

“To Articulate the Past Historically”: Walter Benjamin on
Literature and History

by

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Introduction

“We don’t always proclaim loudly the most important thing we have to say,” Walter Benjamin once wrote, “Nor do we always privately share it with those closest to us.” It is with these words in mind that I present my investigation of Benjamin’s 1940 theses “On the Concept of History” (*Über den Begriff der Geschichte*). As Jürgen Habermas observes, Benjamin “belongs to those authors on whom it is not possible to gain a purchase.” In other words, he is destined for “disparate histories” and varied interpretations. For one thing, as Benjamin often admitted, his thought moved “in extremes.” He was fond of reconciling the irreconcilable, bringing together elements that would ordinarily be considered at odds with one another. As I will elaborate in Part One, the theological and materialist strains of thought in the theses “On the Concept of History” (or “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” as it is often translated) are a well-known example of this tendency. Even two of Benjamin’s closest friends and intellectual confidantes—Gershom Scholem and Theodor Adorno—could never agree on a consistent interpretation of the text.

What initially fascinated me about the “Theses,” and what continues to fascinate me, is what remains unsaid. Nowhere in the text does Benjamin address literature, and yet from the small amount I knew about him before I began this project,

I was certain that his historical concept must, to some extent, be a literary concept as well. This initial hunch has led me from the idealism of the early German Romantics to the melancholy of the Baroque allegorists, from Baudelaire's nineteenth-century Paris to the Surrealist's twentieth-century fight against fascism. What resulted was a constellation of images, each of which has a literary as well as a historical significance for Benjamin.

Part One of this paper is meant to serve as an introduction to Benjamin's theses "On the Concept of History." The essay, which is largely considered Benjamin's final critical work before his death, is the most distilled version of a philosophy of history that we find among his writings. I have appended Harry Zohn's well-regarded translation for the interested reader. In Part Two, I explore Benjamin's writings on language and literature, moving from his early career to the works contemporaneous with the 1940 "Theses." I have tried to illustrate the intersections between Benjamin's philosophy of history in the "Theses" and the movement of his thought on literary and critical themes. My hope is that the latter will supplement the text of the "Theses," illustrating the extent to which Benjamin considers literature a point of access to the historical world.

Part One: Theses “On the Concept of History”

“Redemption depends upon the tiny fissures in the continuous catastrophe.”
-Walter Benjamin, “Central Park”

In a letter to Gretel Adorno from April 1940, Walter Benjamin writes that “nothing could be further” from his mind than the thought of publishing his notes “On the Concept of History,” as “it would be a perfect recipe for enthusiastic misunderstanding.”¹ He proved himself as prophetic as the document itself, which calls for “a real state of emergency” in the fight against Fascism—Gershom Scholem called the “Theses” Benjamin’s “awakening from the shock of the Hitler-Stalin pact.”² Certainly the text has led to multiple—and conflicting—interpretations, due in part to its arrangement as fragments shot through with images, allegories, and paradoxes. “Every interpretation will do injustice to the Theses,” argues Rolf Tiedemann, editor of Benjamin’s complete works, “because it must necessarily condense elements in a unified line of reasoning and thus homogenize them in a way. But many elements of the text stand beside each other without mediation, or at times oppose or contradict one another.”³

Equally confounding is Benjamin’s attempt to incorporate both Jewish Messianism and Marxism in his philosophy of history. As a result, the literature surrounding Benjamin and the “Theses” has been divided into opposing camps: some arguing, like the materialist playwright Bertolt Brecht, that the document is Marxist

and incorporates theology as metaphor, and others, like Gershom Scholem, holding that Benjamin is first and foremost a Jewish theologian. Still a third group of critics—among them Theodor Adorno, Jürgen Habermas, and sociologist Michael Löwy—contends that Benjamin’s “On the Concept of History” displays an effort to synthesize Marxist theory *and* Jewish theology, with varying approval. In his seminal essay “Consciousness-Raising or Rescuing Critique,” Habermas disapproves, maintaining that historical materialism “cannot be covered over” with a Messianic, “anti-evolutionary” conception of history “as if with a monk’s cowl.”⁴ Michael Löwy, by contrast, refers to Benjamin’s appropriation of Messianism and Marxism as “an alchemical fusion,” the fruits of which “produce philosopher’s gold.”⁵ He elaborates,

It is true that these two conceptions are usually contradictory. But the author of the ‘Theses’ is not a ‘usual’ thinker: he reinterprets these conceptions, transforms them and situates them in a relation of reciprocal illumination that enables them to be articulated together in a coherent way. He liked to compare himself to a Janus figure, one of whose faces was turned towards Moscow and the other towards Jerusalem. But what is often forgotten is that the Roman god had two faces but a single head: Marxism and Messianism are simply two expressions—*Ausdrücke...*—of a single thought.⁶

This difference of opinion is no doubt inseparable from the rivaling interpretations of Benjamin’s work as a whole. Adorno raises the issue succinctly in his introduction to Benjamin’s *Schriften* when he refers to the “nineteenth-century idea of the “life’s work,” which he describes as “the culmination of an uninterrupted life, fulfilled according to its own measure.” For Adorno, the concept of the “life’s work” does not apply to Benjamin’s *oeuvre*. “It is certain,” he writes, “that the historical catastrophes of his time denied Benjamin’s work any consummate wholeness and

condemned to the fragmentary not only the major project of his later years [the *Arcades Project*]...but also his entire philosophy.”⁷ Scholem, on the contrary, insists that Benjamin’s work is comprised of certain unifying themes. Specifically, his texts illustrate a “deep connection with theology, the inspiration of which remained enduringly vital to Benjamin until the end.” In this regard, Scholem writes that there is hardly a difference between the early “Metaphysics of Youth” of 1913 and the “Theses on the Philosophy of History” of 1940.⁸ He argues heatedly that Benjamin’s work remains indebted to the theological element throughout his career:

[The theses ‘On the Concept of History’]...constitute a metaphysical justification of a “historical materialism” which owes more to theology—to which it so emphatically refers—than could be stomached by its current ‘Marxist’ readers. These, after all, as their writings prove abundantly, feel themselves completely capable, like Marx himself, of managing even today without theology, and therefore in their interpretations they must emasculate the relevant passages in Benjamin.⁹

My analysis of Benjamin’s work is consistent with Scholem’s perspective insofar as I believe that each of Benjamin’s texts can be read to inform and illuminate themes that remain pertinent from his earliest writings through the 1940 “Theses.” A good example of this is the 1915 piece, “The Life of Students,” which Benjamin writes at the age of twenty-three. In the essay, Benjamin contrasts a view of history that puts faith in continuous advancement across time with his “own remarks,” which delineate a condition in which history “appears to be concentrated in a single focal point, like those that have traditionally been found in the utopian images of philosophers.”¹⁰ As we shall see in the following pages, Benjamin might have written the same lines two and a half decades later. Still, this does not mean that we should turn a blind eye to

the shifts and turning points throughout Benjamin's career, the existence of which is undeniable. I side with the intellectual historian and prominent Benjamin scholar Richard Wolin when, in his preface to *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetics of Redemption*, he warns against imposing an "external, artificially contrived unity" onto Benjamin's collective works. Like many Benjamin critics, Wolin draws a distinction between an earlier metaphysical and theological period and a later materialist phase in Benjamin's career.¹¹ The former, which Wolin situates between Benjamin's 1916 essay "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man" through the 1925 *Trauerspiel* study, he refers to as Benjamin's period of "redemptive criticism" (*rettende Kritik*), following Habermas's lead. From mid-1925 through his death in 1940, Wolin observes that the "metaphysically inclined Benjamin of the early period" had reached maturity. The "esoteric, speculative guise" of his theoretical stance in the early phase has been "cast aside," in favor of an "orthodox yet innovative materialist approach to the study of phenomena."¹²

This division between an earlier metaphysical phase and a later materialist period is good to keep in mind because it takes into account a noticeable transition that occurs in Benjamin's thought in the mid-1920's, when Marxist themes become a focal point of his writings. We might note, at the same time, that certain of his projects evade this tidy categorization, and with this in mind Wolin must acknowledge that his distinction is best considered loosely. The theses "On the Concept of History" represent an instance in which the complete separation of metaphysical and Marxist elements begins to break down. Drawing a comparison between the 1940 "Theses"

and the “Theologico-Political Fragment” of the early 1920’s, Wolin concludes, “so much for the tidy but artificial distinction between the ‘early’ and ‘late’ Benjamin [!]”¹³ Löwy puts it nicely when he writes that Benjamin’s “Theses” were “the summation – the ultimate, concentrated expression – of ideas that run through the *whole* of his work.”¹⁴ Wolin reads the document similarly: it is Benjamin’s “theoretical last will and testament.”

I. Theology and the “Theses”

“*Only the Messiah himself consummates all history.*”
-Benjamin, “Theologico-Political Fragment”

In “Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian,” (1937), Benjamin first proposes the materialist theory of history to which he will return in the “Theses”—some of the passages, in fact, are nearly identical. “Historical materialism conceives historical understanding as an *afterlife* of that which has been understood and whose pulse can be felt in the present,” Benjamin writes.¹⁵ It “*sees the work of the past as still unfinished.*”¹⁶ Benjamin’s ideas on the incompleteness of history prompted Max Horkheimer, founder of the Frankfurt Institute, to write the following in a letter addressed to Benjamin later that year: “The determination of incompleteness is idealistic if completeness is not compromised within it. Past injustice has occurred and is completed. The slain are really slain.... If one takes the lack of closure entirely seriously, one must believe in the last Judgment....”¹⁷

Martin Jay points out that the Institute was “not entirely enthusiastic” about Benjamin’s brand of Marxism. “Far from encouraging the theological elements in his thought,” Jay writes, Horkheimer and the Institute sought to push Benjamin in a more secular direction.¹⁸ In “Konvolut N” of the *Arcades Project*, Benjamin includes Horkheimer’s letter on the “Fuchs” essay as well as his own response, which parts ways with the strictly materialistic, scientific perspective put forth by Horkheimer and the Institute:

The corrective to this line of thinking may be found in the consideration that history is not simply a science but also and not least a form of remembrance (*eine Form des Eingedenkens*). What science has “determined,” remembrance can modify. Such mindfulness can make the incomplete (happiness) into something complete, and the complete (suffering) into something incomplete. That is theology; but in remembrance we discover the experience (*Erfahrung*) that forbids us to conceive of history as fundamentally atheological, little as it may be granted us to try to write it with immediately theological concepts.¹⁹

Some critics have claimed, like Tiedemann, that the “Theses” have, at times, “the quality of a continued correspondence with Horkheimer,” that “they are an attempt to justify the theological moments of Benjamin’s thinking” in the face of Horkheimer’s pronounced secularism.²⁰ Certainly Benjamin was aware of the explosiveness of the theological element of the “Theses,” and expressed as much to Scholem when he admitted to being “rather afraid of the opinion and reaction of the Institute from the beginning.”²¹

In fact, Benjamin begins Thesis I of “On The Concept of History” by shedding light on the theological element so often concealed in his later work. He draws from Edgar Allen Poe’s essay “Maezel’s Chess-Player,” in which Poe solves the riddle of an

automatic chess-player that toured America in the 1820s and 1830s. According to the story on which the essay is based, the chess-player was a puppet that consistently beat out its opponents at carnivals and fairs. The puppet sat before a chessboard placed on a large table, arranged so that, underneath, a “system of mirrors” gave the impression that the table was transparent from all sides. In fact, a little hunchback sat inside and controlled the puppet’s hands by means of strings. As Benjamin interprets,

One can imagine a philosophical counterpart to this device. The puppet called ‘historical materialism’ is to win all the time. It can easily be a match for anyone if it enlists the services of theology, which today, as we know, is wizened and has to keep out of sight.²²

Critics continue to argue about the meaning of this cryptic first thesis. The German scholar Gerhard Kaiser reads the hunchback, or “theology,” as “the genius which sets historical materialism in motion,”²³ while critic Krista Greffrath holds that theology, for Benjamin, is an “auxiliary construction” of little importance in relation to the Marxist element.²⁴ For Scholem, the dynamic between the puppet and the hunchback serves as crucial support for the position that Benjamin experienced a theological revival in his later career. He interprets the relationship between the puppet and the hunchback as “an alliance” between materialism and theology, in which historical materialism must take its cues from theology if it is to “win the day.”²⁵ Tiedemann is not so sure: “Historical materialism ‘enlists the services of theology,’” he writes. Therefore, he insists it must be historical materialism that “is in control.”²⁶

How, then, might we settle the dispute between these warring elements – theology and materialism – particularly in relation to Thesis I? I suggest that, perhaps, they are not at war at all. In the *Passagenwerk*, Benjamin leaves a clue as to the

importance of theology in his conception of materialism— his materialism, he reveals, is thoroughly immersed in theological principles. “My thinking relates to theology the way a blotter does to ink,” he tells us. “It is soaked through with it.” However, like the hunchback in the allegory of the chess-player, Benjamin’s theology is likely to remain hidden from the public eye: “If one were to go by the blotter...nothing of what has been written would remain.”²⁷ We reach a similar conclusion if we turn to Poe’s solution to the puzzle of the automatic chess-player. “It is quite certain that the operations of the Automaton are regulated by mind, and by nothing else.”²⁸ Then perhaps, as Löwy asserts, the relationship between Poe’s text and the first thesis is not simply anecdotal: “Poe’s ‘mind’ becomes, in Benjamin’s thesis, theology or, in other words, the Messianic spirit, without which historical materialism cannot ‘win the game’ and the revolution cannot triumph.”²⁹ Certainly, the question of which is in charge, theology or materialism, is bound to get complicated. What seems to me important is to recognize that both the material *and* the theological are necessary components of Benjamin’s philosophy of history. To this effect, Benjamin scholar Irving Wohlfarth bypasses the question of power dynamics altogether in his interpretation of the thesis: historical materialism, he claims, merely “needs a little help from its theological friend.”³⁰

I support Wohlfarth’s observation because it recognizes the importance of the theological element of the “Theses” while at the same time acknowledging that it does not serve as a goal in itself. It does not aim at “the ineffable contemplation of eternal verities,” nor a “reflection on the nature of the divine Being.”³¹ Rather, theology is “in

the service” of the struggle for the oppressed, and for the oppressed past. As Löwy eloquently expresses, the theological strain “must serve to re-establish the Messianic, revolutionary force of historical materialism – reduced to a *wretched automaton* by its epigones.”³² As such, Benjamin’s philosophy of history embraces not only the redemptive forces of Messianism, but its apocalyptic and destructive forces, as well. As Gershom Scholem explains, this idea is indebted to the Jewish understanding of Messianism, which conceives redemption as an event that takes place “publicly,” on “the stage of history,” rather than as a private experience that “is reflected in the soul”³³:

Jewish Messianism is in its origins and by its nature—this cannot be sufficiently emphasized—a theory of catastrophe. This theory stresses the revolutionary, cataclysmic element in the transition from every historical present to the Messianic future.... This catastrophic character of the redemption, which is essential to the apocalyptic conception, is pictured...in glaring images. It finds manifold expression: in world wars and revolutions, in epidemics, famine, and economic catastrophe.... Though the redemption, then, cannot be realized without dread and ruin, its positive aspect is provided with all the accents of utopianism.³⁴

Drawing from the Jewish Messianic idea, Benjamin adopts the belief that “beginning at the moment of the deepest catastrophe,” there exists “the chance for redemption.”³⁵

While the Marxist spokesmen of Benjamin’s day made their home in the future, leaning on doctrines of historical progress, Benjamin’s Messianism functions as “theoretical armature” – to adopt one of his phrases – against a vision of history in which society gradually approaches a utopian Golden Age. “Nothing has corrupted the German working class so much as the notion that it was moving with the current,” Benjamin writes in Thesis XI.³⁶ In his “Notes to the Theses on History,” Benjamin

writes that the experience of his generation had led to the recognition that “capitalism will not die a natural death.”³⁷ As Tiedemann points out, for Benjamin, “the onset of revolution could no longer be awaited with the patience of Marx; rather, “it had to be envisaged as the eschatological *end* of history.” He cites the following passage from Benjamin’s notes in support: “the classless society is not the ultimate goal of progress in history but its rupture, so often attempted and finally brought about.”³⁸

The “eschatological *end* of history” that Tiedemann links to a moment of revolutionary rupture in the continuum of history is, for Benjamin, akin to a final Judgment Day, to the “coming of the Messianic Kingdom.”³⁹ Paradoxically, then, Benjamin conceives of revolution eschatologically, as an End of Days, at the same time that it serves as a *momentary* cessation of *ongoing* historical movement. To this effect, the historical materialist Benjamin envisions in the “Theses” approaches a historical subject “only where he encounters...the sign of a *Messianic cessation of happening*, or, put differently, a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past.”⁴⁰ In contrast to a prevailing theory of history that, for Benjamin, conceives time as “homogenous and empty,” as “an anteroom” in which “one could wait for the emergence of the revolutionary situation with more or less equanimity,” Benjamin’s Messianic vision is charged with moments of revolutionary rupture within the calm flow of history:⁴¹

A historian who takes this as his point of departure stops telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary. Instead, he grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one. Thus he establishes a conception of the present as the “time of the now” which is shot through with chips of Messianic time.⁴²

