announces the inability of the image to tell a story: the story of death, for example. It is

because of this silence in the face of loss and catastrophe—even when death remains undeclared—that the image is always at the same time an image of death, an image about the death of the image, about the ruin of the image's capacity to show, to represent, to address and evoke the persons, events, things, truths, histories, lives and deaths to which it would refer.

This is why, we might say, the entire logic of the world can be read here, and it can be read as the logic of the image. Like the world, the image allows itself to be experienced only as what withdraws from experience. Its experience—and if it were different it would not be an experience at all—is an experience of the impossibility of experience. The image tells us that it is with loss and death that we have to live. Nevertheless, what makes the image an image is its capacity to bear the traces of what it cannot show, to go on, in the face of this loss and death, to suggest and gesture towards its potential for speaking. In other words, the fact of the image's existence—and here I refer only to an image worthy of the name “image,” to an image that would remain faithful to the deadly silences that make it what it is—overcomes the death about which all images speak, or at least seek to speak, in order to suggest what remains of life, what is still life.

The image, then: this means, according to Benjamin, “of death”—composed of death, belonging to death, taking its point of departure from death, seeking to speak of death and not only its own—but also “the death of death,” the emergence and survival of an image that, telling us it can no longer show anything, nevertheless shows and bears witness to what history has silenced, to what, no longer here, and arising from the darkest nights of memory, haunts us, and encourages us to remember the deaths and losses for which we, still today, remain responsible.¹

¹ This prologue is a very slightly altered version of the prologue I wrote to introduce my essay, “*Lapsus Imaginis: The Image in Ruins*,” in *October 96*, Spring 2001, p. 35. It is meant to suggest the relationship between ruins and death that haunts the present essay, but also the way in which all reading begins elsewhere. I should add that portions of

“*Lapsus Imaginis*” also appear throughout the essay—often in fragmented form and in very different contexts.

I.

What does it mean to read an image or a photograph? What would it mean to assume responsibility for an image or a history—for an image of stilled or petrified life, or for the stilled or petrified life sealed within an image? How can we respond, for example, to the images and histories inscribed within these two photographs, to the life that has been stilled—by the camera or by death—but also to the life that, surviving death, even as it remains touched by it, lives on and remains, even after movement has ceased? How can we begin to read them? And especially when the limits, the borders and the distinctions that would guarantee our understanding of them have been shattered by a history of violence and death from which no determination can be sheltered. In exhibiting and archiving the image of one who is no longer here (in the one instance, a child killed in the Soviet bombardment of Afghanistan, and, in the other, a brother killed in the 1988 battle for control of the Mazar-Kabul road) but also the hand of the one who holds and offers the image (the father and brother who, in the moment in which we are now viewing the image, may no longer be alive), the image remains bound to the survival of the traces of a past and to our ability to read these traces as traces. Each detail of the photographs has its force, its logic, its singular place. A condensation of several histories, each photograph remains linked to an absolutely singular event, and therefore also to a date, to a historical inscription. Looking both backwards and forwards, however, these photographs ask us to think about “context” in general in a different way. Their context would include the date and circumstances of the photographs themselves. They belong to a series of photographs taken by the New York-born photographer, Fazal Sheikh, in the winter of 1997, in Afghan refugee camps in



Abdullah holding a photograph of his nephew who died in a Soviet bombardment Afghan refugee village, Khairabad, North Pakistan 1997

north-eastern Pakistan and in several cities in Afghanistan, including Kabul and Jalalabad. In particular, they belong to a series of photographs of hands, simply hands, holding small photographs of lost fathers, sons and brothers.² They also belong to Fazal Sheikh's ongoing effort during the last fourteen years—in the aftermath of the continued decline and dissolution of the nation-state and its sovereignty, and the general erosion of traditional political-judicial categories (such as the citizen, rights, and nationality)—to document and record the resulting mass phenomena of the refugee, not just in Afghanistan and Pakistan, but also in Somalia, Kenya and beyond.³

In this way Fazal Sheikh's photographs seek to evoke what Benjamin famously referred to as the "tradition of the oppressed,"⁴ a tradition composed—among many other things—of the silence of the displaced and marginalised, and the unspeakability of the traumas of the dispossessed. Like Benjamin, Sheikh seeks to enable those whom violence has deprived of expression to articulate their claim to justice, silently perhaps, but in the name of a judgment of history itself. As Shoshana Felman would have it, these would be the "expressionless" of the "tradition of the oppressed," those who, "on the one hand, have been historically reduced to silence, and who, on the other hand, have been rendered historically faceless, deprived of their human face, deprived—not only of a language and a voice—but even of the mute expression always present in the face of a living person. Those whom violence has paralysed, effaced or deadened, those whom violence has treated in their lives as though they were already dead, those who have lived (in life) without expression, without a voice and without a face, and have become—much like the dead—historically (and philosophically) expressionless."⁵ As Felman goes on to suggest, Benjamin's writings are organised around his effort

to cast light on the historical injustices and acts of barbarism that constitute history, and to call forth the Judgment Day that might enable "even the expressionless of history (the silence of the victims, the muteness of the traumatised)" to "come into historical expression." If this Judgment Day assumes a "reawakening of the dead," it is because justice in Benjamin always also includes justice for the dead: "Life for the dead resides in a remembrance (by the living) of their story; justice for the dead resides in a remembrance (by the living) of the injustice and the outrage done to them. History is therefore, above and beyond all official narratives, a haunting claim the dead have on the living, whose responsibility it is not only to remember but to protect the dead from being *misappropriated*."⁶ This is why, in Benjamin's words, "only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins."⁷

It is this "spark of hope in the past" that I have tried to fan in what follows, by seeking to refer to the faceless and expressionless dead who, along with the living who wish to remember them, ask us to put the violence of recent history on trial. We perhaps can begin to do so by remembering the many lessons Benjamin offers us: about the ethics and politics of remembrance and mourning, the necessity of seizing the significance of particular memories as they flash up in moments of danger, the relations among death, photography, and the technical media, and the relations among war, trauma and the inability to speak or to tell stories. Approaching these two photographs through the lens of these lessons, I want to suggest that there is a way in which, before us, in advance of us, Benjamin already will have read these two images for us, even if, as we know, his eyes never once cast their glance on either of them. He will

² These images are reproduced in Fazal Sheikh, *The Victor Weeps: Afghanistan*, Zurich, Scalco, 1998. The two photographs in which I am particularly interested here can be found on pages 101 and 113.

