



## Paleonomies of the Thought-Image

AN INTRODUCTION

### The Frankfurt School and the Thought-Image

A paleonomy, as Jacques Derrida explains, is the “maintenance of an *old name* in order to launch a new concept.”<sup>1</sup> Extending Derrida’s observation, we could say that all serious engagement with philosophical and aesthetic concepts and their political and historical traditions may require a form of paleonomic work. In modern writing, key examples include Kant’s *critique*; Friedrich Schlegel’s *irony*; Hegel’s *system*; Marx’s *ideology*; Nietzsche’s *genealogy*; Freud’s *unconscious*; Kafka’s *law*; Heidegger’s *Being*; Brecht’s *gesture*; Lacan’s *real*; Foucault’s *author*; Levinas’s *Other*; Derrida’s *writing*; de Man’s *allegory*; and Debord’s *spectacle*. In every case, the paleonomic gesture requires us to stand inside and outside a tradition at the same time, perpetuating the tradition while breaking with it, and breaking with the tradition while perpetuating it.

This book wishes to reread the often neglected literary genre of the *Denkbild*—“thinking image,” “image of reflection,” or simply “thought-image”—as a paleonomy by examining the philosophical and literary texts of a constellation of friends and colleagues associated with what came to be known as the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory (Frankfurter Schule): Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Siegfried Kracauer, and, more indirectly, Ernst Bloch. Deeply connected by complex personal and intellectual relations to each other and to the project of critical theory, these major German Jewish writers strategically chose the minor genre of the *Denkbild* because it belongs to those apparently marginal speculative and aesthetic

phenomena that, upon closer inspection, emerge as the secret avenues of critical insight. Denkbilder are neither programmatic treatises nor objective manifestations of a historical spirit, neither fanciful fiction nor mere reflections of reality. Rather, the philosophical miniatures of the Denkbild can be understood as conceptual engagements with the aesthetic and as aesthetic engagements with the conceptual, hovering between philosophical critique and aesthetic production. The Denkbild encodes a poetic form of condensed, epigrammatic writing in textual snapshots, flashing up as poignant meditations that typically fasten upon a seemingly peripheral detail or marginal topic, usually without a developed plot or a prescribed narrative agenda, yet charged with theoretical insight.

The Denkbild was of such concern to these writers because it reconfigures the relationship between conceptual and aesthetic categories, between philosophy and art, not only thematizing but also enacting the difficulty that Adorno diagnoses in his *Aesthetic Theory* and that organizes both his own Denkbilder and those of his friends around a common core, namely that “art stands in need of philosophy that interprets it in order to say that which it cannot say, whereas art is only able to say what it says by not saying it.”<sup>2</sup> The practice of the Denkbild constitutes an abiding and obsessive response to the rigorous demands of this axiom.

Engaging the material inscription of logic and poetics through the figure of the Denkbild, I wish to read Adorno, Benjamin, Bloch, and Kracauer not merely as philosophers and cultural critics, but as *writers*. My guiding assumption is that much of what is most valuable in these writers, and what connects them as a group of thinkers who pay close attention to the status of writing itself, is the view that *what* they say cannot be thought in isolation from *how* they say it, that any philosophical truth-content their writing may contain invariably is tied to, and mediated by, its specific and potentially unstable figures of presentation. In their writerly production, each of them responds, implicitly or explicitly, to Nietzsche’s famous metaphor of a metaphor: “What, then, is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms—in short, a sum of human relations which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people: truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are.”<sup>3</sup> As is the case with Nietzsche’s moveable army of tropes, the tropes of the Denkbild insist that any truth, even the

truth of the existence of untruth, can be arrived at only by attending to the metaphor of the metaphor, the figure of the figure. In this way, the Denkbild shows itself responsible to the idea that only a writing that takes account of its own irreducibly figurative qualities can allow the historical nature of an utterance, the historicity of language, to begin to speak.