A constellation, made up of certain stars that are nearer and others that are farther away, only forms a complete image in the present. Thus, for Benjamin the present moment and the past event are bound together such that the fullness of the past is only visible from the perspective of the present. This comes to bear on Benjamin's conception of *Jetztzeit*, which he describes as time filled by "the presence of the now." In the "Theses," the revolutionary moment functions as a "leap in the open air of history" in which past and present meet.⁴³ For instance, Robespierre "grasps the constellation" which eighteenth-century France formed with ancient Rome during the French Revolution: "To Robespierre ancient Rome was a past charged with the time of the now [*Jetztzeit*] which he blasted out of the continuum of history. The French Revolution...evoked ancient Rome the way fashion evokes costumes of the past."⁴⁴

Benjamin's conception of *Jetztzeit* and his vision of history are largely indebted to the Jewish tradition and its emphasis on remembrance and the past. As Scholem writes, the "utopianism" of Jewish Messianism "seizes upon all the restorative hopes" that are "turned toward the past."⁴⁵ Benjamin elaborates on his conception of the relationship between the Jewish tradition and remembrance in Thesis XVIII, the last of the "Theses":

We know that the Jews were prohibited from investigating the future. The Torah and the prayers instruct them in remembrance, however. This stripped the future of its magic, to which all those succumb who turn to the soothsayers for enlightenment. This does not imply, however, that for the Jews the future turned into homogenous, empty time. For every second of time was the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter.⁴⁶

The final image of the “Theses” builds on an ancient Rabbinic fable in which the Messiah sits at the gates of Rome, among “the lepers and beggars” of the Eternal City. It suggests that the Messiah currently waits in hiding, but could possibly appear at any time.⁴⁷ The directive toward remembrance present in the passage is central to Benjamin’s observation in Thesis II, that there exists a “weak Messianic power” among individuals, a “power of redemption (*Erlösung*),” to which “the past has a claim.” In the thesis, Benjamin holds that “our coming was expected on earth,” and “like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a *weak* Messianic power,” a power we can harness through remembrance.⁴⁸

That the past should have a claim on the present again evokes Benjamin’s response to Horkheimer, particularly his thoughts on the incompleteness of past suffering. In this regard, Benjamin aligns himself with the nineteenth-century German philosopher Hermann Lotze’s claim in *Mikrokosmos*—a text he quotes in Thesis II—that “the reason of the world would be turned to unreason if we did not reject the thought that the work of vanishing generations should go on benefiting only those who come later.”⁴⁹ Like Lotze, Benjamin urges us to extend a voice to the incomplete past. Consequently, his notion of history rests, like Lotze’s, “entirely on the image of redemption,” on “the thought of the preservation and restoration of all things.”⁵⁰ In strictly theological terms, Benjamin’s image of redemption—his claim to a *weak* Messianic power among individuals—is bound to the Lurianic notion of *tikkun*. Isaac Luria, a leading figure in the Kabbalistic resurgence of the sixteenth century, taught *tikkun* as the restoration of order to a fragmented world. With *tikkun*, “there will be a

communion between man and every creature of the world,” Scholem explains, “a harmony that will result in the continual flowing of divine light through the world and back to God.”⁵¹ Like the weak Messianic power invoked by Benjamin, this form of restitution ultimately relies on individual action: “The Messiah is only a symbolic figure; Messianic redemption, the restoration of order and harmony, *will be brought about by the people.*”⁵²

It is in the interest of *tikkun*, of the restoration of a Utopian past, that Benjamin instructs the individual in remembrance. He urges us to “articulate the past,” to seize hold of it, before it “flits by” and is forever lost to the realm of the forgotten.⁵³ Benjamin expresses this notion imagistically in the allegory of the Angel of History in Thesis IX. The vision of the angel, adopted from a painting by Paul Klee that Benjamin purchased in June of 1921, is rendered with his eyes “fixedly contemplating” the past.⁵⁴ “This is how one pictures the angel of history,” Benjamin writes. “Where we see a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet.” The angel’s view of history reveals a “petrified, primordial landscape,” in which all that is sorrowful in human history is present before his eyes.⁵⁵ The allegory continues,

The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing in from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward.⁵⁶

In his essay “Agesilaus Santander,” Benjamin tells us, “The kabbalah relates that in every instant God creates an immense number of new angels whose only purpose is,

before they dissolve into naught, to sing His praise before His throne for a moment.”⁵⁷

The angel of history in the “Theses,” though, encounters an image of the past for which all words cease to apply. Confronted by the overpowering face of catastrophe, the angel is unable to act – certainly, he cannot “awaken the dead” nor “make whole what has been smashed.” Benjamin leaves this restorative task, instead, in the hands of mankind. Invoking the redemptive power of memory, he writes, “to be sure, only a redeemed mankind receives the fullness of the past. Each moment it has lived becomes a *citation à l’ordre du jour*—and that day is Judgment Day.”⁵⁸

II. Benjamin’s Materialist Dialectic

“The materialist presentation of history leads the past to bring the present into a critical state.”

-Walter Benjamin, *Arcades Project*

That Messianism and materialism must take hands in the fight for the oppressed, and for the oppressed past, does not imply that one should amalgamate the two concepts, imagining they share a common *telos*. For, while materialism is “erected upon the idea of happiness,” the goal of the Messiah is an apocalyptic end to earthly existence.⁵⁹ Benjamin professes as much early in his career in the “Theologico-Political Fragment” (1920-1921). “The order of the profane cannot be built up on the idea of the Divine Kingdom,” he writes, “and therefore theocracy has no political, but only a religious meaning.” Ultimately, the divine and the profane – the earthly, the fleeting – take opposite paths: “If one arrow points toward the goal toward which the profane

dynamic acts, and another marks the direction of Messianic intensity, then certainly the quest of free humanity for happiness runs counter to the Messianic direction.”⁶⁰

As such, the pursuit of liberation – of a “free humanity” – falls within the realm of the profane and into the hands of individuals. At the same time, in keeping with the teachings of Isaac Luria, Benjamin observes that the profane realm may act to bring about earthly redemption—but it is not until his turn to Marxism that historical materialism will become explicit in this conception. Benjamin’s Marxist revelation is closely bound up with a 1924 trip to the island of Capri. There he befriended Asja Lacis, the Soviet actress and communist who led Scholem to claim, years later, that Benjamin’s dedication to Marxism was “palpably made under a woman’s influence.”⁶¹ Benjamin carried a copy of Georg Lukács’s *History and Class Consciousness* (1920) with him to Capri. The volume, which he obtained at the behest of his friend Bertolt Brecht, would later become, in Benjamin’s eyes, “the most achieved work in the literature of Marxism” and for him the “last word” on Marxist theoretical knowledge.⁶² What fascinated Benjamin particularly in Lukács’s work was his emphasis on political *praxis*. Lukács’s discussion of the practical application of Marxism outside of theory, and his grounding of this analysis in Marx’s works, greatly appealed to Benjamin. On September 16, while still in Capri, Benjamin wrote Scholem,

A reference to Lukács’s book joined one of a private nature. While proceeding from political considerations, Lukács arrives at principles that are, at least in part, epistemological and perhaps not entirely as far-reaching as I first assumed. The book astonished me because these principles resonate for me or validate my own thinking.... Regarding communism, the problem with “theory and practice” seems to me in effect to be that, given the disparity that must be preserved between these two realms, any definitive insight into theory is precisely

dependent on practice. At least it is clear to me how in Lukács this assertion has a hard philosophical core and is anything but bourgeois demagogical claptrap.⁶³

Quoting Marx in 'Theses on Feuerbach' (1845), Lukács writes, "The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it."⁶⁴ This notion resonated with Benjamin, who expressed an interest in party action rather than its aims—for the first time he was able to see Communism "not as a theoretical problem but, first and foremost, as a binding attitude."⁶⁵ We find a similar notion in Benjamin's conception of the historical materialist in the 'Theses.' Benjamin urges the historian to take an active, revolutionary role when he writes that the historical materialist must "brush history against the grain."⁶⁶ It is in this sense that the moment of Messianic rupture is meant to halt the flow of historical progress. "One of the reasons Fascism has a chance is that in the name of progress its opponents treat it as a historical norm," Benjamin writes in the 'Theses.' "The current amazement that the things we are experiencing are 'still' possible is *not* philosophical."⁶⁷

The theory of progress to which Benjamin refers has its roots in the natural sciences of the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment eras. "Implicit here is a series of conceptualizations which are intimately connected with the Social Democratic doctrines of the period," Benjamin writes in the 'Fuchs' essay:

The profound effect of Darwinism on the development of the socialist understanding of history is well known. During the time of Bismarck's persecution of the Socialists, the Darwinian influence served to maintain the party's faith and determination in its struggle. Later, in the period of revisionism, the evolutionary view of history burdened the concept of development more and more as the party became less willing to risk what it had gained in the struggle against capitalism. History assumed deterministic traits: the victory of the party was "inevitable."⁶⁸

Hand in hand with this critique of the natural sciences is a critique of Auguste Comte and the nineteenth-century positivist school. Comte, who published his *Cours de philosophie positive* (1830-42) in the decade following Hegel's death, held that social phenomena could be controlled by universally valid laws rather than by human reason—just as in the natural sciences. Governed by a “positive” conception of history, Benjamin believes that, “in the development of technology,” positivism was unable “to see...the concomitant retrogression of society.” Significantly, for Benjamin, the positivists among the Social Democratic theorists had “misunderstood the destructive side of this development because they were alienated from the destructive side of dialectics.”⁶⁹

The philosophy of history Benjamin presents is, accordingly, indebted to the “negative character of reality” embraced by Marx, and by Hegel before him.⁷⁰ Where Hegel's negative totality is consistent with a rational system of history, Marx detaches the dialectic from its ontological base and, instead, applies it to the historical process. In *Reason and Revolution*, Frankfurt School philosopher Herbert Marcuse explains that the dialectic under Marx becomes:

A social condition, associated with a particular form of society, and the negativity that underlies its contradictions and shapes its every content is the negativity of class relations. [...] The historical character of the Marxian dialectic embraces the prevailing negativity as well as its negation. The given state of affairs is negative and can be rendered positive only by liberating the possibilities immanent in it. This last, the negation of the negation, is accomplished by establishing a new order of things.⁷¹

In the “Theses,” Benjamin proposes that the “leap in the open air of history” of Thesis XIV is a “dialectical one,” akin to the way in which Marx understood the revolution.⁷² While the Marxian and Hegelian dialectics are conceptualized as temporal processes, though – they are actualized through the unfolding of history – the dialectic Benjamin adopts stands outside of time. The materialist dialectic, as conceived by Benjamin, is composed of images. Significantly, in the 1939 essay “Central Park,” Benjamin writes of a “dialectical image” which “flashes up” in the space where past and present meet: “The image of what has been,” writes Benjamin, is seen as a “flashing up in the now of its recognizability.”⁷³ In the *Arcades Project*, the dialectical image becomes the basis for Benjamin’s notion of the “dialectic at a standstill,” a key influence on the thought of Adorno and Horkheimer:

The historical index of the images doesn’t simply say that they belong to a specific time, it says above all that they only enter into legibility at a specific time...Every Now is determined by those images that are synchronic with it...It isn’t that the past casts its light on what is present or that what is present casts its light on what is past; rather, an image is that in which the Then and the Now come together into a constellation like a flash of lightning. In other words: an image is *dialectics at a standstill*.⁷⁴

The image of Benjamin’s dialectic takes the form of a monad: “A historical materialist approaches a historical subject only where he encounters it as a monad,” Benjamin writes in Thesis XVII.⁷⁵ In *Monadologie* (1714), Leibniz had put forth his conception of the monad as a “simple substance,” indivisible and without parts.⁷⁶ Like its Leibnizian counterpart, Benjamin’s monad occurs “instantaneously, being created or annihilated all at once,”⁷⁷ and contains a present that is “filled with the future and laden with the past.”⁷⁸ In contrast to Leibniz, who holds that the monad is created and

mediated by God, Benjamin writes in the *Arcades Project* that the monad is created by human mind—it functions as a “caesura” in the movement of thought. Where the materialist encounters a historical constellation at a “moment of danger,” the dialectical image appears.

In this regard, Benjamin’s “dialectic at a standstill” establishes itself in opposition to a historical constellation of dangers. Just as his conception of Messianism contains a destructive, catastrophic element, Benjamin conceives the dialectical moment as one in which the historical object is forcefully “blasted out of the continuum of history.” In this moment outside of time, the “after-” history of the historical object comes in conflict with its negative “fore-” history.⁷⁹ “The contours of this positive part will only emerge clearly when profiled against the negative,” Benjamin writes in the *Passagenwerk*:

Every negation, in return, only has value as the backdrop for the outlines of the vital, the positive. So it is of decisive importance to subject this tentatively isolated, negative part to another division so that...it too will reveal a new positive element, different from the one previously described. And so on *in infinitum*, until all of the past has been brought into the present in a historic apocatastasis (restoration, return).⁸⁰

Adorno has argued that Benjamin was quite right to call the images of his historical system dialectical, citing Benjamin’s emphasis on a negation that explodes the positive continuum of history in order to bring about a moment of genuine emancipation.⁸¹ Scholem disagrees, holding that mystical intuition and rational insight are only “seemingly connected by dialectic.”⁸² He considers the allegory of Benjamin’s Angel of History, in which ruin piles upon ruin in a situation of

Nietzschean eternal return. In this regard, Scholem believes that Benjamin's historical process is best described as cyclical rather than dialectical.⁸³ Certainly Benjamin's dialectic has received its fair share of criticism from Marxist sympathizers, as well. Tiedemann, for instance, believes that Benjamin's "leap in the open air of history" is not dialectical, "nor is it how Marx understood the revolution."⁸⁴ He fears that Benjamin's translation of materialism into theological terminology runs the risk of diminishing the impact of both elements. "The revolution which does not come is supposed to be standing at the gate at any moment, like the Messiah," he writes. "There, in some historical beyond, it can quickly put together a classless society, even if it is nowhere to be seen around here."⁸⁵

"Men make their own history," Marx writes in the *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852), but they make it "under circumstances directly encountered, given, and transmitted from the past."⁸⁶ Marx's appeal to the past illustrates a strong point of intersection with Benjamin's idea in the "Theses." Marx tells us that, in past revolutions, "the awakening of the dead" must have "served the purpose of glorifying new struggles, not of parodying old; of magnifying the given task in imagination, not of fleeing from its solution in reality; of finding once more the spirit of revolution, not of making its ghost walk about again."⁸⁷ Later in the text, though, he suggests for the revolutions to come that we "let the dead bury their dead."⁸⁸ The "social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot draw its poetry from the past, but only from the future," he writes. Here we must acknowledge where Benjamin and Marx part ways. Ultimately, Marx illustrates an indebtedness to human progress, and to the future, that

is incompatible with the philosophy of the “Theses.” As the allegory of the Angel of history makes clear, for Benjamin the seer’s gaze is not turned toward the future, but rather, “kindled by the peaks of earlier generations as they sink further and further into the past.”⁸⁹

¹ *Correspondence 1930-1940*, 287.

² “Walter Benjamin and His Angel,” *On Walter Benjamin*, 83.

³ “Historical Materialism or Political Messianism?” *Benjamin: Philosophy, Aesthetics, History*, 203.

⁴ “Consciousness-Raising or Rescuing Critique,” *On Walter Benjamin*, 113-114.

⁵ *Fire Alarm*, 4.

⁶ *ibid.*, 20.

⁷ “Introduction to Benjamin’s *Schriften*,” *On Walter Benjamin*, 3.

⁸ *On Walter Benjamin*, 52.

⁹ *ibid.*, 82.

¹⁰ “The Life of Students,” *Selected Writings v. 1*, 36.

¹¹ xii.

¹² *ibid.*, xiii.

¹³ *Benjamin: Philosophy, Aesthetics, History*, 216.

¹⁴ *Fire Alarm*, 18. Italics added.

¹⁵ *Selected Writings v. 3*, 262. Italics added.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, 267. Italics added.

¹⁷ *Arcades Project*, 471.

¹⁸ *The Dialectical Imagination*, 201.

¹⁹ *Arcades Project*, *ibid.*

²⁰ “Historical Materialism or Political Messianism?” *Benjamin: Philosophy, Aesthetics, History*, 183.

²¹ *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*, 221.

²² *Illuminations*, 253.

²³ *Benjamin. Adorno. Zwei Studien*, 17. Quoted by Tiedemann in “Historical Materialism or Political Messianism?,” 189.

²⁴ Quoted by Löwy, *Fire Alarm*, 28.

²⁵ Beiner, “Walter Benjamin’s Philosophy of History,” *Political Theory*, Vol. 12, No. 3, 423.

²⁶ *ibid.*, 190.

²⁷ “Convolut N,” *Benjamin: Philosophy, Aesthetics, History*, 61.

²⁸ Quoted by Löwy, *Fire Alarm*, 26.

²⁹ *ibid.*

³⁰ “Re-Fusing Theology: Some First Responses to Walter Benjamin’s *Arcades Project*,” *New German Critique*, No. 39, 9.

³¹ *Fire Alarm*, 28.