³ I am indebted here to Giorgio Agamben's discussion of the modern refugee crisis in "Beyond Human Rights," in *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*,

(trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino) Minneapolis, University of Minnesota, 2000, pp. 15-26.

⁴ See Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History" (trans. Harry Zohn), in *Selected Writings, Vol. 4, 1938-1940*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, Cambridge, MA, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003, p. 392.

⁵ See Shoshana Felman, *The Juridical Unconscious: Trials and Traumas in the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2002, p. 13.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁷ Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," *op. cit.* p. 391.



Haji Qiamuddin holding a photograph of his brother Asamuddin Afghan refugee village, Khairabad, North Pakistan, 1997

have taught us how to read the two photographs, even as he suggests that, in order to be answerable to the history sealed within them, we must expose ourselves to the vicissitudes of a history in which we are inscribed and for which we remain urgently and dangerously responsible because it is we who are at stake. He will have taught us how to read an image historically, and towards ends that he might, still today, call “revolutionary.”

II.

These two photographs were taken after the Taliban's capture of Kabul in 1996 and after the series of prohibitions it proclaimed against images, pictures and portraits in December of that year. They were taken in refugee camps, among the Northern Alliance, in the secrecy of night and under the light of a small lamp, and they are meant to remember and memorialise the deaths of loved ones, and indeed to remember and memorialise an earlier act of remembrance and memorialisation. They are, after all, and among other things, photographs of photographs. They are meant to remind us of the violent history that led to these deaths: the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, which precipitated a long and bloody history of displacement, civil strife and struggle for control over the country; the efforts by the CIA and Pakistan's ISI (Inter Services Intelligence) to support Afghan resistance to the Soviets and expand it into a holy war, an Islamic Jihad, which would turn Muslim countries within the Soviet Union against the Communist regime and eventually destabilise it; the devastation of Afghanistan during the ten years before the Soviet Union's withdrawal in 1989; the fact that, by 1990, almost half of the Afghan population—6.2 million—had fled the country; the

civil wars and the eventual emergence of the Taliban's reign of terror in the early to mid-1990s; and, by the winter of 1997, with 2.7 million Afghans still living in exile and nearly two million Afghans dead in the period after the Soviet invasion, the reduction of a country to a landscape seething with the traces of dispossession, destruction and death. The images are also meant to evoke—in however an encrypted a manner—the long history of invasion, colonisation and violence that has defined, shaped and divided Afghanistan for several centuries, and the deaths that this history has produced in the past, but also—as we know all too well—continues to produce, and will continue to produce in the present and the future.⁸ They also call forth important questions about the relationship between Islam and the long history of the prohibition of images, the relationship between Islam and photography, technology and modernisation, the relationships between the practice of palm reading, the Islamic belief in the evil eye and the importance of the hand and its five fingers within the Koran, but also as a prophylactic against this evil eye. And, finally, they bear witness to the force of decontextualisation that takes place in every photograph, which enables us to suggest something about the nature of photography in general. These are photographs, in other words, that not only tell us something about the moment in which they were taken—and about the several histories that are sealed within that moment—but also about the structure and character of photography itself. Indeed, this force of decontextualisation belongs to the violence of all images, and perhaps particularly to the violence of images of violence—since violence is always accomplished in an image. In other words (and here we may follow Benjamin's own critique of violence), violence is registered when the production of its effects is indissociable from its manifestation.

⁸ On the history of Afghanistan, see, among many others, Diego Cordovez and Selig Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan: The Inside Story of the Soviet Withdrawal*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1995; Abdul Ghani, *A Brief Political History of Afghanistan*, Lahore, Najaf Publishers, 1989; Olivier Roy, *Afghanistan, from Holy War to Civil War*, Princeton, Princeton

University, 1995; and Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban, Militant Islam, Oil & Fundamentalism in Central Asia*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2000.

To read these photographs therefore means to give an account of the several histories and contexts sealed within them, to respond to the innumerable experiences commemorated, displaced and ciphered by them, to seek to reconstruct the circumstances in which they were produced, or better, of those they name, code, disguise or date on their surfaces, and to think about what memory can be when it seeks to remember what stills life, when it begins in the trauma of violence and loss. But how can we respond to what is not presently visible, to what can never be seen within the images? To what extent does what is not seen traverse them as the experience of the interruption of their surfaces? That these are the questions raised by a desire to read historically is confirmed in a passage from the drafts to Benjamin's "On the Concept of History." There, he tells us that "The past has deposited in it images, which one could compare to those captured by a light-sensitive plate. 'Only the future has developers at its disposal which are strong enough to allow the image to come to light in all its detail. Many a page in Marivaux or Rousseau reveals a secret sense, which the contemporary reader cannot have deciphered completely.' The historical method is a philological one, whose foundation is the book of life. 'To read what was never written', says Hofmannsthal. The reader to be thought of here is the true historian."⁹ If the structure of an image is defined as what remains inaccessible to visualisation—if what the image offers is evidence of the invisible, of what, remaining invisible or unwritten within the surface of the image, nevertheless demands to be read—this withholding and withdrawing structure prevents us from experiencing the image in its entirety, or, to be more precise, encourages us to recognise that the image, bearing as it always does several memories at once, is never closed.

⁹ *Gesammelte Schriften*, 7 vols., ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp Verlag, 1972, Vol. 1, p. 1238.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, Vol. 2, p. 134.

III.