To insist on the figurative qualities of these writers' philosophical and poetic production and to read them primarily as writers is also to problematize the very notion of a homogenous, self-contained Frankfurt School. This name today refers loosely to the members of the Institute for Social Research, founded by Felix Weil as a progressive interdisciplinary research center in Frankfurt in 1924, and the name was not normally used by the members themselves. The Frankfurt School's foremost historians, Martin Jay and Rolf Wiggershaus, have excavated the complex circumstances under which the label "Frankfurt School" was retroactively applied, beginning in the 1950s, to this group of thinkers and writers, all of whom were affiliated with the project of a fundamental ideologico-philosophical cultural critique that took the political, epistemological, and psychoanalytic insights of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud as seriously as the aesthetic, moral, and historical ones of Kant and Hegel.<sup>4</sup>

But can a "school" ultimately be "read"? Is it a homogenous entity that can be arrested long enough for us to make generalizations about it? Or is it not rather a richly textured network of heterogeneous traces and singularities? And if the designation "Frankfurt School" privileges the geographic location of a German city, do the proper names New York, Los Angeles, Berlin, and even Paris not play just as important a role in the group's complex history of displacement, exile, and extraterritoriality? Should the Frankfurt School be content to consider itself a school at all, or does it, in the very moment of this designation, cease to be a school dedicated to transformative thinking and to a critical thought that is permanently in flux? Perhaps the Frankfurt School can remain faithful to its transformative aims as a school only when it no longer is a school, when it is the particular school that can be no school, the school without school. From the perspective of such a reflection, we should set aside any preconceived notions or political appropriations and allow the term Frankfurt School to rearticulate itself along the lines of a careful and probing reading of the singular and specific texts that were produced in its orbit. I wish to propose, then, that the Denkbild offers one fruitful opportunity for such a

reconsideration. My use of the term “Frankfurt School” therefore also deserves to be read as a paleonymy, the retention of an old name for a new concept.

One dimension of this paleonomic mobilization of the term “Frankfurt School” involves my choice of writers for inclusion in this study. In focusing on a specific engagement with the poetic Denkbild, my study does not address the work of those important writers associated, more or less intimately, with the first generation of the Frankfurt School, members of what then was called the Institute for Social Research, such as its director, Max Horkheimer, or Erich Fromm, Otto Kirchheimer, Leo Löwenthal, Herbert Marcuse, Franz Neumann, Friedrich Pollack, Karl August Wittfogel, and many others.<sup>5</sup> Even among the writers whom I have selected, individual relationships to the Institute are anything but homogenous. Although Adorno, especially through his close ties to Horkheimer, clearly belonged to the inner circle of that group—indeed, their coauthored book, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947), became the one text most canonically associated with the Frankfurt School—other writers such as Kracauer belonged to this group only in a more peripheral and indirect sense, despite the vital importance of their work to the group’s theoretical formulations. Moreover, Bloch, who never belonged to the Institute or the Frankfurt School in any official sense, maintained deeply involved relationships with many of its members. He was an important early mentor to Adorno, Benjamin, Kracauer, and others in the Frankfurt School, and his work unfolded in constant dialogue with that produced by its members.

There are important correspondences between Bloch and several members of this group, and it is no accident that both Adorno and Benjamin considered his *Spirit of Utopia* (1918) a formative work in their own intellectual development. Bloch, for his part, produced his book of Denkbilder, *Spuren* (1930), in the context of frequent discussions with Benjamin during the time when the latter was composing his own Denkbilder book, *One-Way Street* (1928), a publication that Bloch also reviewed for a journal. Further links between Bloch and these other writers were forged by his contribution of book reviews to the Institute for Social Research’s journal, “Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung,” and the invitation he received in the late 1930s from Horkheimer, Adorno, and other members of the Institute to contribute to a planned collective volume on questions and theories of materialism.<sup>6</sup> By including Bloch in this constellation, I am

less interested in performing an act of revisionist intellectual history than I am in allowing Bloch's *Denkbilder* to illuminate, and be illuminated by, the intellectual projects of those writers who comprised such an important part of his writerly orbit. In so doing, I am in agreement with a growing group of critics, including, among others, the intellectual historian Wiggershaus, the philosopher Eduardo Mendieta, and the Germanist Jack Zipes, who advocate the broad inclusion in the orbit of the Frankfurt School of writers such as Bloch and Kracauer who were close personal and intellectual allies with members of the Institute without ever officially belonging to it. For instance, Wiggershaus's sentiment in his history of the Frankfurt School is that the works of these colleagues, especially those of Bloch, Benjamin, Kracauer, and Adorno, are inextricably interlaced in their shared gesture of micrological thinking:

This history, which external circumstances rendered highly uneven, suggests that one should not understand the term "Frankfurt School" too narrowly. Two further considerations confirm this: first, the fact that the "charismatic figure," Horkheimer, gradually assumed an ever less decisive position that therefore was not suitable to the formation of a school: second, there is the following circumstance related to the first. If one looks at the four decades of the older Frankfurt School in its totality, one sees that neither a unified paradigm developed nor a paradigm shift that could accommodate everything that is evoked when one speaks of the Frankfurt School. The two main figures, Horkheimer and Adorno, worked from different positions on shared themes. . . . Adorno represented a micrological-messianic thinking that connected him closely with Walter Benjamin, who, through his efforts, became a contributor to the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* and eventually a member of the Institute for Social Research, as well as with Siegfried Kracauer and with Ernst Bloch.<sup>7</sup>

As Wiggershaus elaborates this imbrication in another text:

As little as Kracauer can be said to have belonged to the so-called Frankfurt School, he nevertheless belongs, along with its most important representatives, to a common constellation. It consists of Ernst Bloch, Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, Theodor W. Adorno, and Max Horkheimer. What makes all of them elements in the same constellation is that they can be understood as critical materialists whose critical materialism was either sharpened by theological motifs or harbored theological motifs within itself. . . . The combination of article, essay, and book; the combination of notes, aphorisms, and occasional works with montage-like or encyclopedic form; the inclusion of literary forms in the spectrum of means

of presentation and the use of literary means appropriate to the objective in philosophico-theoretical contexts: all of this was an expression of the attempt to combine a sensory spectrum broadly opening up to contemporary experience with a philosophical and theoretical thinking that resisted ossification.<sup>8</sup>

Likewise, as Zipes reminds us, while “Bloch has never received the critical attention that the Frankfurt School has received,” it is important to note that “he shared many things in common with them, especially with Walter Benjamin.”<sup>9</sup> And, most recently, Mendieta justifiably includes Bloch’s texts in an anthology that collects the Frankfurt School’s major statements on the relation between religion and critique, reminding us that Bloch’s “work was determinant for the development of the Frankfurt School’s thinking about religion, theology, and Judaism,” especially in light of the messianic elements that Bloch’s work constantly interjected into Adorno’s uncompromising negativity.<sup>10</sup> As a case in point, we may recall that Benjamin writes to Ernst Schoen as early as 1919 that, for all the reservations he has with regard to Bloch’s work, *Spirit of Utopia* “is the only book . . . against which I can measure myself.”<sup>11</sup> This view is shared by Adorno many years later when he writes of Bloch’s *Spirit of Utopia*: “The book, Bloch’s first, bearing all his later work within it, seemed to me to be one prolonged rebellion against the renunciation within thought that extends even into its purely formal character. Prior to any philosophical content, I took this motif so much as my own that I do not believe I have ever written anything without commemorating it, either implicitly or explicitly.”<sup>12</sup> As early as the 1930s, the time in which most of the *Denkbilder* that are the focus of this study were being composed, Adorno for his part directly confirms his desire to involve Bloch with the Frankfurt School Institute. He writes to Bloch on 2 October 1937, “as you are aware, I am now a member in good standing of the International Institute for Social Research, to which I have always been closely connected through my friendship with Max Horkheimer. . . . It goes without saying that the personal reestablishment of our contact [that is, between Adorno and Bloch] at the same time signifies its material and factual [*sachlich*] one. And it is no less self-evident that I would like to extend our contact to the Institute as well.” Adorno closes his letter by asking Bloch, to whom he refers as his “red brother,” for copies of his latest manuscripts and by assuring Bloch that he is “burningly interested” in his most recent work and that “Horkheimer, with whom I briefly corresponded about it, also feels a great affinity for it.”<sup>13</sup> Finally, a remark-