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- ³² *ibid.* Italics added.
- ³³ *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*, 1.
- ³⁴ *ibid.*, 7-13.
- ³⁵ *ibid.*, 11.
- ³⁶ "Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations*, 258.
- ³⁷ "Notes to the Theses on History," quoted by Tiedemann in "Dialectics at a Standstill," *Arcades Project*, 944.
- ³⁸ *ibid.*
- ³⁹ "Theologico-Political Fragment," *Reflections*, 312.
- ⁴⁰ Thesis XVII, *Illuminations*, 263. Italics Added.
- ⁴¹ Paralipomena to "On the Concept of History," *Selected Writings v. 4*, 402.
- ⁴² Thesis XVIIIa, 263.
- ⁴³ XIV, 261.
- ⁴⁴ *ibid.*
- ⁴⁵ *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*, 13.
- ⁴⁶ XVIIIb, 264.
- ⁴⁷ *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*, 12.
- ⁴⁸ II, 254.
- ⁴⁹ Quoted by Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 479.
- ⁵⁰ *ibid.*
- ⁵¹ "Isaac Luria: A Central Figure in Jewish Mysticism," *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, Vol. 29, No. 8, 12.
- ⁵² *ibid.* Italics added.
- ⁵³ Thesis V, VI, 255.
- ⁵⁴ IX, 257.
- ⁵⁵ Benjamin, "Allegory and Trauerspiel," *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 166.
- ⁵⁶ Thesis IX, *ibid.*
- ⁵⁷ "Walter Benjamin and His Angel," *Jews and Judaism in Crisis*, 205.
- ⁵⁸ Thesis III, 254.
- ⁵⁹ *Reflections*, 312.
- ⁶⁰ *ibid.*
- ⁶¹ "Walter Benjamin," *On Jews and Judaism*, 193.
- ⁶² Benjamin, "Zur Kritik der Gewalt," *GS*, II, 1 (1921), p. 191. Translated by Löwy in *Fire Alarm*.
- ⁶³ Scholem and Adorno, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin*, 248.
- ⁶⁴ *History and Class Consciousness*, 1.
- ⁶⁵ *ibid.*
- ⁶⁶ VII, 257.
- ⁶⁷ VIII, 257.
- ⁶⁸ *Selected Writings*, v.3, 273.
- ⁶⁹ *ibid.*, 266.
- ⁷⁰ Marcus, Herbert, *Reason and Revolution*, 312.
- ⁷¹ *ibid.*, 314-315.
- ⁷² XIII, 261.

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- ⁷³ *Selected Writings*, v.4, 183.
- ⁷⁴ “Convolut N,” *Walter Benjamin: Philosophy, Aesthetics, History* 50.
- ⁷⁵ *Illuminations*, 262, 263.
- ⁷⁶ §1.
- ⁷⁷ Leibniz, *Monadology*, §6.
- ⁷⁸ Leibniz, ‘Preface to the New Essays (1703-5),’ *Philosophical Essays*, 296.
- ⁷⁹ “N,” *Walter Benjamin: Philosophy, Aesthetics, History*, 66.
- ⁸⁰ *ibid.*, 46.
- ⁸¹ *ibid.*, 11, 12.
- ⁸² “Walter Benjamin and His Angel,” *On Walter Benjamin*, 54.
- ⁸³ *ibid.*, 83.
- ⁸⁴ “Historical Materialism or Political Messianism?” *Benjamin: Philosophy, Aesthetics, History*, 200-201.
- ⁸⁵ *ibid.*, 201.
- ⁸⁶ “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte,” *Selected Writings*, 300.
- ⁸⁷ *ibid.*, 301.
- ⁸⁸ *ibid.*
- ⁸⁹ Parilopema to “On the Concept of History,” *Selected Writings v. 4*, 405.

Part Two: Accessing the Past

"We open the book of what happened."

-Walter Benjamin, *Arcades Project*

In addition to drawing upon the interplay of Messianic and Marxist ideas in the theses "On the Concept of History," Benjamin also expands on the theory of historiography he began in "Eduard Fuchs: Collector and Historian" (1937). Interestingly, in Thesis VI, he tells us, "To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it "the way it really was,"¹ taking issue with the German historian Leopold von Ranke's belief that history should be written *wie es eigentlich gewesen ist*.^{*} The inclusion of this provocative sentiment, that history need not be written "the way it really was," underscores Benjamin's departure from the prevailing conception of historiography at the time, which he refers to as "historicism" in contrast to his own "historical materialism." "Historicism gives the 'eternal image' of the past; historical materialism supplies a *unique experience* with the past," he writes in Thesis XVI. The "eternal image" of the past, for Benjamin, represents the vision of history he criticized as early as "The Life of Students" (1915) essay. It "puts its faith in the infinite extent of time and thus concerns itself only with the speed, or lack of it, with which people and epochs advance along the path of progress."² As Benjamin later adds in the "Theses,"

^{*} In *History of the Latin and Teutonic Nations from 1494 to 1515* (1887), Ranke writes, "You have reckoned that history ought to judge the past and to instruct the contemporary world as to the future. The present attempt does not yield to that high office. It will merely tell how it really was."

this historicist vision of history is one that imagines events as a continuum spanning “homogeneous, empty time.”³

Recall from Part One that, for Benjamin, a continuous view of history in which event follows event by way of a causal chain serves as the breeding ground for political complacency. “The concept of the historical progress of mankind cannot be sundered from the concept of its progression through homogenous, empty time,” he tells us in Thesis XIII.⁴ He warns us, further, of the “whore” called “Once upon a time” who makes her home in the historicist’s bordello, distracting her patrons with myths of a universal history. Benjamin urges, instead, for a materialist historiography – insofar as he makes the concept his own – in which past events are forcefully seized from the historical continuum before they are forever lost to the forgotten past, thereafter unavailable for the revolutionary present. “The true picture of the past flits by,” Benjamin writes in Thesis V. It “can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again.”⁵

Benjamin presents a further reason in the “Theses” for his skepticism regarding a historical narrative that attempts to depict history “the way it really was.” The argument is indebted to the Marxist critique of cultural goods in *Das Capital*. Marx’s notion that the cultural value of goods reinforces the existing social structure mirrors Benjamin’s argument in Thesis VII that the historicist’s reliance on cultural artifacts binds the historical narrative to the viewpoint of “the victor.” When he asks, for instance, with whom the adherents of historicism empathize, he says the answer is “inevitable”:

With the victor. And all rulers are the heirs of those who conquered before them. Hence, empathy with the victor inevitably benefits the rulers. Historical materialists know what that means. Whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which the present rulers step over those who are lying prostrate.⁶

To this effect, in a lucid piece on Benjamin, history, and textuality, Irving Wohlfarth observes that, for Benjamin, “to tell history nowadays is already to tell a lie”:

Far from transcending all man-made conventions, the God’s eye view is merely an optical illusion...The panorama that historicism contemplates, the “perspectives” it opens up, the survey courses it offers, are of the order of a phantasmagoria—criminally innocent or disingenuous entertainment for which the materialist historian cannot afford the time.⁷

Rather than articulate the past “the way it really was,” the process of relying on cultural artifacts that have fallen into the hands of the victor perpetuates, in Benjamin’s eyes, a vision of history in which the fallen remain trampled on and forgotten:

There is no document of civilization that is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as a document is not free of barbarism, barbarism taints also the manner in which it was transmitted from one owner to another. A historical materialist therefore dissociates himself from it as far as possible. He regards it as his task to brush history against the grain.⁸

If the conventional approach to historiography is, for Benjamin, a form of “barbarism,” how is it that we are meant to “articulate the past,” to “seize hold of it,” before it “flits by”?⁹ If we are to explore this question further, we must look beyond the 1940 “Theses.” I suggest that Benjamin’s writings on language and literary criticism are meant to supplement the redemptive theory of history we find in the “Theses.” These texts parallel the shifts and turning points in Benjamin’s career as expressed in Part One of this study: the metaphysical beginnings, the turn to Marxism, and the later

attempt to synthesize both aspects of his thought. As I hope to illustrate, Benjamin's historical materialist is at the same time a critical reader of literature. To begin, we must travel back to the early works of Benjamin's *oeuvre*, looking first to his early writings on knowledge, experience, and language. Having done so, we might examine how literary works and the project of reading critically become crucially important for the redemptive task of accessing the past.

I. Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Experience

We might say that Benjamin's concept of experience is the thread that runs through the whole of his work. Thus, in his introduction to *Walter Benjamin: Philosophy, Aesthetics, History*, scholar Gary Smith notes that experience serves as "Benjamin's great theme...the true focal point of his analysis of modernity, philosophy of history, and theory of the artwork."¹⁰ This comes to bear on the project of the historical materialist in the "Theses," who envisions history not as an "eternal image" of the past, but rather as a "unique" and ever-changing experience. Central to this thesis is Benjamin's belief that modernity has witnessed a deterioration of personal experience. "Experience has fallen in value," he writes in 1936.¹¹ Benjamin's early writings, and particularly his 1917 treatise "On the Program of the Coming Philosophy," are central to the formulation of his philosophy of experience. In the treatise, Benjamin uses Kant's critical philosophy as the foundation for his own theory of experience. As he writes to Gershom Scholem in October 1917, he considers Kant's work with the "utmost reverence, looking on even the least letter as a *tradendum* to be transmitted." Still, Benjamin adds, "what is *essential* in Kant's thought must be

preserved...however much it is necessary to recast him afterwards.”¹² As a result, “On the Program of the Coming Philosophy” serves to preserve, but also to recast, elements of Kantian epistemology.

Benjamin begins his critique of Kant first by attending to the Kantian theory of knowledge, since, for him, “the hollowness of the experience” available to Kant is a consequence of his formulations on the concept of knowledge.¹³ For the young Benjamin, it is of the utmost importance to salvage from Kant as well as Plato before him a desire for certainty in the pursuit of knowledge: “Both of these philosophers share a confidence that the knowledge of which we can give the clearest account will also be the most profound,” he writes.¹⁴ At the same time, Benjamin remains critical of the limitations of Kantian epistemology to the extent that Kant draws on principles from the scientific Enlightenment, and particularly from Newtonian physics:

Especially in the *Prolegomena*, Kant wanted to take the principles of experience from the sciences, especially mathematical physics, and yet from the very beginning, and even in the *Critique of Reason*, experience itself and unto itself was never identical with the object realm of that science...The very fact that Kant was able to commence his immense work under the constellation of the Enlightenment indicates that his work was undertaken on the basis of an experience virtually reduced to a nadir, to a minimum of significance.¹⁵

When Benjamin asserts that Kant’s epistemology represents experience “virtually reduced to a nadir,” he points to its reliance on a standard of certainty that is limited to what is empirically measurable. The theory of knowledge that Kant derives from the claims of Newtonian physics is one that privileges phenomenal knowledge, or knowledge of appearances, above the knowledge of “things in themselves” (*Dinge-an-sich*). As a result, in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant is concerned with the

epistemological conditions that make the subjective knowledge of appearances possible. He outlines three conditions which constitute all possible perceptual experience: sensible intuition, the categories of understanding, and reason. Kant calls these faculties *transcendental* because they deal with the modes of knowledge rather than the objects of knowledge: "I call all knowledge *transcendental* if it is occupied, not with objects, but with the way that we can possibly know objects even before we experience them," Kant writes in the introduction to the *Critique*.¹⁶ By intuition, Kant refers to the *a priori* acceptance of the principles of time and space. Although the existence of these principles cannot be obtained empirically, for Kant they represent "the condition of the possibility of appearances" – in other words, they make the experience of objects possible.¹⁷ Kant's twelve categories of understanding represent the parameters by which all knowledge remains possible through sense perception, including substance, quantity, and quality. In the *Transcendental Analytic*, Kant argues that conclusions reached outside the limitations of perception and pure intuition necessarily involve "transcendental illusions," or errors in the process of reasoning, because they depend on inferences that fall outside the bounds of verifiable experience.¹⁸ These "transcendental illusions" include ontological proofs about the existence of God and the nature of human existence. For Kant, although such metaphysical questions have a practical use in the formulation of a moral philosophy, they ultimately carry no epistemological significance because they are unverifiable through experience.

Thus, when Kant asks in the first *Critique* how metaphysics, as a science, is possible, he concludes, "We may...and indeed we must, regard as abortive all attempts

hitherto made, to establish a metaphysic *dogmatically*.”¹⁹ Certainly, then, the early Benjamin departs from Kant in the “Program of the Coming Philosophy” when he calls for a concept of experience that is both transcendental *and* speculative—in other words, he insists that philosophy leave room for experience of the absolute. “The problem faced by Kantian epistemology, as by every other great epistemology, has two sides, and Kant only managed to give a valid explanation for one of them,” Benjamin writes in the 1917 treatise. Aside from the question of certainty in knowledge, to which Kant attends through the categories, there remains “the question of the integrity of an experience that is ephemeral.”²⁰ By restoring a metaphysical dimension to philosophy, Benjamin hopes “to do justice to a higher experience.”²¹ In order to do so, he suggests a breakdown of the rigid distinction between the subject and object of experience upon which Kantian empiricism depends:

It simply cannot be doubted that the notion, sublimated though it may be, of an individual, living ego which receives sensations by means of its senses and forms ideas on the basis of them, plays a role of the greatest importance in the Kantian conception of knowledge. This notion is, however, mythology, and so far as its truth content is concerned, the same as every other epistemological mythology.... To the types of empirical consciousness correspond just as many types of experiences, which in regard to their relation to the empirical consciousness, so far as truth is concerned, have only the value of fantasy or hallucination.²²

The conception of knowledge that occupies Benjamin in the treatise is not the “mythology” of empirical knowledge formulated by Kant, but rather what he considers “pure knowledge”—a knowledge that transcends the subject-object dichotomy. As Richard Wolin expresses in *An Aesthetics of Redemption*, “For Benjamin, truth is something *objective* and *divine* in origin, and therefore ontologically superior to the

abstract synthesizing activities of the transcendental subject.”²³ Consequently,

Benjamin turns to a concept of experience that embraces the “ephemeral”:

Its [metaphysics’] distinctiveness lies...in its universal power to tie all of experience immediately to the concept of God through ideas. Thus the task of the coming philosophy can be conceived as the discovery or creation of that concept of knowledge which, by relating the concept of experience exclusively to the transcendental consciousness, makes not only mechanical but also religious experience logically possible. This should definitely not be taken to mean that knowledge makes God possible, but that it definitely does make the experience and doctrine of him possible in the first place.²⁴

When Benjamin speaks of a *transcendental* consciousness, he applies the term in the sense that Kant calls *transcendent*: “We shall entitle...those principles...which profess to pass beyond these limits [of possible experience] *transcendent*” Kant writes, adding that he is not “referring to the *transcendental* employment or misemployment of categories,” but rather to “actual principles which incite us to tear down all those boundary-fences and to seize possession of an entirely new domain which recognizes no limits of demarcation.”²⁵ Based on his reading of Kant’s first *Critique*, Benjamin believes that Kant nowhere denies the possibility of a metaphysics of experience, but rather insists upon criteria for evaluating such a metaphysics. He considers Kant’s reliance on scientific truth to be a limitation of Enlightenment philosophy, in which philosophical knowledge had its basis in formulae and numbers almost to the total exclusion of the sphere of language. As a result, Benjamin concludes that “the great restructuration and correction” of Kantian philosophy can only be attained by paying heed to the sphere of language, so often overlooked by Enlightenment philosophers. For Benjamin, the new concept of experience shall be found “by relating knowledge to language” and through

the recognition “that all philosophical knowledge *has its unique expression in language.*” And thus, “the demand upon the philosophy of the future can finally be put in these words: to create on the basis of the Kantian system a concept of knowledge to which a concept of experience corresponds, *of which the knowledge is the doctrine.*”²⁶

Ultimately, then, Benjamin’s project in the 1917 treatise is to unite knowledge, experience, and language through an approach to philosophy that revives its metaphysical dimension. By breaking down the barriers between subject and object, Benjamin not only calls for a new concept of experience, but a new approach to philosophy more generally: one that embraces mystical, religious, and supernatural elements of experience. “We know of primitive peoples of the so-called pre-animistic stage who identify themselves with sacred animals and plants and name themselves after them...and of clairvoyants who at least claim to be able to feel the sensations of others as their own,” Benjamin tells us in the “Program.” “To determine the true criteria for differentiating between the values of the various types of consciousness will be one of the highest tasks of the future philosophy.”²⁷ As such, Benjamin counters Kant’s empirical approach to experience with a defense of the experiences of ancients, madmen, and clairvoyants. “A philosophy that does not include the possibility of soothsaying from coffee grounds...cannot be a true philosophy,” says the young Benjamin in 1918.²⁸ While it remains unclear in “Program on the Coming Philosophy” how this future metaphysics is to be realized, we know that Benjamin suggests a method in which “the knowledge is the doctrine (*Lehre*).” The term *Lehre* translates, in English, somewhere between “religious doctrine” and “teachings.”

Although Benjamin's meaning remains ambiguous, it is reasonable to situate his words in a context that acknowledges both the religious and textual dimensions of *Lehre*, especially in light of the relationship between language, religion, and knowledge that Benjamin illuminates in his early writings. In order to better explore this relationship, we must examine his 1916 essay "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man" (1916), as well as the point of intersection between language, mimesis, and translation.

II. Philosophy of Language

"Origin is the goal."