If these two photographs evoke a history of crisis, loss and destruction, then, part of what is placed in crisis—part of what is lost and destroyed—is the finitude of the context within which we might read them. This is why, if we respond to them by trying to establish only the historical contexts in which they were produced, we risk forgetting the disappearance of context—the essential decontextualisation—that is enacted by every photograph. Like the severed hands that hold these little memorials of loss and death, the moment in the image appears suspended and torn from any particular historical moment, whether past, present or future. As Benjamin explains in his early essay on the *Trauerspiel* and tragedy, the "time of history is infinite in every direction and unfulfilled at every moment. This means we cannot conceive of a single empirical event that bears a necessary relation to the time of its occurrence. For empirical events, time is nothing but a form, but, what is more important, as a form it is unfulfilled. This means that no single empirical event is conceivable that would have a necessary connection to the temporal situation in which it occurs."¹⁰ Time tells us that the event can never be entirely circumscribed or delimited. The image is of the order of the *monstrous*. This is why the effort to determine and impose a meaning on the events recorded in these photographs, to stabilise the determination of their context—an act that involves, among other things, reading what is not visible within them—involves both violence and repression. This is also why whatever violence there is in the attempt to establish the context of these images remains linked, because of this repression, to an essential non-violence.

It is in this highly unstable and dangerous relationship between violence and non-violence that responsibilities form,

responsibilities that have everything to do with how we read these two extraordinary photographs. Benjamin refers to the violence or non-violence of reading when he claims that “the image that is read—which is to say, the image in the Now of its recognisability—bears to the highest degree the imprint of the perilous critical moment on which all reading is founded.”¹¹ Suggesting that there can be no reading of an image that does not expose us to a danger, he warns us of the danger of believing that we have seen or understood an image. For Benjamin, the activity of reading is charged with an explosive power that blasts the image to be read out of its context. This tearing or breaking force is not an accidental predicate of reading; it belongs to its very structure. This is why the image always bears its own death or interruption. This is why it always appears as its own death mask.¹²

IV.

Let us return to these two hands and to the images they seem to offer to us. What these two photographs say to us—in all their muteness, in all their silence, in their several relations to death, memory, mourning and transmission—is that, if there is “a thought of the hand or a hand of thought,” it is “not of the order of conceptual grasping.” These photographs do not represent the act of a comprehension that begins by taking hold of something, by laying one’s hands on something. Instead, the hands in these images barely seem to hold the small photographs that lay in their palms. The image of the dead child seems to be almost floating, suspended like the hand that holds it, but that holds it lightly, barely supporting the image with two of its five fingers, each of which points in a different direction, as if to suggest, however discreetly, the mobility of reference

that structures every photograph. The entire photograph is touched by a kind of fragility and vulnerability, by a sense of surrender and evanescence. All of these are also legible in the photograph of the brother’s hand holding the image of his dead sibling and especially in the hand’s disappearing, withdrawing fingers. In both instances, the thought of the hand offered here is one of a hand that gives, that offers, that holds, if this is possible, “without taking hold of anything.”¹³ If these two photographs therefore suggest the fragility, uncertainty and indetermination from which any act of understanding emerges, they also inscribe, within the limits and contours of their permeable frames, an allegory of photography: an allegory that seeks to tell us something not only about the nature of photography but also about the possibility of reading photographs in general.

The hands that extend themselves, that seek to keep and to hold, to carry and hand over, to hand down, like a kind of legacy or inheritance, a fragment of the past, these hands tell us what a photograph desires: it, too, wishes to offer, to keep, to convey and hand over a fragment of our memory. Like the hand, it comes to us as a mode of transmission—but a mode of transmission that asks us to think about what it means to transmit or communicate, to bequeath something, to leave behind a legacy or inheritance through which a future might become possible. The photographs are about, among so many other things, what it means to pass something down, to hand something over—a memory, a death, a past, present or future—and not only because they confirm, in however an interrupted a manner, a story of inheritance and lineage, a story of the relations among fathers, sons and brothers. Emphasising the singularity of a single death—and we should never forget that what is ineffaceable about death is that, no matter how many thousands, hundreds of thousands, or even millions of

¹¹ Ibid. Vol. 5, p. 578

¹² Heidegger explicitly discusses the relationship between death and the photographic image in his analysis of the Kantian notions of image and schema. Suggesting that what links death and the photographic image is their capacity to reveal the process of appearance in general—and in a passage that has great relevance to the two photographs that concern us—he writes, “The

photograph of the death mask, as copy of a likeness, is itself an image—but this is only because it gives the ‘image’ of the dead person, shows how the dead person appears, or rather how it appeared. . . . Now the photograph, however, can also show how something like a death mask appears in general. In turn, the death mask can show in general how something like the face of a dead human being appears. But an individual corpse itself

can also show this. And similarly, the mask itself can also show how a death mask in general appears, just as the photograph shows not only how what is photographed, but also how a photograph in general appears.” See *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, (trans. Richard Taft), Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1990, p. 64.

¹³ The phrases within quotation marks in this paragraph are drawn from

Derrida’s essay, “Geschlecht II: Heidegger’s Hand,” (trans. John P. Leavey) in *Deconstruction and Philosophy: The Texts of Jacques Derrida*, ed. John Sallis, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1987, p. 173.

deaths there may be, these deaths are always singular deaths—they also suggest that, like photography itself, inheritance is both a matter of singularity and repetition, a matter of the singularity of a memory and of the repetition without which there could be neither memory nor inheritance. This association between inheritance and photography also suggests that what these hands surrender to us is what is given to us by every photograph: an image. We can never remind ourselves enough that the photograph gives us an image rather than what is photographed. We could even say that every photograph turns the photographed into a kind of refugee, tearing it from of its context and displacing it into another place and moment. In these two photographs, what is torn from its context is not simply the hand that offers the photograph of a dead son or a dead brother, the act of memory and memorialisation itself, but also the innumerable other deaths evoked by these singular ones. That the small photographs evoke the son's and brother's absence tells us that the photographs—the ones before us but also the ones held in the father's and brother's hands—come to us, as all photographs do, in the mode of bereavement.