able 1964 radio conversation between Bloch and Adorno on the internal contradictions in utopian longing highlights the many shared concerns and fundamental agreements that form the relays between Bloch and the Frankfurt School.<sup>14</sup> With his poetic and philosophical concerns, especially in the context of the *Denkbild*, Bloch belongs without belonging, belonging only in his non-belonging, as a ghostly yet abiding presence in the thinking of his Frankfurt School friends.

These friends' engagement with their sense of constitutive loss and trauma proceeded by their refunctionalizing and redefining of the literary and philosophical tradition of the *Denkbild* during their time in Germany in the late 1920s and 1930s and continued (except for Benjamin, who committed suicide before he could escape from the Nazis in 1940) while they were in American exile during the Hitler regime. Deepening and elaborating the micrological turn in critical thought that Georg Simmel had helped to effect through his philosophical and sociological writings since the late nineteenth century—indeed, Benjamin, Bloch, and Kracauer all were students of Simmel and were deeply influenced by his philosophy during their years as university students and beyond—the friends worked on the level of speculative thought to interrogate the imbrication of cultural analysis and aesthetic form that was at the core of Simmel's unorthodox microphenomenology of the object world.<sup>15</sup> Even though they objected to the nationalist spirit and patriotic attitude that at times characterized Simmel's largely bourgeois perspective (Bloch eventually even went so far as to disown his teacher on these grounds), the phenomenological and theoretical rigor that Simmel brought to the micrological analysis of the culture of objects, whether in his analyses of everyday human encounters with the face or in his subtle readings of the cultural logic of money, as in his *Philosophie des Geldes* (1900), remained a key touchstone for the friends. After all, their project, too, was to read certain surface phenomena of modernity as ciphers of deeper cultural and political processes.

The *Denkbild*, as this group of friends conceived of it, is a brief, aphoristic prose text typically ranging in length between a few sentences and a couple of pages that both illuminates and explodes the conventional distinctions among literature, philosophy, journalistic intervention, and cultural critique. As creative appropriations of the tradition of the baroque emblem and of subsequent eighteenth-century versions of the genre in Herder and others, modernist *Denkbilder*, which were a preferred medium

not only for authors of the Frankfurt School but also for such contemporary writers as Karl Kraus, Robert Musil, and Bertolt Brecht, tend to focus on the specificity of a quotidian object or a seemingly negligible phenomenon: a dream, a gas station, an advertisement, a film, a shadow, a hotel lobby, a sports event, affective states such as boredom, even the telephone—in order to place these objects and phenomena into a new, unexpected constellation that enables them to be read and evaluated as signs of a larger cultural semiotics. The Denkbild can be understood, borrowing a phrase from Adorno, as an innovative “philosophical form . . . in which spirit, image, and language are linked.” The fragmentary, explosive, and decentering force of the Denkbild also served Adorno and his friends in their concrete and conceptual struggle against the reactionary modes of cultural and political coordination that constituted the so-called conservative revolution in Germany in the 1920s and 1930s, a set of right-leaning nationalistic tendencies associated with such names as Oswald Spengler, Ernst Jünger, Arthur Möller van den Bruck, and Ernst von Salomon.

### Figuring the Thought-Image

Two examples may provide us with a better sense of some of the formal trajectories encrypted in the Denkbild. The first is one of the most famous Denkbilder to have emerged from the corpus of this group of writers, the angel of history that Benjamin evokes in his theses on the concept of history. The second one, also by Benjamin, is less well-known but vigorously bespeaks the formal thrust of this mode of writing.