Karl Kraus, Epigraph to Thesis XIV

The 1916 essay "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man" is often considered Benjamin's first major critical work. However, for Benjamin, it represented a number of largely unfinished thoughts on an "infinitely difficult topic" which was "still quite far from having taken final shape."²⁹ As a result, the essay appears particularly difficult, even within a body of work that is often noted for its esotericism. At the same time, the text is crucial for any examination of Benjamin's critical theory. There are two main reasons for this: first, by pointing to the aspect of language that is both pure and divine, Benjamin illustrates the unique role language plays in the new concept of experience he outlines in "Program of the Coming Philosophy." Secondly, the relationship Benjamin develops between language and truth will serve as an important link in the formulation of Benjamin's thoughts on the redemptive value of literary works. These thoughts will ultimately serve to establish the importance of the

literary work as a vehicle of remembrance, and thus as an important component of Benjamin's formulation of historical materialism in the "Theses."

In the 1916 essay, Benjamin develops a theory of language that attends to the theological dimension of experience which so preoccupies him in "Program of the Coming Philosophy." By paying heed to the divine quality of language, Benjamin is able to point to a realm of experience that precludes the Kantian division between subject and object, and between appearance and essence. This is the realm of "language as such," of pure language. According to Benjamin, the realm of pure language is not instrumental; rather than a medium to communicate *through*, language is initially "the direct expression of that which communicates *itself* in it."³⁰ For instance, the language of a lamp, tree, or table expresses the "spiritual essence" (*geistiges Wesen*) of the object in itself, insofar as the object exists and is part of the created world.³¹ As a result, pure language is, for Benjamin, identical to the structure of reality because it points to the essential being of objects. Since the spiritual essence of humanity involves the Adamic act of naming, the "language of man" is distinguishable from "language as such" through its "translation of spiritual essences of divine nature...into the ordered realm of names."³² As Benjamin expresses, "The name is that *through* which and *in* which, language itself communicates itself absolutely."³³ In the pure language of naming, by which Adam assigns to each created being its *true* name, there exists "no means, no object, and no addressee of communication."³⁴ Rather, for Benjamin, Adamic naming represents a divine, immediate form of expression, in which "the mental being of man communicates itself to God."³⁵

Benjamin proceeds with a discussion of the creative and cognitive dimensions of language based on an analysis of the biblical story of creation. It is important to note, as Richard Wolin points out, the close relationship between Benjamin's reading of the first book of Genesis and the central role of language in many Kabbalistic interpretations of the myth of creation. This relationship will serve to clarify the more enigmatic passages of the essay. Benjamin's employment of Kabbalistic doctrine is evident, for instance, in his conception of *Ursprache* – the pure, originary language that existed at the beginning of time. The question of how the world came into being is central throughout the history of Kabbalist studies. Most, if not all, of this speculation is concerned with the realm of divine emanations, or *sefiroth*, by which creation is conceived as a gradual unfolding or revelation of God's divine essence. As Gershom Scholem explains:

Insofar as God reveals himself, He does so through the creative power of the *sefiroth*...This Kabbalistic world of the *sefiroth* encompasses what philosophers and theologians called the world of the divine attributes. But to the mystics it was divine life itself, insofar as it moves toward Creation...The process which the Kabbalists described as the emanation of divine energy and divine light was also characterized as the unfolding of the divine *language*. This gives rise to a deep-seated parallelism between the two most important kinds of symbolism used by Kabbalists to communicate their ideas. They speak of attributes and of spheres of light; but in the same context they speak also of divine names and the letters of which they are composed. From the very beginnings of Kabbalistic doctrine these two manners of speaking appear side by side. The secret world of the godhead is a world of language, a world of divine names that unfold in accordance with a law of their own.³⁶

While there is no single, unified theory of language among Kabbalist scholars, according to Scholem they share the belief that “all things exist only by virtue of their degree of participation in the Great Name of God, which manifests itself throughout

the whole of creation.”³⁷ The creative, divine act of naming represents an instance in which names correspond perfectly to the essence of things—or the Kantian thing-in-itself—because word and thing unfold simultaneously. In Benjamin’s interpretation of the book of Genesis, he differentiates between this initial stage in which God used language to create the world, and a second stage of language in which Adam himself names things. As Benjamin explains, when God bestows language unto man, it transforms from a creative power to a cognitive power—it becomes knowledge:

In man God set language, which had served *him* as medium of creation, free. God rested when he had left his creative power to itself in man. This creativity, relieved of its divine actuality, became knowledge...The deepest images of this divine word and the point where human language participates most intimately in the divine infinity of the pure word...is the...name...The paradisiacal language of man must have been one of perfect knowledge.³⁸

While the language of Adam is neither creative nor divine, it still “possesses its own magic” because it represents human language in its most perfect form.³⁹ As the philosophy and German studies scholar Max Pensky argues, in Adamic naming “the idea is immediately present in the name,” not in the sense that the name “strives for a unity of cognitive act and intended object,” but because “the name *is* this unity perfected in the new form of (sonic) deed.”⁴⁰ Adamic naming, for Benjamin, is thus immediate, absolute, and eternal. After the Fall from Paradise, however, this pure, Adamic language is lost to mankind. Benjamin’s interpretation of the Fall of Adam may again be supplemented by Kabbalist literature in order to clarify his explication of the Tree of Knowledge and the break between appearance and essence. In the book of Genesis, there exist in the Garden of Eden both the Tree of Life and the Tree of

Knowledge. Before Adam and Eve fed from the Tree of Knowledge, the world was ruled by the Tree of Life, which knew no evil but only the essence of things, which was good – because God said, “Let the water teem with living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth,” and “God saw that it was good.”⁴¹ According to a passage from one of the books of the *Zohar*, a central Kabbalist text dating from the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century, since the fall of Adam,

The world is no longer ruled by the Tree of Life as it had been in the beginning, but by the Tree of Knowledge. The Tree of Life represents the pure, unbroken power of the holy, the diffusion of the divine life through all worlds and the communication of all living things with their divine source. There is no admixture of evil in it...no death, no restriction. But since the Fall of Adam, since the time when the forbidden fruit of the Tree of Knowledge was eaten, the world is ruled by the mystery of this second tree in which both good and evil have their place. Hence, under the rule of this Tree, the world contains differentiated spheres: the holy and the profane, the pure and the impure, the permitted and the forbidden, the living and the dead, the divine and the demonic.⁴²

According to Benjamin, “knowledge of good and evil abandons name.”⁴³ The pure language of Adam decays because it becomes instrumental, a medium to communicate *through* rather than *in*. Consequently, the word becomes “*mere sign*” and meaning becomes “prattle.”⁴⁴ This linguistic confusion is heightened by the plan for the Tower of Babel, which results in a multitude of different signs being applied to the same object. Benjamin refers to this event as the advent of “overnaming,” which he sees as the cause of all of nature’s mourning: “How...melancholy it is to be named not from one blessed paradisiacal language of names, but from the hundred languages of man, in which name has already withered.”⁴⁵

Despite the degradation of language that occurs with its transformation from divine to profane, Benjamin intimates that there remains trapped within the language of man a degree of the pure, divine language that existed at the beginning of time. “All higher language is a translation of lower ones, until in ultimate clarity the word of God unfolds,” Benjamin writes at the end of the essay.⁴⁶ Pensky’s analysis in this area is helpful. He argues that the arbitrariness Benjamin perceives between sign and signified implies “a cognitive recourse to a *nonarbitrary* dimension of linguistic communication.” As a result, “the conception of an arbitrariness (*Willkür*) of the system of signs” must necessarily arise from “the prior metaphysical pronouncement that a nonarbitrary immediacy of sign and signified (the *Ursprache*) is...withheld” after the Fall.⁴⁷

Benjamin returns to this idea in the 1933 essays “Doctrine of the Similar” and “On the Mimetic Faculty.” In both works he puts forth the conception of an *ur*-history, a primal state of existence calling to mind the utopian relation between man and nature present before the Fall. In this early phase of life, human beings could still perceive the natural world physically and immediately, through the faculty of “magical correspondences.”⁴⁸ The formation of magical correspondences represents, for Benjamin, “the most ancient” form of reading; it is “to read what was never written,” reading “before all languages, from the entrails, the stars, or dances.”⁴⁹

Like the pure naming of Adam, the sensuous language of magical correspondences has withered with historical development. “Clearly the observable world of modern man contains only minimal residues of the magical correspondences and analogies that were familiar to ancient people,” Benjamin writes.⁵⁰ The residues of

this once magical faculty for forming and perceiving similarities remains evident in written and spoken language, no longer immediate and sensuous but instead a form of “nonsensuous similarity.”⁵¹ In both “Doctrine of the Similar” and “On the Mimetic Faculty,” Benjamin suggests that language possesses a mimetic quality dating back to the earliest forms of written and spoken word. His theory of nonsensuous correspondences holds that the sound and appearance of words are initially meant to imitate the objects they represent. For Benjamin, as for the philologist Rudolf Leonhard before him, “Every word—indeed, the whole of language—is onomatopoetic.”⁵² As in “On Language as Such and On the Language of Man,” in which Benjamin implies that the divine content of pure language is hidden within the language of man, Benjamin writes in the 1933 essays that the primal correspondence between appearance and essence may be momentarily glimpsed in words and sentences. To this effect, Benjamin sees his mimetic theory of language as “related in the most intimate way to mystical or theological theories of language.”⁵³ Like the “true picture of the past” addressed in the “Theses,” these linguistic correspondences are “in every case bound to a flashing up,” offering themselves “as fleetingly and transitorily as a constellation of stars.”⁵⁴

Benjamin’s 1921 essay “The Task of the Translator” is pertinent to both the 1916 and 1933 works, because in it he addresses how the individual may access the “divine truth” or “magical similarities” present within language and linguistic works. Although Benjamin includes the 1921 text as an introduction to his translation of Baudelaire’s *Tableaux Paraisiens*, as Michael P. Steinberg, Associate Professor of History

at Cornell, points out, Benjamin's discussion of translation is "not so much between language *x* and language *y*" as between "the forbidden idea of the absolute, original language and its pale refractions in human language"—these are the language of God and the language of man encountered in Benjamin's earlier work.⁵⁵ In "The Task of the Translator," Benjamin holds that there lies within the text "a depository of the ultimate truth which all thought strives for."⁵⁶ This truth is concealed within the "pure language" of the text, which Benjamin compares to the divine "creative Word."⁵⁷ Ultimately, the task of the translator is redemptive: "*to release in his own language that pure language which is under the spell of another, to liberate the language imprisoned in a work in his re-creation of that work.*" It is "for the sake of pure language" that the translator "breaks through decayed barriers of his own language."⁵⁸

This redemptive task of the translator is at the same time a historical task. It is dependent upon the idea that, like those past generations of the "Theses" who have not yet been redeemed, the life of the literary work is also incomplete. Benjamin calls the life of the work after it has been completed its "afterlife," and he writes of it specifically in relation to literary works: "The idea of life and afterlife in works of art should be regarded with an entirely unmetaphorical objectivity," Benjamin tells us.⁵⁹ Within the literary work Benjamin sees a particular historical value; when stripped of its aestheticized qualities, it contains a past "depository of truth" *that can be carried into the present*. If we consider "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man" in conjunction with "The Task of the Translator," it is apparent that Benjamin has a decisive interest in the concept of *redeeming* the text in order to unlock the "ultimate

truth” concealed within—a truth that is divinely related to the pure language of God. This notion of redeeming the text is intimately connected with the project of the historical materialist of the “Theses,” whose goal is to form a “unique experience” with the past by carrying the data of the past into the present in order to create a moment of now-time (*Jetztzeit*). Further, when we consider Benjamin’s thesis in the 1916 piece, that language in its most pure form is the immediate, creative language of God, it is evident that to restore language to its *origin*, in which it existed in a pure condition and corresponded perfectly to the true knowledge of things, becomes the *goal*. This task is highly theological, in that it is strongly related to the concept of Messianic redemption discussed in Part One. Indeed, if we return to Scholem’s analysis on the Kabbalist interpretation of the two trees in the garden of Eden, we read on that, with the advent of Messianic redemption, the “full glory of the utopian” will again break forth, “although characteristically and in keeping with the Tree of Life it is conceived as a restoration of the state of things in paradise.”⁶⁰ Certainly, Messianic redemption includes a restoration of language to its pure, divine form, and a concomitant restoration of the unity of appearance and essence.

Finally, as Richard Wolin points out, the task the individual plays in unlocking the pure knowledge that resides within the text, as discussed in “Task of the Translator,” corresponds to the Kabbalist task of using scriptural exegesis to reveal the mysteries of God.⁶¹ This practice is evident, for instance, in the writings of the thirteenth-century Spanish Kabbalist Abraham Abulafia, who believed that the Torah could be dissected and interpreted in order to reveal divine truths.⁶² The importance

of scriptural interpretation in the Kabbalist tradition is central to the writings of the *Zohar*:

As wine in a jar, if it is to keep, so is the Torah, contained within its outer garment. Such a garment is made up of many stories, but we, we are required to *pierce the garment*.⁶³

The difference between Benjamin and the Kabbalists, as Wolin points out, is that, “In Benjamin’s quasi-secularized reinterpretation of this doctrine,” not scripture alone, “but also literary works of art, are legitimate objects of the exegetical quest for the key to redemption.”⁶⁴ As we shall now examine, Benjamin maps out a revelatory task for the literary critic comparable to that of the translator. Like the translator, the critic is to redeem the data of the past by making it relevant for the present. This task lies in *interpretation* rather than *translation*: according to Benjamin’s theory of critique, the critical examination of works of literature must aim to *pierce the garment* of the text in order to redeem its truth content for the revolutionary present.

III. Redemptive Criticism

“*Construction presupposes destruction.*”
-Walter Benjamin, *Arcades Project*

It may seem odd to suggest the literary work as the realm in which the historical materialist may seek genuine historical experience. After all, as Marcuse point out, the work of literature finds its home in a world of “beautiful illusion,” one that is so heavily aestheticized as to make beautiful the “one single catastrophe” of historical existence encountered with such melancholy by the Angel of History.⁶⁵ Benjamin addresses this issue in his 1922 essay on Goethe’s *Elective Affinities*. According to his reading, when

Ottolie kills herself out of love for Eduard, “all that is painful and violent remains remote” from her death.⁶⁶ The death is rendered beautifully because Ottolie serves as a symbol of beauty: “One does not overstate the case if one says that the belief in Ottolie’s beauty is the fundamental condition for engagement with the novel.”⁶⁷ In order to address the problem of artifice in relation to truth, both in *Elective Affinities* and works of literature more generally, Benjamin introduces the notion of an expressionless (*das Ausdrucklose*) aspect of language. The expressionless element of the artwork, as Benjamin explains, exists beyond the sphere of appearance and contains within it the essential truth of the artwork:

The unexpressed is that critical violence [*Gewalt*] which, while unable to separate semblance from essence in art, prevents them from mingling. It possesses this violence as a moral dictum. In the expressionless, the sublime violence of the true appears as that which determines the language of the real world according to the laws of the moral world. For it shatters whatever survives as the legacy of chaos in all beautiful semblance: the false, errant totality—the absolute totality. Only the expressionless completes the work, by shattering it into a thing of shards, into a fragment of the true world, into the torso of a symbol.⁶⁸

The notion of an inexpressible element in linguistic works is intimately related to Benjamin’s theory of language. In “Task of the Translator,” for instance, Benjamin tells us, “In all language and linguistic creations there remains in addition to what can be conveyed something that cannot be communicated.” This is the realm of the expressionless, and it finds its roots in the pure, immediate language of God, which “no longer means or expresses anything but is, as expressionless and creative Word.”⁶⁹ There exists, in Benjamin’s concept of the expressionless, a concomitant theory of literary criticism, the goal of which is to redeem the true, unexpressed aspect of the

work from beneath its outer veil. In other words, like the Kabbalist, the critic is to *pierce the garment* of the text in order to salvage its hidden truth. As Benjamin articulates in his discussion of the expressionless, this task involves violently shattering the totality of the beautiful exterior of the work in order to release the concealed fragments of truth within. While this process possesses a violent, destructive element, it is at the same time conservative in that it preserves the data of past experience for the present. This is supported by the distinction Benjamin draws between critic and commentator in the *Elective Affinities* essay. While the latter is concerned solely with the “material content” of the artwork, the critic, by contrast, seeks out its hidden “truth content,” and in so doing activates the past:

If, to use a simile, one views the growing work as a burning funeral pyre, then the commentator stands before it like a chemist, the critic like an alchemist. Whereas, for the former, wood and ash remain the sole objects of his analysis, for the latter only the flame itself preserves an enigma: *that of what is alive*. Thus, the critic inquires into the truth, whose living flame continues to burn over the heavy logs of what is past and the light ashes of what has been experienced.⁷⁰

The notion that the artwork possesses a “living flame” of past experience to which the critic has access suggests that Benjamin endows the critic with a redemptive capacity by which, through active reading, he or she is able to carry the data of past experience into the present. This is further evident if we examine, for a moment, Benjamin’s concept of the aura, which factors largely in his later works. Benjamin defines the aura as “the unique phenomenon of distance, however close [the work] may be.”⁷¹ The aura, radiant and yet elusive, presents the work of art as both present and absent, unique to

the here and now and yet belonging to the distant past.⁷² To penetrate the aura is to reveal a hidden storehouse of past experience:

Experience of the aura...rests on the transposition of a response common in human relationships to the relationship between the inanimate or natural object and man. The person we look at, or who feels he is being looked at, looks at us in turn. To perceive the aura of an object means to invest it with the ability to look at us in turn.⁷³