Moreover, we know that once the other dies, once the friend, the lover, the relation is no longer alive, the dead one can only survive “in us” as an image. At the same time—and this is part of the force of these two photographs, and especially that of the dead child, since both of them could be said to “exteriorise” the process of an internal memory—when we look at the dead who have been incorporated as images “in us,” we are looked at by them (and we are even transformed into them, that is, into images). This means, as Derrida would have it, that “it would be from death, from what might be called the *point of view of death*, or more precisely, of the dead. . . or more precisely still, from the point of view of the *face* of the dead in their portraiture, that an

image would give seeing, that is, not only would give *itself* to be seen but would give insofar as it sees, as if it were seeing as much as seen.”¹⁴ Or, as Benjamin puts it in his book on the German *Trauerspiel* or mourning play, in a passage that brings together the face and death: “Everything about history that, from the very beginning, has been untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful, is expressed in a face—or rather in a death's head.”¹⁵

We need only look again at the two images before us: the dead child looks directly at us, and even the half-blind dead brother still looks at us with his remaining eye.¹⁶ This inversion of the relations between subject and object evokes one of the features of the stilled life but also of the genre of still life painting, wherein images and things often seem to be endowed with life and often assume a kind of agency. Offered to our gaze—like the two photographs before us—the still life returns this gaze and, in the wording of Hal Foster, thereby threatens “to dispossess us of our sight.”¹⁷ This characteristic of the still life—the becoming-animate of the inanimate that so often happens, for example, in Dutch still lifes—works to transvalue the ancient term for still life, *rhopography*, the depiction of insignificant things. But if this work of transvaluation suggests a kind of contradiction at the heart of still life, it also forms part of the power of Fazal Sheikh's photographs. Like the still life that depicts insignificant things at the same time that it seeks to bestow significance upon them, these photographs seek to remind us of the value of lives and deaths that have been largely overlooked or considered less significant than others. They ask us to think about our relation to the lives and deaths they evoke and portray, and about the status of life and death in general. As Judith Butler would have it, they confront us with a series of questions—questions that, today, are perhaps more urgent than ever—questions about

¹⁴ See Derrida's eulogy for Louis Marin, “By Force of Mourning,” in *The Work of Mourning*, (trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas), Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2001, pp. 147-48.

¹⁵ See *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama*, (trans. John Osborne), London, New Left Books, 1977, p. 106.

¹⁶ Benjamin suggests that childhood already has a particular relation to death when, in “A Berlin Chronicle,” he writes: “For childhood, having no preconceived opinions, has none about life. It is as dearly attached. . . to the realm of the dead, where it juts into that of the living, as to life itself.” See “A Berlin Chronicle,” (trans. Edmund Jephcott), in *Selected*

Writings, Vol. 2, 1927-1934, Cambridge, MA, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999, p. 613.

¹⁷ Hal Foster, “The Art of Fetishism: Notes on Dutch Still Life,” in *Fetishism as Cultural Discourse*, ed. Emily Apter and William Pietz, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1993, p. 265.

the value of Muslim life in relation to ours, about whether or not Afghan refugees are considered to be human within United States foreign policy or press coverage, and about the consequences of a failure to consider Muslim and Arab lives as lives. Like the still life that, as Norman Bryson suggests, asks us to look at what has been overlooked, these photographs ask us to regard the destroyed lives and devastated peoples that, for Fazal Sheikh, have remained unnoticed and uncounted,¹⁸ which have remained, to use Benjamin's word, "expressionless." If we are looked at by these stilled lives, however, there is no symmetry between the interplay of gazes that takes place here, which is why what is at stake in viewing these images is also our responsibility towards them. In looking at us, the dead in these images ask us to remain answerable for them, to think of our relation to what brought death to them, to keep them *safe* not simply from the violent history that led to their death, but also from the history that will continue to seek to erase and efface them from its movement. That the photographs therefore ask us to think simultaneously of the relations among the past, the present and the future is confirmed by the deadly fact that we can no longer view these two images without also being asked to think about the death and devastation that has been visited upon Afghanistan and its peoples for more than six years now, and that will no doubt continue into the future. This is why, we might say, these photographs of hands that bear images of the dead in their palms offer us traces of the past from which we also may read the future. They tell us that all reading is perhaps a kind of palm reading—but it is a palm reading that, like the reading of these two palms and of the small images that cover part of the palms to which they now belong, reveals an encounter with the death that defines the horizon of the future, and not only ours.

¹⁸ See especially Bryson's chapter on rhopography in *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1990, pp. 60-95.

¹⁹ Gershom Scholem, "Chiromancy" in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, Corrected Edition, Jerusalem, Keter Publishing House, 1982, p. 477.

²⁰ See Charlotte Wolff, *The Hand in Psychological Diagnosis*, London, Methuen and Co., Ltd., 1951, p. 7. See also her *Studies in Hand-Reading*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1936 and *The Human Hand*, London, Methuen, 1942. Wolff was a close friend of Dora and Walter Benjamin—they met each other in the early 1920s—and it is not impossible

V.

As Gershom Scholem notes, in one of several texts he wrote on chiromancy, "the determination of a man's character and frequently of his fate and future from lines and other marks on the palm and fingers was one of the mantic arts which developed in the Near East, apparently, during the Hellenistic period." "In the Middle Ages," he goes on to say, "the Christian chiromantics found a scriptural basis for chiromancy in the Book of Job (37:7)—"He sealet up the hand of every man, that all men may know his work"—which could be interpreted to mean that the hand imprints are made by God for the purpose of chiromancy."¹⁹ Turning to the Arabic roots of palmistry, Scholem traces the history of the belief that the hand is a kind of book, a kind of guide or manual to the generations of man, and to the way in which events leave their historical traces on bodies, the way in which the past informs and survives in the present and the way in which the future can be read from the trace of the lines on the palm. Within this history, the palm is viewed as the most elementary part of the hand and as the source from which the fingers are developed. The hand is related to the expression of thought (in language and writing), and because, to quote Charlotte Wolff, "the form, the texture, the lines and the gestures executed subconsciously by the hand are, unlike the expression of the face," beyond "our control," they are understood to possess the virtue of impartiality.²⁰ The hand is understood to have a privileged relationship to reading and writing. For the blind, the touch of the hand is the only way to read. Indeed, the hands are even said to be the eyes of the blind.²¹

The practice of palm reading therefore bears within it another thought of the hand, but one that—with its emphasis on, among other things, the lines of life, destiny,

that her obsession with reading the human hand was of great interest to Benjamin, especially given his own references to palmistry. For a description of their friendship, see Wolff's autobiography, *Hindsight*, London, Quartet Books, 1980, pp. 65-72.