Benjamin’s famous image of the angel constitutes the axis around which the entire constellation of his theses on history pivots, namely, in the ninth of eighteen theses. In this Denkbild, he writes:

There is an image by Klee named “Angelus Novus.” It presents an angel looking as though it were about to distance itself from something at which it is gazing. Its eyes are staring, its mouth is open, and its wings are spread. This is what the angel of history must look like [*Der Engel der Geschichte muß so aussehen*]. Its face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, it sees a single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of its feet. The angel would like to tarry, awaken the dead, and reassemble what has been shattered. But a storm is blowing from paradise; it has got caught in its wings with



such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm inexorably propels it into the future to which its back is turned, while the pile of debris before it grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.<sup>16</sup>

Benjamin here records his general wish to reconceptualize history, which involves a rejection of historicist linearity, a strategic exploding of the teleology of progress, and a rupture of temporality that results in a revolutionarily charred moment of “now-time,” in the image of Paul Klee’s angel. Depending on one’s reading of the phrase “must look like,” this angel is an *Angelus Novus*—a *new* angel—either because it is the image of what already has taken place, or because it prefigures something that has yet to take place, something that only can be imagined in the future figure of this angel. Whether read as an affirmation or as a predictive promise, in Benjamin’s text Klee’s angel becomes invested with the figurative force that alone could underwrite the “*weak* messianic power” and open “the small gate [*kleine Pforte*] through which the Messiah might enter.”<sup>17</sup> Benjamin appropriates the image of Klee’s angel for a rearticulation of the historical that understands messianism neither as a concrete historical movement nor as a religious doctrine but rather as a more general commitment that refuses to foreclose hope for what is still to come. In order to keep the promise of the narrow gate alive, the angel of history admonishes us to “articulate the past historically,” rather than fetishize the ultimately elusive image of “the way it really was.” To articulate the past historically means to activate the historicity of our objects of study in a way that places them on the far side of the teleology of progress and the grand claims of conventional historicism. As in his frequent evocation of photography, which memorializes the image of an event while at the same time removing it from the stream of history, Benjamin’s “true image of the past flits by,” “flash[ing] up in the moment of its recognizability never to be seen again.”<sup>18</sup> The angel of history presents itself as just such an image. For Benjamin, this historical elusiveness, its vacillation between an affirmation and a negation, embodies a political hope. On a certain level all *Denkbilder* share this aesthetico-political movement, even as the individual tropes and images within an author’s corpus remain in every case irreducibly singular.

The second example is a *Denkbild* entitled “The Sock,” which Benjamin included in the 1938 version of his *Berlin Childhood around 1900*. It reads:

The first cabinet that would yield whenever I wanted was the wardrobe. I had only to pull on the knob, and the door would click open and spring toward me. Among the nightshirts, aprons, and undershirts which were kept there in the back was the thing that turned the wardrobe into an adventure for me. I had to clear a way for myself to its farthest corner. There I would come upon my socks, which lay piled in traditional fashion—that is to say, rolled up and turned inside out. Every pair had the appearance of a little pocket. For me, nothing surpassed the pleasure of thrusting my hand as deeply as possible into its interior. I did not do this for the sake of the pocket's warmth. It was “the little present” rolled up inside that I always held in my hand and that drew me into the depths. When I had closed my fist around it and, so far as I was able, made certain that I possessed the stretchable woolen mass, there began the second phase of the game, which brought with it the unveiling. For now I proceeded to unwrap “the present,” to tease it out of its woolen pocket. I drew it ever nearer to me, until something rather disconcerting would happen: I had brought out “the present,” but “the pocket” in which it had lain was no longer there. I could not repeat the experiment on this phenomenon often enough. It taught me that form and content, veil and what is veiled, are the same. It led me to draw truth from works of literature as warily as the child's hand retrieved the sock from “the pocket.”<sup>19</sup>

The *Mitgebrachte*, that which has been brought along as a gift in a covering sheath, not only cannot be separated from its carrier, it also *is* this carrier. To unroll the sock for its inner core of meaning is to make it disappear, even as it ceaselessly demands to be unrolled. Our attempt to extract the gift of a *Denkbild* from the language that carries it to us always leads us to the discovery that the language is the gift. There is no semantic, extratextual truth-content that could be excavated from the material fibers of a *Denkbild*'s rhetoric. To learn from the literary form of the *Denkbild* is thus to learn from a potentially open-ended series of significations that signify not only *that* but also *how* they signify, becoming allegories of the ways in which they mean and fail to mean. In this sense, every *Denkbild* is a sock.