The concept of the aura has a clear correspondence to Benjamin's notion of the unexpressed, as both hold the potential for freeing past experience for the present. That the experience of reading may potentially yield a reciprocal relationship between reader and object of reading is central to Benjamin's discussion of criticism: the critic is to be responsive to the work, to look and be looked at in turn. Benjamin's interest in criticism begins with his 1919 dissertation, "The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism." In the essay, he examines the concept of literary criticism among the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century writers Friedrich Schlegel, Novalis, and August Wilhelm Schlegel. The importance of their theories, for Benjamin, lies in the distinct role they play in elevating responsiveness to the artwork from a "mere discerning" to a creative, experiential enterprise. According to Benjamin, for these three writers, "to be critical meant to elevate thinking so far beyond all restrictive conditions that the knowledge of truth sprang forth magically."⁷⁴ Critically reflecting on the artwork becomes a source of transcendence, of access to the absolute. Ultimately, Benjamin rejects the early Romantic theory of criticism because of its emphasis on self-reflection rather than judgment. If truth for the Romantic "springs forth magically" from the work, then criticism must be limited to what appears as self-

evident on its surface. Benjamin calls this method of reflection, in which the goal of the critic is to attain a higher state of consciousness by reading only what is written, “immanent critique,” and accordingly it is “only improperly called a judgment.”⁷⁵ He suggests, instead, a dialectical approach to criticism, which incorporates not only the positive, Romantic element of reflection but also its negative side, judgment. This negative dimension of criticism is much more in line with Benjamin’s thoughts on the expressionless as outlined in the *Elective Affinities* essay. Recall that, for Benjamin, the expressionless element of language is made to violently shatter all traces of the beautiful in order to collect the truth remaining among its shards. In contrast to the method of the early Romantics, who conceive the artwork as possessed of an absolute quality by which truth could be grasped immanently, in “Goethe’s *Elective Affinities*” Benjamin suggests that the task of the critic is to blast open this totality by defacing the beautiful surface of the work, looking instead to what is shattered and fragmented. In the interest of destroying the beautiful in order to rescue the true, Benjamin will hail criticism as “*the mortification of the works*” in his subsequent exploration of German tragic drama.⁷⁶

Composed during his time in Capri in 1924, Benjamin conceived *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* as his *Habilitation* for a position at the University of Frankfurt. The work is separated in two parts, the first of which examines the material content of *Trauerspiel*, the Baroque German mourning play of the seventeenth century. The second section, “Allegory and *Trauerspiel*,” explores the “truth content” of the German mourning play through a discussion of the critical role of Baroque allegory. Here

Benjamin returns to his criticism of early German Romanticism, contrasting it with Baroque drama. Benjamin grounds the distinction between early Romanticism and *Trauerspiel* in his distillation of the concepts of symbol and allegory. According to Benjamin, the early Romantics mistakenly assume that the artwork exists as “an indivisible unity of form and content.” By privileging the work as a symbolic totality, they believe they can derive from it an absolute and universal meaning:

The striving on the part of the romantic aestheticians after a resplendent but ultimately non-committal knowledge of an absolute has secured a place in the most elementary theoretical debates about art for a notion of the symbol which has nothing more than the name in common with the genuine notion...For this abuse occurs wherever in the work of art the ‘manifestation’ of an ‘idea’ is declared a symbol. The unity of the material and the transcendental object, which constitutes the paradox of the theological symbol, is distorted into a relationship between appearance and essence.⁷⁷

Benjamin notes the “paradox of the theological symbol” because, as evident in his work on language, he holds that any secular idea conveyed through symbol will never correspond perfectly to the essence of the idea: the latter is only possible in God. As a result, the Romantic symbol can only serve as a beautiful representation of the idea, which is ultimately devoid of the absolute knowledge the Romantics believed they had attained. Their approach, for Benjamin, is nothing more than an effort to represent the general or absolute through the finite and particular, and as such, it corresponds to the work of the historicist, who seeks history as a totality when he holds only fragments in his hands. For Benjamin, an absolute history, like an absolute truth or absolute language, can only exist in theological terms, for a redeemed mankind.

As a result, Benjamin rejects the Romantic notion that truth is evident in the totality of the work and looks instead to its fragments: “There are as many ultimate truths as there are authentic works of art. These ultimate truths are not elements but genuine parts, pieces, or fragments of truth.”⁷⁸ By this move, Benjamin turns away from the Romanticist’s glorification of the beautiful and universal and instead toward *Trauerspiel*, a highly stylized dramatic form that seeks history in a fragmented wasteland of ruins, death, and decay. “When Benjamin looked at the past, he looked at its underside,” writes historian Michael P. Steinberg in *Walter Benjamin and the Demands of History*.⁷⁹ Certainly this holds true of Benjamin’s interpretation of *Trauerspiel*, whose playwrights—Daniel Caspar von Lohenstein, Martin Opitz, and Andreas Gryphius—convey the suffering and hopelessness of the Thirty Years’ War in their works. These dramatists construct grisly, bloody scenes on elaborate stage sets in order to communicate the Baroque misery of the Reformation and dispel “the Counter-Reformation’s insistence on its splendor and coherence.”⁸⁰ The Baroque plays have a twofold structure, composed of a concrete representation of the plot and an underlying, allegorical dimension.⁸¹ For instance, Andreas Gryphius’s 1657 play *Catharina von Georgien* addresses the recent martyrdom of the Christian Princess Catharina at the hands of her Persian captor and suitor. As the same time, there exists an allegorical component encompassing the antinomies between divine and earthly love, body and soul, heavenly bliss and eternal damnation.⁸² In his commitment to “the underside” of history, Benjamin moves away from the Romantic symbol and

instead toward the allegorical structure of the Baroque era as the focal point of his conception of literary criticism:

Whereas in the symbol destruction is idealized and the transfigured face of nature is fleetingly revealed in the light of redemption, in allegory the observer is confronted with the *facies hippocratica* of history as a petrified, primordial landscape. Everything about history that, from the very beginning, has been untimely, sorrowful, and unsuccessful, is expressed in a face—or rather in a death’s head...This is the heart of the allegorical way of seeing, of the Baroque, secular explanation of history as the Passion of the world; its importance resides solely in the stations of death, because death digs most deeply the jagged line of demarcation between physical nature and significance.⁸³

While the symbolism of the early Romantics reveals as an eternal, resplendent vision of nature, Baroque allegory conceives nature as melancholy and transient, a process of “irresistible decay.”⁸⁴ This is evident, for instance, by what is conveyed in the “death’s head,” a human skull used by von Lohenstein in the play *Redender Totenkopf*, or *Speaking Death’s Head*, in order express the passing away of all earthly things. To this extent, Benjamin sees *Trauerspiel* as moving beyond a conception of nature as eternal, universal myth and instead into the realm of history: “The word ‘history’ stands written on the countenance of nature in the characters of transience,” Benjamin writes in “Allegory and *Trauerspiel*,” and as such “it is fallen nature which bears the imprint of the progression of history.”⁸⁵ Surely this is history as seen through the melancholy eyes of the angel in the “Theses,” whose gaze sets not on the historicist’s ideal of a continuous “chain of events,” but rather on a heap of decaying ruins, the “one single catastrophe” which “keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet.”⁸⁶ Likewise in the *Trauerspiel* study, Benjamin writes that it is “common practice” among the Baroque playwrights “to pile up fragments ceaselessly,”⁸⁷ and the bodies and

severed limbs, broken swords and lost crowns which clutter the stage converge in a vision of the world as “dead objects,” a realm of “infinite hopelessness.”⁸⁸ As Benjamin expresses, “in the process of decay, and in it alone, the events of history shrivel up and become absorbed in the setting. The dry rebuses that remain contain an insight, which is still available to the confused investigator.”⁸⁹ Significantly, it is precisely this element of death and decay that opens space for the critic to imbue the mourning play with meaning. For Benjamin, the transcendent, historical significance of the *Trauerspiel* is never explicitly present within the work, but is rather critically applied from without, by the allegorist. Richard Wolin’s gloss on this difficult subject is revealing:

This “negative” system of references is ensured by the technique of allegory, through which the morbid imagery of the plays’ manifest, profane material content becomes valueless in and of itself and ultimately acquires significance only by way of pointing to an external, transcendent referent. The didactic, repeatedly emphasized allegorical content of the *Trauerspiel* is the theme of *redemption through death*.⁹⁰

There exists a profane as well as a theological dimension to the concept of “redemption through death” evoked by the *Trauerspiel* playwrights. Benjamin conceives the profane element of Baroque allegory as specifically historical in character. He is drawn to the Baroque allegory for its transient nature, its role not as an aestheticized, eternal symbol but rather as a living, ever-changing interplay of history and experience. “Where man is drawn towards the symbol, allegory emerges from the depths of being to intercept the intention, and to triumph over it,” Benjamin writes. “If it is to hold its own against the tendency to absorption, the allegorical must constantly unfold in new and surprising ways.”⁹¹ Thus, allegory, as conceived by Benjamin, is a mechanism by which the critic may subjectively derive meaning out of the ruinous wasteland of *Trauerspiel*, forming

“new and surprising,” and constantly unfolding, connections with the text. In allegory, “any person, any object, any relationship can mean absolutely anything else,” and to this effect, the allegorist may be said to take on the task of forming constellations, finding a historical referent in the landmines of the present out of literary works conceived in a moment of crisis from the past.⁹² “The Baroque concept emerges from a discussion of the *state of emergency*, and makes it the most important function,” Benjamin writes in his explanation of *Trauerspiel*.⁹³ With this in mind, Steinberg astutely point out that, for Benjamin, the distinction between symbol and allegory lies in a complementary distinction between representation and reference: “With the symbol...reference gives way to representation. Benjaminian allegory, unlike traditional allegory, is a discourse of reference,” he asserts.⁹⁴ This referential power, as we shall continue to explore, is formed between moments of crisis from disparate historical eras. With regard to Baroque drama, Steinberg points specifically to the referential connection Benjamin the allegorist perceives between the Protestant Reformation and the instability of the Weimar Republic. In both the “shakiness” of the German Republic of the 1920s and the Counter-Reformation movement of the Catholic rulers of the Baroque era, Benjamin notes a similar and alarming tendency toward the tightening of “dictatorial power” in the name of “a complete stabilization, and political and ecclesiastical restoration.”⁹⁵ For Benjamin, the connection between these two eras illuminates an imminent threat that is evident, for instance, in the work of the political theorist Carl Schmitt, a proponent of strong, centralized government in the 1920s and a later member of the Nazi party. As Steinberg explains,

In the 1920s, the shakiness of the Weimer Republic demanded the urgent reinvention of politics and culture. The moment carried urgency for all but particularly for the German Jews...The fundamental political and cultural problem, which the practice of tragic drama strove to work through and which, through the invocation of the culture of *Trauerspiel*, Benjamin faces anew, is the problem of sovereignty and legitimacy in a disenchanted world. This is the problem engaged by Carl Schmitt, whose recently published book *Political Theology* (1922) had jolted varieties of Weimar theorists who shared the fear of the weakening of the German political ego. Thus the reformation crisis of sovereignty, legitimacy, and cosmology becomes an antecedent of Weimar uncertainty, and Benjamin seizes on the connection [...] The restorative spirit of the Catholic Baroque returns in the contemporary era. Carl Schmitt is a Counter-Reformation residue.

This allegorical relationship, as Steinberg here elucidates, is at the same time a historical relationship: “*history creates its allegories.*”⁹⁶ This is precisely the move that Benjamin makes in the *Trauerspiel* study, when he forms an allegorical connection between the Catholic rulers of the Counter-Reformation and the conservative extremists of the Weimar Republic. His goal is to point out a shared urgency between the periods, to make the experience of the Reformation pertinent to his own time. As such, the allegory formed between moments of historical crisis functions similarly to the dialectical image conceived by Benjamin in the “Theses.” The allegorical method thereby appears as a literary counterpart to the dialectic at a standstill outlined by Benjamin in his later works. As he tells us in his essay on Goethe’s *Elective Affinities*, in order to free the work of art from its spell of beautiful illusion, “the life undulating in it must appear petrified and as if spellbound in a single moment.” The allegorical mortification of the work as conceived in the *Trauerspiel* study serves precisely this end. The allegorist is to arrest the work “in a single moment,” to *bring time to a standstill*. The allegorist thereby “arrests the semblance” of the artwork, “spellbinds the movement,

and interrupts the harmony” in order to bring about a moment frozen in consciousness.⁹⁷ As is evident in the dismal picture formed in the works of Baroque drama, this historical consciousness is the recognition of an immanent threat during a moment of crisis, and, under the proper circumstances, may serve to counteract the illusory and pacifying vision of continuous progress. It is with reference to the dialectical image that, in the *Trauerspiel* study, Benjamin conceives the role of the critic as decisively historical: “The object of philosophical criticism is to show that the function of artistic form is as follows: *to make historical content.*”⁹⁸

In addition to the historical significance Benjamin isolates in *Trauerspiel*, he points to a redemptive, theological dimension that is central to the works. Like the negative theology of the Kabbalists, by which utter devastation in the realm of the profane may assist, paradoxically, the coming of the Messianic Kingdom, so the utter devastation of the Baroque wasteland points, for these playwrights, not only toward death and decay but also toward its inverse: divine salvation. This transformation from the realm of death to that of eternal life is evoked, for instance, in von Lohenstein’s death’s head: “Yea, when the Highest comes to bring in the harvest from the graveyard, so will I, a death’s head, become an angel’s countenance,” he writes in *Redender Totenkopf*.⁹⁹ Similarly, in Griphius’s *Catharina von Georgien*, the suffering experienced by the queen during her earthly imprisonment is transformed into the bliss of eternal spiritual afterlife. Benjamin explains this movement from profane to divine dialectically:

It will be unmistakably apparent, especially to anyone who is familiar with allegorical textual exegesis, that all of the things which are used to

signify derive, from the very fact of their pointing to something else, a power which makes them appear no longer commensurable with profane things, which raises them onto a higher plane, and which can, indeed, sanctify them. Considered in allegorical terms, then, the profane world is both elevated and devalued [...] Ultimately in the death-signs of the Baroque the direction of allegorical reflection is reversed; on the second part of its wide arc it returns, to redeem...the immersion of allegory has to clear away the final phantasmagoria of the objective and, left entirely to its own devices, re-discovers itself, not playfully in the earthly world of things, but seriously under the eyes of heaven.¹⁰⁰

Instead of conceiving this theological element as a case in point for the redemptive capacity of literary works, Benjamin is highly critical of the Baroque allegorical method in the final pages of his study. If, for Benjamin, the early Romantics are guilty of seeking truth in the totality of the artwork instead of looking amidst its fragments, then the Baroque allegorists are equally guilty for turning away from a melancholy truth in favor of a superficial salvation. Ultimately, for Benjamin, the “intention” of the allegorist “does not *faithfully* rest in the contemplation of bones,” but instead “*faithlessly* leaps forward to the idea of resurrection.”¹⁰¹ When Benjamin notes that the Baroque allegorist must, in the end, “clear away the final phantasmagoria of the objective,” he points toward the tendency to conceive the death and decay of the natural world as illusion, as decisively “not real.”¹⁰² Susan Buck-Morss’s gloss on the conclusion of the *Trauerspiel* study is telling:

Evil disappears, but at what cost! When the allegorists, claiming that the fragments of failed nature are really an allegory of spiritual redemption, ...when they declare evil as ‘self-delusion’ and material nature as ‘not real,’ then, for all practical purposes allegory becomes indistinguishable from myth.¹⁰³

In its recourse to myth, Benjamin concludes that Baroque allegory “goes away empty-handed.”¹⁰⁴ His critique is, in part, a political one. Benjamin’s work on *Trauerspiel* coincides with his increasing interest in Marxism and his growing concern with the political and social changes taking place around him. For Benjamin, “the German *Trauerspiel* is taken up entirely with the hopelessness of the earthly condition,” and as such, it leaves little space for revolutionary action.¹⁰⁵ Benjamin perceives in *Trauerspiel* a melancholy resignation toward the desolate state of the world, and it is this resignation that leads its playwrights, idealistically, to seek salvation in the realm of the divine rather than action in the sphere of the profane. The author of the “Theses” will not be satisfied with a literary theory that hides, in the end, amongst the recesses of myth and illusion, as do the Baroque allegorists when they fail to confront head-on the desolation and decay of the historical world. As a result, Benjamin rejects the contemplative attitude of the Baroque allegorists in favor of an active and revolutionary approach to literary criticism. “Criticism is a moral question,” he writes in 1926. “The critic is the strategist in the literary struggle,” and the artwork, “the shining sword in the battle of the minds.”¹⁰⁶

IV. Profane Illumination

“Awakening is namely the dialectical, Copernican turn of remembrance.”