²¹ On the relation between hands and blindness, see Derrida's *Memoirs of the*

Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins, (trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas), Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1993.

knowledge and death—brings together several of the issues with which I have been concerned in this essay: the close relations between life and death, reading and inheritance, memory and inscription, uncertainty and testimony, sight and responsibility, and between the past, present and future. These motifs are analysed in Benjamin's strange and difficult 1919 essay, "Fate and Character." There, in the context of a reconsideration of the relations and differences between fate and character, Benjamin seeks to provide a theory of reading in general. "Contemporary ideas," he writes, "do not permit immediate logical access to the idea of fate." Modern men therefore "accept the thought of reading character from, for example, the physical features of a person, finding knowledge of character as such somehow generally present within themselves, whereas the idea of analogously reading a person's fate from the lines in his hand seems unacceptable. This seems as impossible as 'predicting the future' seems impossible; for under this category the foretelling of the fate is subsumed without further ado, and therefore, while character appears as something existing in the present and the past, and therefore as recognisable. It is, however, precisely the contention of those who offer to predict men's fate from no matter what signs, that for those who know how to attend it (who find an immediate knowledge of fate as such in themselves) it is in some way present or—to put this more cautiously—ready in place. The supposition that some 'being in place' of future fate contradicts neither that concept itself nor the human powers of perception predicting it is not, as can be shown, nonsensical. Like character, fate, too, can be surveyed only through signs, not in itself. For even if this or that character trait, this or that network of fate, is directly in view, it is the relationship that these concepts suggest—never on call except through signs, because it is situated over the immediately visible."²² "The

complete elucidation of these matters," he adds toward the end of his essay, "depends on ascertaining the particular nature of time in fate. The fortune-teller who uses cards and the seer who reads palms teach us at least that this time can at every moment be made simultaneous with another (not present)."²³

It would be impossible in this context to draw out all the consequences of these passages for a reading of the images with which I am concerned here, but I do wish to emphasise what for me are its most important ones. Firstly, Benjamin suggests that those who profess to predict fate from signs—and specifically those of the body—never encounter fate directly, since, "like character, fate, too, can be apprehended only in signs, not in itself." Those who read signs—and here Benjamin points to what characterises all reading—therefore know that they must read them *as* signs. This means that to have "immediate knowledge of fate as such" is to read fate in terms of the process of signification itself. Fate—which includes the possibility of predicting the future—is what we come to read and know when we learn to read. Secondly, our fate, on encountering a world composed of signs, is therefore to learn to read. But we must read whilst understanding that any reading must, like "the fortune-teller who uses cards and the seer who reads palms," take place, if it can take place at all, in something like a photographic space—at least as we have defined this space—a space in which the past, the present, and the future can no longer be thought separate from each other, in which the past can appear in what is to come and what is to come in what is past (even if there is no symmetry between that past and what is to come), and in which ghosts can emerge from the past as well as from the future. Thirdly, reading must always mean to be exposed to time, signs or images. But, in this context, if the reading of

²² Benjamin, "Fate and Character," (trans. Edmund Jephcott) in *Selected Writings, Vol. 1, 1913-1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, Cambridge, MA, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996, p. 201.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 204.

images draws us to the necessity of the disappearance into which they withdraw and from which they emerge—as Benjamin tells us elsewhere, “what we know we will soon no longer have before us, this is what becomes an image”²⁴—then it is because images themselves, like fate, refer to time. But what we call time is precisely the image’s inability to coincide with itself. It demands that every image be an image of its own interruption, that every image be governed by the law that interrupts its surface, that forbids its own presentation. It presents itself as a repetition of the prohibition against images, a repetition that tells us that history can only emerge in the interruption of the continuum of presentation. As Benjamin would have it, without interrupting the historical continuum, without blasting the techniques of representation, there can be no historical time. No history without the interruption of history. No time without the interruption of time. No image without the interruption of the image. If, however, this interrupted image is still an image, then “image” means the death of the image. It means that every image is an image of death—that the only image that could really be an image would be the one that shows its impossibility, its withdrawal and destruction, its death. The image can only be an image, then, when it is not one, when it says “there is no image” or “there can be no image”—no single, closed image. The two photographs with which we are concerned lead us to this understanding. They tell us, if they can tell us anything at all, that the image does not demonstrate. It is rather a monster of time—in which time does not properly tell time. It is, as Werner Hamacher puts it, a “*monstruum* without *monstration*,”²⁵ and this despite what we know of the hand’s relation to monstration in general. Indeed, the ambiguity of the image and this violence of interruption—the violence at work in the image and the

image opening within violence—is the ambiguity of the monstration of its monstrosity.

VI.

As Benjamin suggests in his essay on Kafka, the monstrosity of the image can never be overcome. Even as the reader seeks to unfold Kafka’s parables so that he can find their meaning “on the palm of his hand,” Benjamin suggests that he experiences his pleasure, not so much on the palm of the hand, where differences are smoothed out and everything presumably would appear clearly and transparently, but rather in the lines and creases of the palm, whose mysteries are reserved for the skilled chiromancer.²⁶ In reading the flat of the hand, Benjamin notes, there is a need, not only to trace the furrowed lines of the palm alone, but also, and perhaps especially, to follow the silent writing—the gestural movements—of the hands themselves. This silent writing, he suggests, prevents the reader from reducing complications, elucidating enigmas, or parabolically illustrating truth. He goes on to note that only an attentiveness to this silent writing—to what has remained invisible, unwritten and perhaps even unread—can give us the courage to act decisively and courageously.