While proximate to such short forms of modernity as aphorism, fragment, parable, and maxim, the poetico-philosophical *Denkbild* is traceable along a distinct genealogical development. In the 1920s, Benjamin was the first among his Frankfurt School colleagues to employ the term *Denkbild* for his writing, even as others were writing in this mode at the same time. In this condensed textual formation, form itself becomes content, and one's perception of a seemingly trivial object becomes, through sustained reflection, an exemplary theoretical reflection. Benjamin was aware, through the

study of German baroque drama that gave rise to his early theory of modernity in the *Trauerspiel* book, that the notion of the Denkbild descends from the baroque emblem.<sup>20</sup> Based on Benjamin's meticulously kept record of the books he read and his sources for the *Trauerspiel* study, we know that he drew heavily on the baroque emblem books of such writers as Giovanni Piero Valeriano Bolzani, Diego de Saavedra Fajardo, and Julius Wilhelm Zingref, and that he engaged the theories of the emblem by such writers as Franz von Baader, Jacob Boehme, Karl Giehlow, and Georg Phillip Harsdörfer.<sup>21</sup> The baroque emblem consisted of a tripartite structure: motto or *inscriptio* (the title), icon or *pictura* (the image of the described object), and epigram or *subscriptio* (the interpretive commentary). Here, the singular and concrete signification of *pictura* is the ground for an interpretive strategy that recognizes in the singular a more universal and abstract meaning.<sup>22</sup> (The short, epigrammatic titles that head the Denkbilder of Benjamin's *One-Way Street*, such as "Construction Site," "For Men," and "Optician"; or of Adorno's *Minima Moralia*—such as "Cat out of the Bag," "Baby with the Bathwater," and "Table and Bed"—reenact this function of the baroque emblem's *inscriptio*.) In Dutch baroque art, one also finds the term *denkbeeld*, which refers to a broadly conceived figural presentation or instantiation of a non-empirical idea.<sup>23</sup> In the eighteenth century, writers such as Lessing, Goethe, Hamann, and Winkelmann used the term Denkbild in various philosophical contexts, where the usage encompassed a range of meanings, from the sensuous cognition of form to the Idea of the Platonic *eidōs*. Winkelmann, for instance, employs the term when lamenting the whimsical superficiality of rococo porcelain design in favor of reviving the more "dignified" and didactically suffused forms of classical antiquity that, in his estimation, constitute the only Denkbild of worthy proportions and qualities. Herder, too, employs the term Denkbild—though he uses it at times interchangeably with the more Kantian-inflected *Sinnbild*, a sensuous image or allegorized idea—in his discussion of symbolic figuration in the context of an emerging German classicism and in the context of an insistence on the sensually mediated relation between intuition (*Anschauung*) and reflection.

In the nineteenth century, important touchstones for the development of the Denkbild as it later would coalesce in Adorno, Benjamin, Bloch, and Kracauer were the aphoristic philosophical prose of Nietzsche and, concerning the trope of urbanity and the obsessive analysis of modern

city phenomena, the literary work of Baudelaire and his “reading” of Paris in terms of what Benjamin came to call the capital of the nineteenth century. When German and Austrian writers of the early twentieth century and of the Weimar Republic, such as George, Kraus, Musil, Brecht, and, first and foremost, the writers of the emerging Frankfurt School, employed the *Denkbild* as a privileged literary form, they inscribed themselves into a subterranean poetic tradition while at the same time refunctionalizing that tradition for their own aesthetic and philosophical purposes. It is from the perspective of this refunctionalization that Adorno writes apropos of the *Denkbilder* in Benjamin’s *One-Way Street*:

In the poem from the *Siebente Ring* in which George expresses his gratitude to France, Mallarmé is praised as “für sein Denkbild blutend,” bleeding for his “thought-image.” The word *Denkbild*, from the Dutch, replaces the word *Idee*, idea, which has been spoiled by usage; a conception of Plato which is opposed to Neokantianism comes into play here, a conception in terms of which the idea is not a mere mental notion but rather something existing in itself, something that can then be contemplated, if only intellectually. The expression *Denkbild* was attacked sharply in Borchardt’s review of George and has made little headway in the German language. But like books, the words of which books are made have their destinies. While the Germanization of the idea did not prevail against linguistic tradition, the impulse that inspired the new word has remained active. Walter Benjamin’s *One-Way Street*, first published in 1928, is not, as one might at first think, a book of aphorisms but rather a collection of *Denkbilder*: a later series of short prose pieces by Benjamin, related in their substance to *One-Way Street*, does in fact bear that name. The meaning of the word has of course shifted. The only thing Benjamin’s meaning has in common with George’s is that precisely the experiences that a trivial view considers merely subjective and contingent are granted objectivity—that in fact the subjective as such is conceived as the manifestation of something objective. Benjamin’s *Denkbilder* are Platonic, in other words, only in the sense in which people have spoken of the Platonism of Marcel Proust—someone with whose work Benjamin converges, and not merely as Proust’s translator. The pieces in *One-Way Street*, however, are not images like the Platonic myths of the cave or the chariot. Rather, they are scribbled picture-puzzles, parabolic evocations of something that cannot be said in words [*des in Worten Unsagbaren*]. They do not want to stop conceptual thought so much as to shock through their enigmatic form and thereby get thought moving, because thought in its traditional conceptual form seems rigid, conventional, and out-moded. What cannot be proved in the customary style and yet is compelling—that is to spur on the spontaneity and energy of thought and, without being taken lit-

erally, to strike sparks through a kind of intellectual short-circuiting that casts a sudden light on the familiar and perhaps sets it on fire.<sup>24</sup>

For Adorno, a Denkbild, which works to say in words what cannot be said in words, launches an impossibility, indeed, wishes to take that very impossibility as its principle. While Wittgenstein famously insists that one must remain silent about that of which one cannot speak, the Denkbild seeks to speak only of that about which one cannot speak. The Denkbild therefore works to create an image (*Bild*) in words of the ways in which it says what cannot be said. It is a snapshot of the impossibility of its own rhetorical gestures. What it gives us to think (*denken*) is precisely the ways in which it delivers an image (*Bild*) not only of this or that particular content, but always also of its own folding back upon itself, its most successful failure.

Adorno locates in Benjamin's Denkbilder an enigmatic impulse that flows through his own Denkbilder and through those of their common friends Bloch and Kracauer as well. The poetic prose of the Denkbild works both with and against conceptual thought, remaining faithful to the concept by betraying it, illuminating remnants of experience in the service of an unknown futurity that those remnants still may harbor. The Denkbild wishes to comment on its own contingency, even as it strives to assert propositions of truth that also wish to remain unfettered by the contingency that they themselves diagnose.

The sentences that the Denkbild gives us to read arrest thought in an image composed of words. Each sentence, ghostly in its apodictic illumination, thematizes its non-transparent relationship to the sentences that both follow and precede it. The individual sentence of the Denkbild calls attention to itself as a sentence in order to thematize, by involving the reader in a serious play and a vexing dance of meaning, not simply its denotative meaning but also its participation in the larger process of hermeneutic decoding that it at the same time resists. Woven from the material fibers of language, the image that the Denkbild gives us is a picture of this resistance.<sup>25</sup>

### Pre-Histories of the Thought-Image

In this self-conscious mode of writing and thinking, the Denkbild hopes to preserve something of the poetic consciousness that conceptual