-Benjamin, Konvolut K, *Arcades Project*

In his 1936 essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Benjamin famously posits the decline of the aura. Recall that Benjamin describes the

aura of the artwork as involved in “the unique phenomenon of distance, however close” the work “may be.” Due to the increasing number of technical processes involved in creating and reproducing works of art, the unique status of the artwork—its singular position in a particular time and place—ceases to be a matter of importance. While Benjamin first locates the phenomenon of the decline of the aura in visual artwork, for instance in film and photography, he extends the concept to works of art more generally, including literary works. Although he provides little support for this, his reasoning seems to be that all modern artwork suffers from a lack of authenticity: “The technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition” and jeopardizes its “authenticity.”¹⁰⁷ Benjamin’s response to the disintegration of the aura is ambivalent. On the one hand, like the inexpressible element we encounter in “Goethe’s *Elective Affinities*,” the aura is inextricably tied to the past, and to our capacity for remembrance. As Habermas writes, within the aura “is enclosed the historical experience of past *Jetztzeit* in need of revitalization”; the “undialectical destruction of aura would be a loss of that experience.”¹⁰⁸ On the other hand, as Benjamin explains in the 1936 essay, the aura binds the artwork to its “ritual function,” which in secularized terms remains evident “in the most profane forms of the cult of beauty.”¹⁰⁹ Severed from its mythical role as an emblem of the beautiful, the work of art is capable of fulfilling a political function. “Mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual,” Benjamin writes, and in its place, the artwork “begins to be based on another practice—politics.”¹¹⁰ The artwork, deprived of its cultic distance, takes on a new significance for

contemporary mass movements. As a result, the artwork no longer points to the esoteric, religious illumination of the Baroque allegorists but rather an exoteric, *profane illumination*. As Habermas explains,

In the forms of profane illumination, the experience of aura has burst the protective auratic shell and become exoteric. It does not derive from an analysis that sheds light on what has been suppressed and sets free what has been repressed. It is gained in a manner other than reflection would be capable of, namely by taking up...a semantics that is pried piece by piece from the interior of myth and released messianically (that is, for the purposes of emancipation) into works of great art.¹¹¹

In both “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” and the 1934 essay “The Author as Producer,” Benjamin develops a very fine, perhaps precarious, line between a poetic politics and a political poetics. He vehemently criticizes the former, which he calls “the introduction of aesthetics into political life,” as a propagandistic tool of fascism used to give the masses an outlet for expression “while preserving property” and maintaining control.¹¹² Political poetics, conversely, is a weapon of artists and intellectuals in the service of the class struggle. Its goal is to awaken its audience to the reality of modern social conditions by producing a “shock” comparable to that of the dialectical image.

Consistent with the project of the “Theses,” Benjamin’s interest in a political poetics remains occupied with the capacity for remembrance available through literary works. Max Pensky supports this assessment in the short piece “Tactics of Remembrance,” when he suggests reading the 1929 essays “The Image of Proust” and “Surrealism” in tandem. Benjamin, for his part, refers to the Surrealism essay as a “companion piece” to the Proust study in a 1929 letter to the Austrian writer Hugo

von Hofmannsthal.¹¹³ In his earlier work on *Trauerspiel*, Benjamin had examined a critical approach in which the subject desperately clings to ruined and fragmented objects, aimlessly seeking to recover them for historical truth. For Benjamin, this raised the question of whether it is possible for a meaningful investigation to arise out of the melancholia of the brooding allegorist. Benjamin's subsequent preoccupation with Marcel Proust's *À la Recherche du temps perdu*, or *Remembrance of Things Past*, suggests an attempt to rescue fragmented objects for a critical method that is collective and universal in nature. In Pensky's words, "a new relationship with the objects of memory is to be achieved not by an abandonment of brooding subjectivity itself," but by "submitting this same subjectivity to the rigid protocol of the work of memory." This method represents an attempt, on Benjamin's part, "to develop strategies for the reading of objectivity without brooding."¹¹⁴

Marcel Proust's writings on memory become, in a sense, the foundation for an approach to memory that aims to release true, objective data of the past. Benjamin's interest in *À la Recherche du temps perdu* centers around Proust's concept of the *mémoire involontaire*, or involuntary memory. The *mémoire involontaire* stands in contrast to the *mémoire volontaire*, or voluntary memory, which operates as a conscious, intellectual effort to recall past events. For Proust, the intellectualizing activity of the voluntary memory is an unreliable source for uncovering the true impressions of things, because "the ideas formed by the pure intelligence have no more than a logical, a possible truth." Like the allegories of the Baroque *Trauerspiel*, "they are arbitrarily chosen."¹¹⁵ The *mémoire involontaire*, by contrast, necessarily involves a true image of the past

because the subject does not choose which images to conjure; the images, in a sense, conjure themselves from the realm of the unconscious. There are a number of instances of *mémoire volontaire* in *À la Recherche du temps perdu*, but undoubtedly the most famous is the episode in which Marcel savors one of his mother's "petites madeleines":

No sooner had the warm liquid mixed with the crumbs touched my palate than a shudder ran through me and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary thing that was happening to me. An exquisite pleasure had invaded my senses, something isolated, detached, with no suggestion of its origin. And at once the vicissitudes of life had become different to me.¹¹⁶

The taste of the madeleine recalls, for Marcel, a memory from many years past, when his Aunt would give him tea and madeleines on Sunday mornings in Combray. For Marcel, "it was precisely the fortuitous and inevitable fashion in which this and other sensations had been encountered that proved the trueness of the past which they brought back to life, of the images which they released." We "feel, with these sensations, the effort that they make to climb back towards the light, feel in ourselves the joy of *rediscovering what is real*."¹¹⁷ Unlike the efforts of the Baroque allegorists, who aimlessly assign meaning to images, Proust's *mémoire involontaire* provides Benjamin with a methodology that has as its goal the discovery of the true "essence of things."¹¹⁸ Since the dissolution of the aura represents a concomitant decline in the ability to experience past events, for Benjamin Proust's novel serves as "an attempt to produce experience synthetically, under today's conditions, since there is less and less hope that it will come into being naturally."¹¹⁹

Proust's method in *À la Recherche du temps perdu* is similar to that of the Baroque allegorist to the extent that the sensations of fragmented objects—"the uneven paving-stones, the stiffness of the napkin, the taste of the madeleine"—become a source of access to the past, into "a fragment of time in the pure state."¹²⁰ Significantly, the experience of *mémoire involontaire* is highly reminiscent of Benjamin's concept of *Jetztzeit* in the "Theses," since it appears as a moment in which past and present intermingle outside of time:

I experience [the impressions] at the present moment and at the same time in the context of a distant moment, so that the past was made to encroach upon the present and I was made to doubt whether I was in the one or the other. The truth surely was that the being within me which had enjoyed these impressions had enjoyed them because they had in them something that was common to a day long past and to the present, because in some way they were extra-temporal, and this being made its appearance only when, through one of these identifications of the present with the past, it was likely to find itself in the one and only medium in which it could exist and enjoy the essence of things, that is to say: outside of time.¹²¹

According to Proust, the experience of the *mémoire involontaire* immobilizes the subject "for a moment brief as a flash of lightning," calling to mind the "true picture of the past" discussed in Thesis V, which "flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again."¹²² The dialectical image, as Benjamin discusses in the *Arcades Project*, represents a moment in which the "Then and the Now come together into a constellation like a flash of lightning," and, to this extent, the influence of Proust's *mémoire involontaire* is unquestionable.¹²³ Proust suggests that the reminiscences of the involuntary memory compose a "magic scrawl, complex and elaborate," which can be harnessed for creative purposes. It is its relation to reality, as encountered through the

mémoire involontaire, that “makes art the most real of all things,” and Proust’s novel “one which has been dictated...by reality.”¹²⁴ The *mémoire involontaire* thus represents, for Benjamin, a method of transforming lived experience into the truthful data of remembrance. At the same time, insofar as Proust explores the concept in *À la Recherche du temps perdu*, its significance is contained to the sphere of the introspective individual, and may only be tangentially applied to society at large. In the “Surrealism” essay, Benjamin will attempt to appropriate the concept of *mémoire involontaire* for revolutionary experience. In his venture into the works of the Surrealist writers, including André Breton, Louis Aragon, and Guillaume Apollinaire, Benjamin’s project for a profane illumination will take concrete form.

“The politically correct tendency includes a literary tendency,” Benjamin writes in his 1934 essay “The Author as Producer.”¹²⁵ His thesis is that the politically conscious author must produce literary works in a manner that encompasses an “organizing function” which aims to “expose what is present” to the audience, and in this sense awaken the viewer or reader from social and political complacency.¹²⁶ In the essay, Benjamin calls on bourgeois writers and intellectuals to utilize their education—which he calls a means of production in its own right—in the service of the class struggle. Quoting the French Communist philosopher René Maublanc, Benjamin writes, “The proletariat today needs allies from the camp of the bourgeoisie, exactly as in the eighteenth century the bourgeoisie needed allies from the feudal camp. I wish to be among those allies.”¹²⁷ The twentieth-century class struggle and the fight against fascism becomes another star in Benjamin’s historical constellation, and he looks

specifically to the “organizing” capacities of Surrealism for its literary counterpart.

Benjamin will explore the techniques of the Surrealists insofar as they seek to “expose what is present” in a manner similar to Proust’s concept of *mémoire involontaire* to the extent that it aims to access the unconscious in order to release a storehouse of past experience. As in the essay on Proust, Benjamin’s 1929 exploration of Surrealism is deeply intertwined with his work on memory, only now the emphasis has become *revolutionary* rather than *introspective*, and *collective* rather than *esoteric*.

Breton, author of the “Manifesto of Surrealism,” sees in the Surrealist method the possibility of subjectively accessing data in order to yield an image both objective and universal, recalling Benjamin’s project for a new concept of experience dating back to his critique of Kant:

We say that the artistic problem today consists of making mental representation more and more objectively precise through the voluntary exercise of imagination and memory (it being understood that only the perception of the outside world has permitted the involuntary acquisition of the materials which mental representation is called up to use). The greatest benefit that Surrealism has gotten out of this sort of operation is the fact that we have succeeded in dialectically reconciling these two terms—perception and representation—that are so violently contradictory for the adult man, and the fact that we have thrown a bridge over the abyss that separated them. Surrealist...construction [has] now permitted the organization of perceptions with an *objective* tendency around *subjective* elements. These perceptions, through their very tendency to assert themselves as objective perceptions are of such a nature as to be bewildering and revolutionary, in the sense that they urgently call for something to answer them in outer reality.¹²⁸

Certainly we can imagine Benjamin’s enthusiasm for a literary project that claims to have discovered objective material through subjective means, and furthermore in the service of the class struggle. In the first “Manifesto of Surrealism,” Breton makes note

of the surrealist objective of resolving dream and reality “into a kind of absolute reality,” a “*surreality*.”¹²⁹ The project is intimately bound to Freudian psychoanalysis, and specifically to dream theory. Breton suggests that, in moments of dreaming, we are freed from the constraints, or “pretenses” of civilization, and thereby open to a superior form of experience that is otherwise repressed in our waking hours. If we could harness the contents of our dreams in their entirety, Breton asserts, we would not only be privileged to a superior form of memory, but this memory would be collective in nature, a “memory spanning generations.”¹³⁰ Since such a feat is not as of yet, scientifically possible, the Surrealist method aims to “penetrate the deepest layers of the mental” through literary techniques intended to bewilder the senses.¹³¹ As Benjamin observes in the “Surrealism” essay, the project is meant “to win the energies of intoxication for the revolution.”¹³² A passage written by Pierre Reverdy in the literary journal *Nord-Sud* illustrates the affinity between the Surrealist method and that of Benjamin’s dialectical image:

The image is a pure creation of the mind.
It cannot be born from a comparison but from a *juxtaposition of two more or less distant realities*.
The more the relationship between the two juxtaposed realities is *distant and true*, the stronger the image will be—the greater its emotional power and poetic reality...¹³³

As in the *Trauerspiel* and Proust studies, Benjamin’s focus is on the potential for Surrealist texts to spur mental analogies between past and present. In this regard, he points specifically to Breton’s novel *Nadja*, which he sees as the first attempt to harness “the revolutionary energies” apparent in objects and images that have become “outmoded”:

In the first iron constructions, the first factory buildings, the earliest photos, objects that have begun to be extinct, grand pianos, the dresses of five years ago, fashionable restaurants when the vogue has begun to ebb from them. The relation of these things to revolution.... Breton and Nadja are the lovers who convert everything we have experienced on mournful railway journeys (railways are beginning to age), on Godforsaken Sunday afternoons in the proletarian quarters of the great cities, in the first glance through the rain-blurred window of a new apartment, into revolutionary experience, if not action. They bring the immense forces of “atmosphere” concealed in these things to the point of explosion.¹³⁴

For Benjamin, the Surrealist “trick” is to transform, through literature, images of the recent past into revolutionary energy.¹³⁵ By performing “magical experiments with words,” the Surrealists seek to promote a new awareness, a genuine historical awakening.¹³⁶ Unlike the objects of the Baroque *Trauerspiel*, which point toward transcendence, or those of Proust’s *À la Recherche du temps perdu*, which result in personal illumination, for Benjamin the Surrealist images point to a *profane illumination*—a recognition of an absolute reality not for the purpose of transcending the profane world, but rather, in order to fight for it. “From where we stand,” writes Breton, “we maintain that the activity of interpreting the world must continue to be linked with the activity of changing the world.”¹³⁷ To this effect, Benjamin refers to the Surrealist approach as “the true, creative *overcoming of religious illumination*,” a “materialistic, anthropological inspiration, to which hashish, opium, or whatever else can give an introductory lesson.”¹³⁸ The *Trauerspiel* study, for Benjamin, illustrates the dangers involved in complacently awaiting religious salvation. At this point in Benjamin’s thought, the overcoming of religious illumination, like the overcoming of

the concept of continuous historical progress, represents a break from myth in favor of revolutionary praxis.

With this in mind, Benjamin is quick to point out the limitations of the Surrealist method. The belief that objective data is to be found not in everyday reality but rather in a heightened, dreamlike state is, in the end, also a mythology for Benjamin, reminiscent of the transcendentalism of the Romantics: “Any serious exploration of occult, surrealistic, phantasmagoric gifts and phenomena presupposes a dialectical intertwinement to which a romantic turn of mind is impervious,” and Benjamin is left wondering if manifestation is consistent with revolutionary action.¹³⁹ As a result, Benjamin observes that the Surrealist method may subordinate the revolutionary effort to “a praxis oscillating between fitness exercises and celebration in advance.”¹⁴⁰ Instead of stressing “the mysterious side of the mysterious,” as he perceives among the Surrealists, Benjamin concludes that we only truly “penetrate the mystery to the degree that *we recognize it in the everyday world.*”¹⁴¹ In an effort to purge the last traces of spiritualism from his materialist criticism, Benjamin begins a decade-long study of Bertolt Brecht’s “crude thinking,” which culminates in the 1939 essay “What is Epic Theater?” Benjamin first makes light of “crude thinking,” or *plumpes Denken*, in a short piece on Brecht’s *Threepenny Novel* in 1935. “The main thing is to learn crude thinking—the thinking of the great,” Benjamin quotes from Brecht, pointing to the latter’s tendency to distill thoughts to their most intelligible form, they may be grasped easily and by the largest audience. “Crude thoughts have a special place in dialectical thinking because their sole function is *to direct theory toward practice,*”

Benjamin writes, “They are directives toward action, not for it; action can, of course, be as subtle as thought. But a thought must be crude to find its way into action.”¹⁴²

In “What is Epic Theater?” Benjamin points to a number of Brecht’s plays, including *Life of Galileo*, *A Man’s Man*, *The Flight of the Lindberghs*, and *The Private Life of the Master Race*, as instances of Brecht’s use of crude thinking for the purpose of reaching mass audiences in the service of the class struggle. These plays are categorized as “epic,” in part, because they center upon heroic figures or characters. The instance of *Galileo* illustrates the pertinence of the genre for Benjamin’s project in the “Theses.” Brecht is prone to using “historical incidents” in order to “represent the conditions of life” in the present, and in this case explores the ethical responsibilities of the intellectual in society by casting Galileo in the role of the hero.¹⁴³ Surely this is a theme meant to resonate with the European intelligentsia of the 1920’s and 1930’s, but Brecht seeks to alienate the audience from the heroic character rather than succumb to the empathy of the historicist—as in the method of the Surrealists, Brecht seeks “astonishment rather than empathy.”¹⁴⁴ Similar to the dialectical image, Brecht’s Epic Theater attempts to uncover “the conditions of life” through “the interruption of happenings.”¹⁴⁵ As such, the actors may step out of character in order to “shock” the spectators, to “impair the illusion of the audience and paralyze its readiness for empathy.”¹⁴⁶ As Adorno points out in his *Aesthetic Theory*, these alienating techniques aim at “the objective discernment” of the plays and the elimination of ambiguity.¹⁴⁷ To this extent, Benjamin is impressed by Brecht’s use of theatrical techniques in the service of the class struggle. Epic Theater represents an instance in which “the

politically correct tendency includes a literary tendency,” and a historical tendency as well. Brecht’s “crude thinking” and his turn to distancing techniques serve to “awaken” the audience to political and social reality, to enlighten the audience to the Marxist cause. In this sense, it is Benjamin’s most successful example of a truly “profane” form of illumination.

V. Correspondances

“*Tout pour moi devient allégorie.*”
-Charles Baudelaire, “Le Cygne”

If we return to the allegory of the automatic chess player from Thesis I, we are reminded that, in order for historical materialism to “win the game,” it must “enlist the services of theology.”¹⁴⁸ As a result, Benjamin’s 1940 essay “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” returns to many of the early metaphysical themes first illuminated in his early theory of language and the *Trauerspiel* study. Indeed, Benjamin’s interest in Charles Baudelaire spans back to his work on *Trauerspiel* and allegory. Over a decade later, in 1938, he had planned to publish a full-scale book entitled *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Age of High Capitalism*, but, like the *Arcades Project*, the work remains incomplete at the time of his death. Perhaps one reason for this is that, in both projects, Benjamin attempts to turn the theory of the “Theses” into a literary reality, and it is possible he felt he had not yet succeeded in this goal. Still, in the 1940 essay, there is evidence that Benjamin perceives in the poems of Baudelaire an ultimate synthesis of the materialist and theological strains of his critical literary theory.