Benjamin makes this last point in the “Madame Ariane” section of *One-Way Street*. There, in a passage that brings together fortune-telling, the act of reading the future from signs, and the experiences of death, loss, mourning and memory, he argues that the one “who asks fortune-tellers the future unwittingly forfeits an inner intimation of coming events that is a thousand times more exact than anything they may say. He is impelled by inertia, rather than by curiosity, and nothing is more unlike the submissive apathy

²⁴ Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, (trans. Harry Zohn), London, New Left Books, 1973, p. 87. See also *GS* 1, p. 590.

²⁵ See Hamacher, “The Gesture in the Name: On Benjamin and Kafka,” in *Premises: Essays on Philosophy and Literature from Kant to Celan*, (trans. Peter Fenves), Cambridge, Harvard

University Press, 1996, p. 316. Hamacher uses the phrase not to describe the image, but as a “name” for the name.

²⁶ See “Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death,” (trans. Harry Zohn), in *Selected Writings, Vol. 2, 1927-1934*, p. 802.

with which he hears his fate revealed than the alert dexterity with which the man of courage lays hands on the future. For presence of mind is an extract of the future, and precise awareness of the present moment is more decisive than foreknowledge of the most distant events. Omens, presentiments and signals pass day and night through our organism like wave impulses. To interpret or to use them: that is the question. The two are irreconcilable. Cowardice and apathy counsel the former, lucidity and freedom the latter. For before such prophecy or warning has been mediated by word or image, it has lost its vitality, the power to strike at our centre and force us—we scarcely know how—to act accordingly. If we neglect to do so, and only then, the message is deciphered. We read it. But now it is too late. Hence, when you are taken unawares by an outbreak of fire or the news of a death, there is in the first mute shock a feeling of guilt, the indistinct reproach: Were you really unaware of this? Didn't the dead person's name, the last time you uttered it, sound differently in your mouth? Don't you see in the flames a sign from yesterday evening, in a language you only now understand? And if an object dear to you has been lost, wasn't there—hours, days before—an aura of mockery or mourning about it that gave the secret away? Like ultraviolet rays, memory shows to each man in the book of life a script that invisibly and prophetically glosses the text. But it is not with impunity that these intentions are exchanged, that un-lived life is handed over to cards, spirits or stars, to be in an instant squandered, misused and returned to us disfigured; we do not go unpunished for cheating the body of its power to meet the fates on its own ground and triumph. The moment is the Caudine Yoke beneath which fate must bow to the body. To turn the threatening future into a fulfilled 'now', the only desirable telepathic miracle, is a work of bodily

presence of mind. Primitive epochs, when such demeanour was part of man's daily husbandry, provided him with the most reliable instrument of divination: the naked body. . . Each morning the day lies like a fresh shirt on our bed; this incomparably fine, incomparably tightly woven fabric of pure prediction fits us perfectly. The happiness of the next twenty-four hours depends on our ability, on waking, to pick it up."²⁷

VII.

In Muslim tradition, if a man fights with his brother, he should leave his face untouched, since God created man after his *sura*—in his image, form, or shape. This tradition links the concept of *sura* to the prohibition of images, which, like most Muslim institutions, can be traced to an interpretation of the Koran, even if the Koran does not mention this prohibition explicitly.²⁸ In Kuranic linguistic usage, there is an identification between the concepts of fashioning and shaping and those of making and creating. This is why, if God is, according to the Koran, the great fashioner, all human fashioners are imitators of God and, as such, deserving of punishment: "Whosoever makes an image, him will God give as a punishment the task of blowing the breath of life into it; but he will not be able to do this," "Those who make these pictures will be punished on the Day of Judgment by being told, Make alive what you have created."²⁹ According to the *Shari'a*, it is forbidden to copy living beings, leading certain older jurists to say that only what has a shadow is forbidden. In the view of Al-Zuhri, however, images are forbidden without exception. Hence, for many years, photography was prohibited and, even though this prohibition appears to have been overcome in certain

²⁷ Walter Benjamin, *One-Way Street*, (trans. Edmund Jephcott) in *Selected Writings, Vol. 1, 1913-1926*, pp. 482-83.

²⁸ As Oleg Grabar has noted, "Much has been written about Islamic attitudes toward the arts. Encyclopedias or general works on the history of art simply assert that, for a variety of reasons which are rarely explored, Islam was theologically opposed to the representation of living beings. While it is fairly well known by

now that the Koran contains no prohibition of such representations, the undeniable denunciations of artists and of representations found in many traditions about the life of the Prophet are taken as genuine expressions of an original Muslim attitude." See his *The Formation of Islamic Art*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1973, p.75. Grabar goes on to suggest that the Koran does oppose idolatry but without rejecting art or

representation as such, and certainly without any prohibitions as direct as that found within the biblical one: "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven images or any likenesses of anything that is in heaven or that is in the earth beneath or that is in the water under the earth" (Exodus 20:4). For a general discussion of the concept of the prohibition of images, see Jean-Luc Nancy's "Le

représentation interdite," in *Au fond des images*, Paris, Gallilée, 2003, pp. 57-100. ²⁹ These passages are drawn from the "Sura" entry in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam, New Edition, Vol. 9*, ed. C. E. Bosworth, E. Van Donzel, W. P. Heinrichs and the late G. Lecomte, Leiden, Netherlands, E. J. Brill, 1997, p. 889.

circles, it has formed an essential component of the Taliban's fundamentalist iconophobia.

It is against the background of this iconophobia that we can begin to register the complexity of the relation between these two photographs and the Muslim prohibition against images. Taken under the sign of the 1996 ban, the very existence of the images works against the prohibition—they come to us as a means of resistance, a resistance to the erasure of death and devastation, to the repression of death's singularity, to the silence imposed by the prohibition, and to the painful indifference to the suffering of others. They come to us as a call to responsibility and to the redemption of the past. For what would freedom be if the dead were not also liberated, at least those who live on in us? And, as these photographs suggest, perhaps there are no others. At the same time, produced as they are under the shadow of the prohibition—in secret, and at night—the images exist in response to it. They remain in relation to it, even as they seek to overcome it. This contradiction between the resistance to the prohibition and its confirmation, between a hand that seeks to show and a hand that withdraws from monstration, is repeated in the relationship between the hands that bear the images of the dead child and brother on the one hand, and the eye of the camera on the other, an eye that cannot be understood here without reference to the Muslim belief in the evil eye.

This belief is well-established in Islam and, according to Abu Hurayra, the Prophet declared the evil eye a reality. Within Muslim tradition, the deadly effects of the evil eye are generally instigated by a desire to harm that is transmitted by a hateful or envious gaze, but they can also be involuntary and can result from the injurious power of a strange or staring look. Sometimes coupled with the spoken word—the evil eye, *fascinum oculo*, and evil mouth,

fascinum lingua, often go together—the evil eye is said to empty houses and fill graves, and, indeed, to account for most of the world's deaths.³⁰ If the hand of the one who survives the death of his son or brother is subjected to the eye of the camera—an eye that, as we know, is often said to kill, to petrify, to sacrifice and to annihilate whatever its lens captures—then this hand is also what resists the evil eye's most devastating effects. Indeed, the most effective protective symbol against the evil eye is the number five (*khamsa*) and the figuration of the five-fingers of the hand positioned, along with the palm, in the direction of the eye. In several Muslim countries, "five" still possesses a magical value as a defence against the evil eye. Consequently, a popular method of protection against this eye consists essentially in stretching out the hand, along with the fingers, toward the person whose glance can harm, and in pronouncing a formula containing the word "*khamsa*." This is why the mark of a henna-painted hand—and often a hand with an eye painted on its palm—is another favourite method of protection (we might recall that henna is an auspicious material, since it is thrown on corpses before they are buried).

When Fazal Sheikh's photographs present their severed hands, then, they evoke, confirm and resist a constellation of Islamic beliefs within a medium that has its own controversial history within Islam. These open-palmed surrenders of images of the dead simultaneously say "yes" and "no" to the camera's eye: look at what my hand offers you, this small image of a dead child and brother, and let others know what you see, but also what, without seeing, you can learn about what produced this death; like the camera that records this act of remembrance and memorialisation, bear witness to what is here remembered and forgotten; do not look at me in a way that will too quickly lead me to share

³⁰ For a general discussion of the "evil eye" and the various means of protecting oneself from it, see the entry for "Ayn" in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam, New Edition*, Vol. 1, ed. A. R. Gibb, J. H. Kramens, E. Lévi, J. Schacht, Leiden, Netherlands, E. J. Brill, 1960, p. 786.

in my son's and brother's experiences of death; see the hand you have severed and know that, even in the face of this violence, I will continue to show what I can; see the way in which your eye has already destined me to death, to the mortification, petrification and thingification that takes place in every photograph; see the way in which, joining portraiture and the still life, you have transformed me into a thing, a kind of still life, and thereby stilled the life I wish to preserve.

VIII.

That these two photographs stage an allegory of photography's relation to sight and the indeterminacy from which it emerges, to blindness and the essential withdrawal or death of the photographed, is confirmed by two details of the image of Haji Qiamuddin holding the small photograph of his dead brother, Asamuddin. The first detail to which I would draw attention is Asamuddin's wounded left eye, a wound that announces, even before his death, his relation to darkness, and to the night—his closed lid perhaps already signaling the process of burial, the closing of the coffin's lid, he will soon experience. Yet his other eye—the open, staring, left one—also resembles an eye of the blind, perhaps even the eye of the dead, at the precise moment when mourning begins: though it is still open, we can imagine the hand that will soon come to close it. I mention this because this image of the half-blind, dead brother suggests not only the opening and closing of the camera's shutter but also the opening and closing of vision that is enacted in every photograph. For each time it is a story of what the eye can see and what it cannot, of what the camera can capture and of what eludes it. To say this, however, is simply to say that our experience of a photograph is always an experience of the

eye, of an eye that seeks to see where it does not see, where it no longer sees, or where it does not yet see. At every moment we are asked to respond to a certain play of light and darkness and we respond to the muteness of this play by inventing stories, by relating every image to several possible narratives.

We will never know, however, if the stories we tell—about what we think we see as we look—will ever touch or engage the images before us. What happens when a photograph gives the experience of the eye over to darkness, when it leads the line of our sight toward a light or shadow that prevents us from seeing? What happens when our eyes meet what they cannot see, or when they encounter what cannot be encountered? What might the experience of blindness and shadows have to do with what makes photography photography? In what way does this image tell us that sight is essentially linked to an experience of mourning, an experience of mourning that mourns not only experience but sight itself?

This withdrawal from sight is reinforced in the photograph by the fading of the hand's fingertips, by their withdrawal into the darkness from which they emerged. What withdraws is the hand's capacity to point, to indicate and refer. This withdrawal—like the withdrawal and death of the brother—deepens the alternation between remembering and forgetting that leaves its traces in the photograph. The fading fingertips evoke a principle of indetermination. The fading away of the possibility of reference does not mean, however, that reference is no longer possible. Rather, like the memory of the dead ones in the images before us, it is always on the point of disappearing, without ever disappearing. It is always on the point of vanishing without ever vanishing. The images therefore enact an art of perpetual retreat and reference, an art that always announces the withdrawal of the one who is photographed.

IX.

This is why, we might say, the image allows us to speak of our death before our death. The image already announces our absence. As I have suggested elsewhere, “we need only know that we are mortal. The photograph tells us we will die, one day we will be here no longer, or rather, we will only be here as we have always been here, as images. It announces the death of the photographed. This is why these two photographs also suggest that what survives in a photograph is also the survival of the dead, of what departs, desists, and withdraws.”³¹ As Benjamin writes in his artwork essay, “the human being withdraws from the photograph.”³² This means that there can be no photograph without the withdrawal of what is photographed. Photographs bring death to the photographed and, because the conjunction of death and the photographed is the very principle of photographic certitude, the photograph is a kind of cemetery. A small funerary monument, it is a grave for the living dead. As Roland Barthes explains, if the photograph bespeaks a certain horror, it is because “it certifies that the corpse is alive, as corpse: it is the living image of a dead thing.”³³ Even as the photograph seeks to memorialise, to remember, to keep the dead alive, it simultaneously confirms the dead one’s death and departure. It is the effigy of this dead.