Baudelaire's nineteenth-century Paris becomes the final star in the constellation of "moments of crisis" Benjamin explores in his literary project. Notably, the historical experience illuminated in Baudelaire's work does not correspond to the vast social disruption and suffering encountered in the dramas of the *Trauerspiel*. Paris in the middle of the nineteenth century, as Buck-Morss expresses, is a period "at the bursting point of unprecedented material abundance." It is "the era of the first department stores, Haussmann's boulevards, international expositions."¹⁴⁹ Surely the bloody days of the Revolution of 1848 provide a different, more violent image of the historical moment. However, it is not this violence that encompasses the imagery of Baudelaire's poetry, and specifically the 1857 collection *Fleurs du Mal*, or *Flowers of Evil*, which is the focus of Benjamin's "Motifs" essay. For Benjamin, the appeal of *Fleurs du Mal* lies in its vast collection of disparate images, ranging from the modern manifestations of industrial capitalism to the magical correspondences of primal nature. The work, for Benjamin, "cannot merely be categorized as historical," but is "intended to be so and understood itself as such."¹⁵⁰

On the one hand, Benjamin perceives in a number of the poems from *Fleurs du Mal* "the figure of the shock," as in Brecht's epic theater, for the purpose of awakening the reader from an inferior form of consciousness.¹⁵¹ Interestingly, Benjamin again takes up the concept of allegory, which he appeared to have abandoned at the end of the *Trauerspiel* study. While the method of the Baroque allegorists becomes, for Benjamin, complicit in myth, he believes that the fragmented images in Baudelaire's poems succeed in breaking through the illusions of high capitalism in order to uncover,

like Brecht, the true “conditions of life.” Benjamin’s argument is adapted from Karl Marx’s theory of commodity fetishism, in which

The products of labor become commodities, social things whose qualities are at the same time perceptible and imperceptible by the senses... There is a physical relation between physical things. But it is different with commodities. There, the existence of things *qua* commodities, and the value relation between the products of labour which stamps them as commodities, have absolutely no connection with their physical properties and with the material relations arising therefrom. There is a definite social relation between men, that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things... This I call the Fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour, so soon as they are produced as commodities, and which is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities.¹⁵²

Benjamin sees commodity fetishism, the social value attributed to products of labor, as involved in the formation of wish images.¹⁵³ These images take the form of private dreams that the public arbitrarily inserts onto commodities; they represent wealth and social status, the elements that drive the incentive to purchase goods. By breaking through the illusion of the new—the department stores, boulevards, and expositions—in order to depict, instead, the new as ruin, Baudelaire seeks to detach commodities from their mythical value. As Buck-Morss writes, he shows “not the commodities filled with private dreams, but private dreams as hollowed out as the commodities.”¹⁵⁴ While both Baudelaire and the Baroque allegorists depict objects as fragmented, empty ciphers, for Benjamin, “The Baudelarian allegory—unlike the Baroque allegory—bears traces of the rage needed to break into this world, to lay waste to its harmonious structures.”¹⁵⁵ This is evident, for instance, in the poems “*Spleen (II)*” and “*Le Jeu.*” In the former, Baudelaire unties the commodity from its mythical newness in order to lay bare the objects in their defetishized form:

*Je suis un vieux boudoir plein de roses fanées,
Où gît tout un fouillis de modes surannées,
Où les pastels plaintifs et les pâles Boucher,
Seuls, respirent l'odeur d'un flacon débouché.*

[I am an old boudoir, where roses dried and brown
Have given their dusty odour to the faded gown,
To the ridiculous hat, doubtless in other days
So fine, among the wan pastels and pale Bouchers.]¹⁵⁶

In the poem, the objects of wish images, namely clothing and furniture, appear severed from their mythical context. Baudelaire applies a similar technique in “*Le Jeu*,” “laying to waste” the “harmonious” façade of fashionable living evoked by nineteenth-century gambling:

*Sous de sales plafonds un rang de pâles lustres
Et d'énormes quinquets projetant leur lueurs
Sur des fronts ténébreux de poètes illustres
Qui viennent gaspiller leurs sanglantes seueurs:*

*—Voilà le noir tableau qu'en un rêve nocturne
Je vis se dérouler sous mon oeil clairvoyant...*

[The dirty ceilings, the blaze of crystal chandeliers,
The low-hung lamps illuminating with a crude glare
The ravaged brows of poets, the scars of grenadiers,
Who come to risk the earnings of their life-blood there.

—Such is the lurid spectacle that with calm dread
I saw as in a melancholy dream unroll...]¹⁵⁷

In the 1939 essay “Central Park,” Benjamin writes that Baudelaire’s “deepest intention” was “to interrupt the course of the world.”¹⁵⁸ The images of high capitalism evoked in the poems of *Fleurs du Mal* “place the shock experience at the center of his artistic work,” and in this sense are meant to “interrupt” the harmony implicit in the moment of new developments and material abundance.¹⁵⁹ As Benjamin expresses in the *Arcades Project*, commodity fetishism “attaches as well to the commodity-producing

society,” and as such, becomes part of the myth of continuous progress.¹⁶⁰

Commodities and cultural artifacts divorced from the production process appear as “magical objects” that arise out of thin air, rather than as the products of human labor and exploitation. Like Brecht’s epic theater, which attempts distance through interruption, Baudelaire’s poems, according to Benjamin, break the myth of the commodity so that the reader may more objectively evaluate the structure out of which these commodities arise. This evaluation not only involves the reality of a surplus labor force, but additionally, that of an ever-growing exploitation of nature which accompanies the expansion of technology. Benjamin addresses this issue in Thesis XI of the “Theses.” Criticizing a line of thought that would distinguish exploitation of nature from the exploitation of the proletariat, Benjamin writes:

This vulgar-Marxist conception of nature bypasses the question of how its products might benefit the workers while still not being at their disposal. It recognizes only the progress in the mastery of nature, not the retrogression of society; it already displays the technocratic features later encountered in Fascism. Among these is a conception of nature which differs ominously from the one in the Socialist utopias before the 1848 revolution. The new conception of labor amounts to the exploitation of nature, which with naïve complacency is contrasted with the exploitation of the proletariat...Nature...is a complement to the corrupted conception of labor.¹⁶¹

As Benjamin illuminates in “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” this estrangement from nature is also a part of the hollowness of experience available to the modern individual. Because of the heavy traffic of stimuli associated with modern industrial society, consciousness begins to function as a “screen,” limiting the number of impressions that enter genuine experience (*Erfahrung*), and relegating them instead to “the sphere of a certain hour of one’s life (*Erlebnis*).”¹⁶² As a result, Benjamin is drawn to Baudelaire’s

notion of *correspondances*, which he describes as “a concept of experience...devoted to something irretrievably lost.”¹⁶³ The *correspondances*, for Benjamin, “are the data of remembrance—not historical data, but data of prehistory”; they represent an “encounter with an earlier life,” one in which the individual is still connected to the natural world.¹⁶⁴ Benjamin finds this motif in two of the poems from *Fleurs du Mal*, “*Correspondances*” and “*La Vie Antérieure*” (‘My Former Life’). ‘*Correspondances*’ begins:

La Nature est un temple où de vivants piliers
Laisent parfois sortir de confuses paroles;
L’homme y passe à travers des forêts de symboles
Qui l’observent avec des regards familiers.

Comme de longs échos qui de loin se confondent
Dans une ténébreuse et profonde unité,
Vaste comme la nuit et comme la clarté,
Las parfums, les couleurs et les sons se répondent.

[All nature is one temple, the living aisles whereof
Murmur in a soft language, half strange, half understood;
Man wanders there as through a cabalistic wood,
Aware of eyes that watch him in the leaves above.

Like voices echoing in his senses from beyond
Life’s watery source, and which into one voice unite,
Vast as the turning planet clothed in darkness and light,
So do all sounds and hues and fragrances correspond.]¹⁶⁵

Benjamin’s exploration of Baudelaire’s *correspondances* further complicates his attitude regarding the destruction of the aura. Since “experience of the aura” rests on “the transposition of a response common in human relationships to the relationship between inanimate or natural object and man,” it appears that, in his study of Baudelaire, Benjamin attempts to preserve the element of the aura that invests us with the ability to look at nature, and for nature “to look at us in turn.”¹⁶⁶ In the *correspondances*, “the murmur of the past can be heard,” and this murmur, for

Benjamin, represents the collective voice of the past. The *correspondances*, for Benjamin, unlock “experience in the true sense of the word,” in which “certain contents of the individual past combine with the material of the collective past,” and in this respect Benjamin believes that “Baudelaire...holds in his hands the scattered fragments of genuine historical experience.”¹⁶⁷

The *correspondances* also mark a return to the metaphysical themes of Benjamin’s early philosophy of language. Baudelaire’s *correspondances* are the nonsensuous correspondences of which Benjamin writes in “Doctrine of the Similar” and “On the Mimetic Faculty.” In this sense, they recreate a direct experience of nature, the harmonious state of origin to which Benjamin refers in “On Language as Such and On the Language of Man.” This is not to say that Benjamin suggests a return to a primal state of nature, and indeed, Baudelaire’s verses illustrate mixed feelings regarding the natural world. Benjamin does suggest, though, that Baudelaire’s imagery points to a time prior to man’s exploitation of nature for a decisive reason. As Wolin observes, “The moment that the history of domination has always tragically forgotten is that man, too, is part of nature and is therefore ultimately destined to fall victim to his one obsessive logic of coercion and control.” The central merit of Baudelaire’s verse was “to have recognized this tragic failing and *attempted to remedy* it by producing *correspondances* with past collective life.”¹⁶⁸ The synthesis of pre-historical and modern images, for Benjamin, illustrates the dialectical moment in which “fore-” and “after-” history meet in a force field pregnant with tensions. It is in this sense that Benjamin ultimately considers Baudelaire’s poetry a redemptive literature:

The dialectical image is an image that flashes up. The image of what has been—in this case, the image of Baudelaire—must be caught in this way, flashing up at the now of its recognizability. The redemption enacted in this way, and solely in this way, is won only against the perception of what is being irredeemably lost.¹⁶⁹

Concluding Remarks

In the unfinished *Arcades Project*, Benjamin addresses many of the motifs regarding literature and history that resurface throughout his career. The project, comprised of hundreds of pages of quotations and thoughts on nineteenth-century Paris, history, Marxism, and literature, was compiled by Rolf Tiedemann from thousands of hand-written notes. The resulting text is Tiedemann's attempt to present the incredible sweep of ideas that make up the project in a manner faithful to Benjamin's initial plan. However, due to his suicide at the Franco-Spanish border shortly after the completion the 1940 "Theses," we will never know for certain how Benjamin would have conceived the project in its final form. In the same way, we can only speculate about the direction Benjamin's thought might have moved after the "Theses" and the book on Baudelaire. Would the themes Benjamin develops in these works endure, serving as touchstones for Benjamin's thought? Or would he have again surprised us with new syntheses, historical moments, and literary theories?

What we do know of the *Arcades Project* illustrates an incredible devotion to the project of reading: reading artwork, texts, history, and quotation, reading critically, and sometimes reading what was never written. A prominent theme of the *Arcades Project* involves reading objects of the "outmoded," not only through literature, as we find it in

Breton's *Nadja* or Baudelaire's *Fleurs du Mal*, but also in the everyday world. In a sense, for Benjamin in the *Arcades Project*, the outside world also becomes a text that is to be critically processed and historically considered. At the same time, Benjamin remains faithful to the project of accessing the past through literature. "The past has left images of itself in literary texts," he quotes from the French historian André Monglond, "images comparable to those which are imprinted by light on a photosensitive plate. The future alone possesses developers active enough to scan such surfaces perfectly."¹⁷⁰

As to the relevance of this idea for the revolutionary cause of the "Theses," we find a mixed reception. "The experience of shock is not an action," Habermas has criticized, "and profane illumination is not a revolutionary deed."¹⁷¹ At the same time, Benjamin's position is that literary works possessed of the capacity to shock may *produce the thought necessary* to bring about change. Thought, for Benjamin, is the precondition for action. Michael Löwy, who serves as the research director in sociology at the National Center for Scientific Research, has written extensively on the affinity between Benjamin's thought in the "Theses" and the Latin American liberation theology of the later twentieth century. Although there exist differences between the two approaches, Löwy believes that "the combination of theology and Marxism the Jewish intellectual dreamed of has turned out, in the light of historical experience, to be not merely possible and fruitful, but a bearer of revolutionary change."¹⁷²

While the instrumental use of Benjamin's philosophy for revolutionary purposes remains a question for debate, his theory of language and emphasis on thinking critically has made him a definite precursor for subsequent literary theorists.

For instance, in his 1981 work *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, Frederic Jameson urges his readers to “always historicize,” drawing from Benjamin’s concept of the historical materialist in the “Theses.” Further, Benjamin occupies a special place in de Man’s literary and critical theory, especially the notion that language is everywhere. In “Theories of Knowledge: Fate and Forgetting in the Early Works of Walter Benjamin,” German studies scholar Timothy Bahti observes that Benjamin’s work continues to raise a central question for more current literary studies: “the question of a theory of language and literature and their meaning that always departs from and returns to the specifics, the ‘minute particulars’ of textual reading, while putting the latter toward a more global understanding.”¹⁷³

Gershom Scholem once wrote to Benjamin that the subject in which he had reached the most “undistorted clarity” was in his metaphysics of language, an area in which he could become “a highly significant figure in the history of critical thought,” and the “legitimate heir of the most productive and most genuine traditions of Hamann and Humboldt.”¹⁷⁴ Perhaps, if Benjamin’s life had not been cut short, his metaphysics of language might have catapulted the reception of his thought to the realm of these thinkers. As it is, it remains for the present to complete the project that Benjamin started—in the spirit of the incompleteness of history which he posits in the “Theses”—of redemption through literature.

¹ “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” *Illuminations*, 255.

² “The Life of Students,” *Selected Writings v. 1*, 37.

³ Thesis XVI, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” 262.

⁴ *ibid.*, 261.

⁵ *ibid.*, 255.

⁶ *Illuminations*, 256.

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- ⁷ “History, Literature, and the Text: The Case of Walter Benjamin,” *Comparative Literature*, Vol. 96, No. 5, 1006-1007.
- ⁸ *ibid.*
- ⁹ “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” 255.
- ¹⁰ Gary Smith, “Thinking through Benjamin: An Introductory Essay,” *Benjamin: Philosophy, Aesthetics, History*, xii.
- ¹¹ “The Storyteller,” *Illuminations*, 83-84.
- ¹² *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin*, 98.
- ¹³ “On the Program of the Coming Philosophy,” *Benjamin: Philosophy, History, Aesthetics*, 3.
- ¹⁴ *ibid.*
- ¹⁵ *ibid.*, 1-2.
- ¹⁶ *Critique of Pure Reason*, 59.
- ¹⁷ *ibid.*, 68.
- ¹⁸ *ibid.*, 298.
- ¹⁹ *ibid.*, 57.
- ²⁰ “On the Program of the Coming Philosophy,” 1.
- ²¹ *ibid.*, 3.
- ²² *ibid.*, 4-5.
- ²³ Wolin, 33.
- ²⁴ “On the Program of the Coming Philosophy,” 6.
- ²⁵ *Critique of Pure Reason*, 298-299.
- ²⁶ *ibid.*, 9-10, Italics added.
- ²⁷ *ibid.*, 4-5.
- ²⁸ Scholem, *Story of a Friendship*, 59.
- ²⁹ *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin*, 81.
- ³⁰ “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man,” *Selected Writings*, v.1, 63.
- ³¹ *ibid.* *Geistiges Wesen* has been translated as “mental being” as well as “spiritual essence.” See Pensky, *Melancholy Dialectics*, 48.
- ³² *ibid.*
- ³³ “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man,” 65.
- ³⁴ *ibid.*
- ³⁵ *ibid.*
- ³⁶ Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism*, 35-36.
- ³⁷ Scholem, *Major Currents in Jewish Mysticism*, 133.
- ³⁸ “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man,” 68-71.
- ³⁹ *ibid.*, 71.
- ⁴⁰ *Melancholy Dialectics*, 49. Pensky derives his argument from Winfried Menninghaus’s analysis in *Walter Benjamins*, 17.
- ⁴¹ Genesis 1:24.
- ⁴² *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*, 22.
- ⁴³ “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man,” 71.
- ⁴⁴ *ibid.*, 71-72.
- ⁴⁵ *ibid.*, 73.