This is why photography is a form of bereavement. This bereavement acknowledges what takes place in any photograph—the return of the departed, of the one who is no longer here. Nevertheless, although what the photograph photographs is no longer present or living, its having-been-there now forms part of the referential structure of our relationship to the photograph. This is why the return of what was once there takes the form of a haunting. As Benjamin states in his 1916 essay on the Trauerspiel, “the dead

become ghosts.”³⁴ The possibility of the photographic image requires that there be such things as ghosts and phantoms. It is no accident therefore that Haji Qiamuddin tells us that, when he sleeps, he sees his brother, Asamuddin, walking in the streets of their home village with his Kalashnikov slung over his shoulder “just as he did when he was alive.”³⁵

It is perhaps precisely in death that the power of the photograph is revealed, and revealed to the very extent that it continues to evoke what can no longer be there. In photographing someone, we know that the photograph will survive him—it begins, even during his life, to circulate without him, figuring and anticipating his death each time it is looked at. It tells us that there is no life except the “life that signifies death.”³⁶ This means that there is no photograph, no image, that does not reduce the photographed to ashes. As Man Ray wrote in 1934, in an essay entitled “The Age of Light,” images are the “oxidised residues, fixed by light and chemical elements, of living organisms. No plastic expression can ever be more than a residue of an experience. . . . [It is rather] the recognition of an image that has survived an experience tragically, recalling the event more or less clearly, like the undisturbed ashes of an object consumed by flames.”³⁷ Benjamin makes a similar point in his essay “The Storyteller,” in a passage that identifies flame with the reader. The reader is said to “annihilate” and “devour” the “stuff” or “subject matter” of a novel “as fire devours logs in a fireplace.” What sustains this reader-flame is no longer just wood and ashes—even if these are now transformed into a text—but a question that keeps the reader’s interest burning: how to learn that death awaits us? As Benjamin notes, “the ‘meaning’ of a character’s life is revealed only in death”. In order to read, then, the reader must know “in advance, no matter what, that he will share [this] experience of death”.³⁸ The living

³¹ See Eduardo Cadava, *Words of Light: Theses on the Photography of History*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1997, p. 9.

³² See Walter Benjamin, “Work of Art in the Age of Technological Reproducibility [Third Version],” (trans. Harry Zohn and Edmund Jephcott) in *Selected Writings, Vol. 4, 1938-1940*, p. 258.

³³ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, (trans. Richard Howard), New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1981, p. 79.

³⁴ *Gesammelte Schriften*, op. cit Vol. 1, p. 590

³⁵ Quoted in Fazal Sheikh, *The Victor Weeps: Afghanistan*, p. 100.

³⁶ The phrase is from Benjamin’s “Central Park” in *Selected Writings, Vol. 4, 1938-1940*, p. 170.

³⁷ Man Ray, “The Age of Light” in *Photography in the Modern Era: European Documents and Critical Writings, 1913-1940*, ed. Christopher Phillips, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art/ Aperture, 1989, p. 53.

³⁸ Benjamin, “The Storyteller” (trans. Harry Zohn) in *Selected Writings, Vol. 3, 1935-1938*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, Cambridge, MA, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002, p. 156.

reader-flame burning over the logs of the past and the ashes of past experience learns to read by learning of its mortality. Reading means learning to die.

X.

There can be no image that does not emerge from the wounds of time and history, that is not ruined by the loss and finitude within which it takes place, without ever taking place. This means that the image testifies not only to its own impossibility but also to the disappearance and destruction of testimony and memory. This is why, if the history and events sealed within these two photographs call out for memory—and for a memory of the violence and trauma they evoke—this memory could never be a memory that aims to restore or commemorate. If the past is experienced in terms of loss and ruin, it is because it cannot be recovered.

Nevertheless, the fact that this violence and trauma, this loss and ruin, live on in the various historical, political, religious or literary forms that today inherit their legacy, means that the experiences to which they would refer are not behind us. As Benjamin well knew, there is no historical “after” to the trauma of loss and violence. Even if we can no longer believe that memory and commemoration will help us prevent disaster in the future, we are nevertheless still obliged to imagine a means of remembering what remains without remaining, of what—destroying and consuming itself—still demands to be preserved, even if within a history that can never enter into history. If nothing can replace what has been lost to history, is it possible to interrupt the course of history and its catastrophes, or are we endlessly condemned to reiterate and enact this condition of loss and displacement? This question tells us not only why we must learn to read the

past—to read, that is, the irretrievable images of the past—but, as Benjamin would say, in a way that knows how these images threaten to disappear to us as long as we do not recognise ourselves in them. This is why, as the Italian artist, Salvatore Puglia, has suggested, what remains for us is “to collect the fleeting images of what has disappeared, to recollect the floating fragments of this history of disappearance. What remains is the possibility of a gesture: to hand, to hold out, in the scattered memories to which we are condemned, some vestigia, some expressions of a multiple anamnesis.”³⁹ What remains are the fragments, the ruins of an image or photograph— perhaps one like these.

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In trying to imagine what it might mean to read—and, in particular, to read an image—in Benjaminian terms, I have been guided by at least two desires. The first is Ralph Waldo Emerson’s wish that we should understand reading as a quotation. This means, among other things, that, when we read we inevitably reveal our indebtedness to all the texts that countersign this act of reading. The second is Walter Benjamin’s desire to practise “the art of citation without citation marks,” which I, following Emerson, would simply call “the art of reading,” and, in this context, perhaps even the art of reading with Walter Benjamin.

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³⁹ This passage is from an unpublished manuscript entitled “Abstracts of ‘Abstracts (of Anamnesis).’” The text was delivered at the Alexander S. Onassis Center at New York University in conjunction with Puglia’s exhibition, “Abstracts (of Anamnesis)” in the spring of 1995.