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- ⁴⁶ *ibid.*, 74.
- ⁴⁷ *Melancholy Dialectics*, 54.
- ⁴⁸ "On the Mimetic Faculty," *Reflections*, 334.
- ⁴⁹ *ibid.*, 336.
- ⁵⁰ *ibid.*, 334.
- ⁵¹ *ibid.*
- ⁵² "Doctrine of the Similar," *Selected Writings* v. 4, 696.
- ⁵³ *ibid.*
- ⁵⁴ *ibid.*, 695-696.
- ⁵⁵ *Walter Benjamin and the Demands of History*, "Introduction," 18.
- ⁵⁶ *Illuminations*, 77.
- ⁵⁷ *ibid.*, 80.
- ⁵⁸ 80.
- ⁵⁹ 71.
- ⁶⁰ Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*, 23.
- ⁶¹ Walter Benjamin, *An Aesthetics of Redemption*, 43.
- ⁶² For more on this see Moshe Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics in Abraham Abulafia*.
- ⁶³ Quoted by Harold Bloom in *Kabbalah and Criticism*, 35, italics mine.
- ⁶⁴ *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetics of Redemption*, 43.
- ⁶⁵ For a greater discussion of Herbert Marcuse's ideology critique, see Habermas's essay 'Walter Benjamin: Consciousness-Raising or Rescuing Critique?' in Smith, 93-98.
- ⁶⁶ "Goethe's *Elective Affinities*," *Selected Works* v. 1, 338, 343.
- ⁶⁷ *ibid.*, 336.
- ⁶⁸ "Goethe's *Elective Affinities*," *Selected Works* v. 1, 340.
- ⁶⁹ "Task of the Translator," *Illuminations*, 79-80.
- ⁷⁰ "Goethe's *Elective Affinities*," 298. Italics mine.
- ⁷¹ "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations*, 222.
- ⁷² Howard Caygill, "Benjamin, Heidegger and Tradition," *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy: Destruction and Experience*, 23.
- ⁷³ "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," *Illuminations*, 188.
- ⁷⁴ "The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism," *Complete Works*, v. 1, 142.
- ⁷⁵ *ibid.*, 152.
- ⁷⁶ *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 166.
- ⁷⁷ *ibid.*, 159-160.
- ⁷⁸ "Truth and Truths/Knowledge and Elements of Knowledge," *Selected Works* v. 1, 278.
- ⁷⁹ Steinberg, Introduction to *Walter Benjamin and the Demands of History*, 3.
- ⁸⁰ *ibid.*
- ⁸¹ Popovich Akin, *German Baroque Drama*, 4.
- ⁸² *ibid.*, 48.
- ⁸³ Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 166.
- ⁸⁴ *ibid.*, 178.
- ⁸⁵ *ibid.*, 177, 180.

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- ⁸⁶ *Illuminations*, 257.
- ⁸⁷ *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 178.
- ⁸⁸ Quoted by Buck-Morss, *Dialectics of Seeing*, 174.
- ⁸⁹ *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 179.
- ⁹⁰ *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetics of Redemption*, 62.
- ⁹¹ *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 183.
- ⁹² *ibid.*, 175.
- ⁹³ *ibid.*, 65. Italics added.
- ⁹⁴ *Walter Benjamin and the Demands of History*, 10.
- ⁹⁵ *ibid.*
- ⁹⁶ *Walter Benjamin and the Demands of History*, 15-17.
- ⁹⁷ "Goethe's *Elective Affinities*," *Selected Works v. 1*, 340.
- ⁹⁸ *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 182.
- ⁹⁹ *Redender Todten-Kopff Herrn Matthäus Machners*, quoted by Benjamin in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 215.
- ¹⁰⁰ *ibid.*, 175, 232.
- ¹⁰¹ *ibid.*, 233. Italics added.
- ¹⁰² *ibid.*
- ¹⁰³ *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 175.
- ¹⁰⁴ *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 233.
- ¹⁰⁵ *ibid.*, 81.
- ¹⁰⁶ "One-Way Street," *Selected Works v.1*, 460.
- ¹⁰⁷ "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations*, 221.
- ¹⁰⁸ "Walter Benjamin: Consciousness-Raising or Rescuing Critique," 106.
- ¹⁰⁹ Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," 222.
- ¹¹⁰ *ibid.*, 224.
- ¹¹¹ Habermas, "Consciousness-Raising or Rescuing Critique," *On Walter Benjamin*, 109.
- ¹¹² *ibid.*, 241.
- ¹¹³ *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin*, 352.
- ¹¹⁴ "Tactics of Remembrance," *Walter Benjamin and the Demands of History*, 173.
- ¹¹⁵ *Remembrance of Things Past*, v. 3, 914.
- ¹¹⁶ *ibid.*, v. 1, 48.
- ¹¹⁷ *ibid.*, v. 3, 913. Italics mine.
- ¹¹⁸ *ibid.*, 904.
- ¹¹⁹ "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," *Illuminations*, 157.
- ¹²⁰ *Remembrance of Things Past*, v. 3, 905.
- ¹²¹ *ibid.*, 904
- ¹²² Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations*, 255.
- ¹²³ "N," (Arcades Project) *Walter Benjamin: Philosophy, History, Aesthetics*, 50.
- ¹²⁴ *Remembrance of Things Past*, v. 3, 914.
- ¹²⁵ *Reflections*, 221.
- ¹²⁶ *ibid.*, 235.
- ¹²⁷ *ibid.*, 237.

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- ¹²⁸ “The Surrealist Situation of the Object,” *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, 277-278. Italics mine.
- ¹²⁹ “Manifesto of Surrealism,” *ibid.*, 14.
- ¹³⁰ *ibid.*
- ¹³¹ “Surrealist Situation of the Object,” *ibid.*, 274.
- ¹³² “Surrealism,” *Reflections*, 189.
- ¹³³ Nord-Sud, quoted by Breton, “Manifesto of Surrealism,” *ibid.*, 20. Italics added.
- ¹³⁴ Benjamin, “Surrealism,” *Reflections*, 182.
- ¹³⁵ *ibid.*
- ¹³⁶ *ibid.*, 184.
- ¹³⁷ “Speech to the Congress of Writers,” *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, 240.
- ¹³⁸ *ibid.*, 179. Italics added.
- ¹³⁹ *ibid.*, 189.
- ¹⁴⁰ *ibid.*
- ¹⁴¹ *ibid.*, 190.
- ¹⁴² *Selected Writings*, v. 3, 7. Italics added.
- ¹⁴³ “What is Epic Theater?” *Illuminations*, 148-150.
- ¹⁴⁴ *ibid.*, 150.
- ¹⁴⁵ *ibid.*
- ¹⁴⁶ *ibid.*, 153.
- ¹⁴⁷ *Aesthetic Theory*, 242.
- ¹⁴⁸ “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” *Illuminations*, 253.
- ¹⁴⁹ *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 178.
- ¹⁵⁰ “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” *Illuminations*, 162.
- ¹⁵¹ *ibid.*, 169.
- ¹⁵² From *Das Kapital* in *Selected Writings*, 436.
- ¹⁵³ Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 182.
- ¹⁵⁴ *ibid.*
- ¹⁵⁵ “Central Park,” *Selected Writings*, v. 4, 174.
- ¹⁵⁶ “Spleen II” or “The Sphinx,” *Flowers of Evil*, 150-151.
- ¹⁵⁷ “Le Jeu” or “The Gaming Room,” *ibid.*, 124-125.
- ¹⁵⁸ *Selected Writings*, v. 4, 170.
- ¹⁵⁹ “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” *Illuminations*, 163.
- ¹⁶⁰ “Konvolut X,” *The Arcades Project*, 669.
- ¹⁶¹ “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” *Illuminations*, 259.
- ¹⁶² “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” *ibid.*, 163.
- ¹⁶³ *ibid.*, 181.
- ¹⁶⁴ *ibid.*, 182.
- ¹⁶⁵ “Correspondances,” *Flowers of Evil*, 196-197.
- ¹⁶⁶ “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” 188.
- ¹⁶⁷ *ibid.*, 159, 185.
- ¹⁶⁸ *An Aesthetics of Redemption*, 237.
- ¹⁶⁹ “Central Park,” 183-184.
- ¹⁷⁰ *Arcades Project*, 482.

¹⁷¹ “Consciousness-Raising or Rescuing Critique,” 120.

¹⁷² *Fire Alarm*, 28-29.

¹⁷³ *Benjamin’s Ground: New Readings of Walter Benjamin*

¹⁷⁴ *Correspondence of Walter Benjamin*, 374.

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Theses on the Philosophy of History

1

The story is told of an automaton constructed in such a way that it could play a winning game of chess, answering each move of an opponent with a countermove. A puppet in Turkish attire and with a hoodah in its mouth sat before a chessboard placed on a large table. A system of mirrors created the illusion that this table was transparent from all sides. Actually, a little hunchback who was an expert chess player sat inside and guided the puppet's hand by means of strings. One can imagine a philosophical counterpart to this device. The puppet called "historical materialism" is to win all the time. It can easily be a match for anyone if it enlists the services of theology, which today, as we know, is wizened and has to keep out of sight.

2

11

"One of the most remarkable characteristics of human nature," writes Lotze, "is, alongside so much selfishness in specific instances, the freedom from envy which the present displays toward the future." Reflection shows us that our image of happi-

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ness is thoroughly colored by the time to which the course of our own existence has assigned us. The kind of happiness that could arouse envy in us exists only in the air we have breathed, among people we could have talked to, women who could have given themselves to us. In other words, our image of happiness is indissolubly bound up with the image of redemption. The same applies to our view of the past, which is the concern of history. The past carries with it a temporal index by which it is referred to redemption. There is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one. Our coming was expected on earth. Like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a *weak* Messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim. That claim cannot be settled cheaply. Historical materialists are aware of that.

III

A chronicler who recites events without distinguishing between major and minor ones acts in accordance with the following truth: nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history. To be sure, only a redeemed mankind receives the fullness of its past—which is to say, only for a redeemed mankind has its past become citable in all its moments. Each moment it has lived becomes a *citation à l'ordre du jour*—and that day is Judgment Day.

IV

*Seek for food and clothing first, then
the Kingdom of God shall be added unto you.*

—Hegel, 1807

The class struggle, which is always present to a historian influenced by Marx, is a fight for the crude and material things without which no refined and spiritual things could exist. Nevertheless, it is not in the form of the spoils which fall to the victor that the latter make their presence felt in the class struggle. They

manifest themselves in this struggle as courage, humor, cunning, and fortitude. They have retroactive force and will constantly call in question every victory, past and present, of the rulers. As flowers turn toward the sun, by dint of a secret heliotropism the past strives to turn toward that sun which is rising in the sky of history. A historical materialist must be aware of this most inconspicuous of all transformations.

V

The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again. "The truth will not run away from us"; in the historical outlook of historicism these words of Gottfried Keller mark the exact point where historical materialism cuts through historicism. For every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably. (The good tidings which the historian of the past brings with throbbing heart may be lost in a void the very moment he opens his mouth.)

VI

To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it "the way it really was" (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger. Historical materialism wishes to retain that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to man singled out by history at a moment of danger. The danger affects both the content of the tradition and its receivers. The same threat hangs over both: that of becoming a tool of the ruling classes. In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it. The Messiah comes not only as the redeemer, he comes as the subduer of Antichrist. 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*. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious.

V I I

*Consider the darkness and the great cold
In this tale which resonates with mystery.*

—BRECHT, THE THREESPINNEN OPERA

To historians who wish to relive an era, Fustel de Coulanges recommends that they blot out everything they know about the later course of history. There is no better way of characterizing the method with which historical materialism has broken. It is a process of empathy whose origin is the indolence of the heart, *acedia*, which despairs of grasping and holding the genuine historical image as it flares up briefly. Among medieval theologians it was regarded as the root cause of sadness. Flaubert, who was familiar with it, wrote: "*Peu de gens deviennent combiens il a fallu être triste pour ressusciter Carthage.*" * The nature of this sadness stands out more clearly if one asks with whom the adherents of historicism actually empathize. The answer is inevitable: with the victor. And all rulers are the heirs of those who conquered before them. Hence, empathy with the victor invariably benefits the rulers. Historical materialists know what that means. Whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which the present rulers step over those who are lying prostrate. According to traditional practice, the spoils are carried along in the procession. They are called cultural treasures, and a historical materialist views them with cautious detachment. For without exception the cultural treasures he surveys have an origin which he cannot contemplate without horror. They owe their existence not only to the efforts of the great minds and talents who have created them, but also to the anonymous toil of their contemporaries. There is no document of barbarism, and just as such a document is not free of barbarism, barbarism taints also the manner in which it was transmitted from one owner to another. A historical materialist therefore dissociates himself from it as far as possible. He regards it as his task to brush history against the grain.

Theses on the Philosophy of History

V I I I

The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the "state of emergency" in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight. Then we shall clearly realize that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency, and this will improve our position in the struggle against Fascism. One reason why Fascism has a chance is that in the name of progress its opponents treat it as a historical norm. The current amazement that the things we are experiencing are "still" possible in the twentieth century is not philosophical. This amazement is not the beginning of knowledge—unless it is the knowledge that the view of history which gives rise to it is untenable.

I X

*Mein Flügel ist zum Schwung bereit,
ich kehre gern zurück,
denn blieb ich auch lebendige Zeit,
ich hätte wenig Glück.*

—Gerhard Scholem, "Gruss vom Angelus" *

A Klee painting named "Angelus Novus" shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has

* *My wing is ready for flight,
I would like to turn back.
If I stayed timeless time,
I would have little luck.*

got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.

X

The themes which monastic discipline assigned to friars for meditation were designed to turn them away from the world and its affairs. The thoughts which we are developing here originate from similar considerations. At a moment when the politicians in whom the opponents of Fascism had placed their hopes are prostrate and confirm their defeat by betraying their own cause, these observations are intended to disentangle the political worldlings from the snares in which the traitors have entrapped them. Our consideration proceeds from the insight that the politicians' stubborn faith in progress, their confidence in their "mass basis," and, finally, their servile integration in an uncontrollable apparatus have been three aspects of the same thing. It seeks to convey an idea of the high price our accustomed thinking will have to pay for a conception of history that avoids any complicity with the thinking to which these politicians continue to adhere.

X I

The conformism which has been part and parcel of Social Democracy from the beginning attacks not only to its political tactics but to its economic views as well. It is one reason for its later breakdown. Nothing has corrupted the German working class so much as the notion that it was moving with the current. It regarded technological developments as the fall of the stream with which it thought it was moving. From there it was but a step to the illusion that the factory work which was supposed to tend toward technological progress constituted a political achievement. The old Protestant ethics of work was resurrected among

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German workers in secularized form. The Gotha Program * already bears traces of this confusion, defining labor as "the source of all wealth and all culture." Smelling a rat, Marx countered that "... the man who possesses no other property than his labor power" must of necessity become "the slave of other men who have made themselves the owners. . . ." However, the confusion spread, and soon thereafter Josef Dietzgen proclaimed: "The savior of modern times is called work. The . . . improvement . . . of labor constitutes the wealth which is now able to accomplish what no redeemer has ever been able to do." This vulgar-Marxist conception of the nature of labor bypasses the question of how its products might benefit the workers while still not being at their disposal. It recognizes only the progress in the mastery of nature, not the retrogression of society; it already displays the technocratic features later encountered in Fascism. Among these is a conception of nature which differs ominously from the one in the Socialist utopias before the 1848 revolution. The new conception of labor amounts to the exploitation of nature, which with naive complacency is contrasted with the exploitation of the proletariat. Compared with this positivistic conception, Fourier's fantasies, which have so often been ridiculed, prove to be surprisingly sound. According to Fourier, as a result of efficient cooperative labor, four moons would illuminate the earthly night, the ice would recede from the poles, sea water would no longer taste salty, and beasts of prey would do man's bidding. All this illustrates a kind of labor which, far from exploiting nature, is capable of delivering her of the creations which lie dormant in her womb as potentials. Nature, which, as Dietzgen puts it, "exists gratis," is a complement to the corrupted conception of labor.

* The Gotha Congress of 1875 united the two German Socialist parties, one led by Ferdinand Lassalle, the other by Karl Marx and Wilhelm Liebknecht. The program, drafted by Liebknecht and Lassalle, was severely attacked by Marx in London. See his "Critique of the Gotha Program."

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Illuminations

X I I

*We need history, but not the way a spotted lofter
in the garden of knowledge needs it.*

—Nietzsche, OF THE USE AND ABUSE OF HISTORY

Not man or men but the struggling, oppressed class itself is the depository of historical knowledge. In Marx it appears as the last enslaved class, as the avenger that completes the task of liberation in the name of generations of the downtrodden. This conviction, which had a brief resurgence in the Spartacist group,* has always been objectionable to Social Democrats. Within three decades they managed virtually to erase the name of Blanqui, though it had been the rallying sound that had reverberated through the preceding century. Social Democracy thought fit to assign to the working class the role of the redeemer of future generations, in this way cutting the sinews of its greatest strength. This training made the working class forget both its hatred and its spirit of sacrifice, for both are nourished by the image of enslaved ancestors rather than that of liberated grandchildren.

X I I I

Every day our cause becomes clearer and people get swifter.

—Wilhelm Dietzen, DIE REISSION DER SOZIALDEMOKRATIE

Social Democratic theory, and even more its practice, have been formed by a conception of progress which did not adhere to reality but made dogmatic claims. Progress as pictured in the minds of Social Democrats was, first of all, the progress of mankind itself (and not just advances in men's ability and knowledge). Secondly, it was something boundless, in keeping with the infinite perfectibility of mankind. Thirdly, progress was regarded as irresistible, something that automatically pursued a straight or spiral course. Each of these predicates is controversial and open

* Leftist group, founded by Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg at the beginning of World War I in opposition to the pro-war policies of the German Socialist party, later absorbed by the Communist party.

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to criticism. However, when the chips are down, criticism must penetrate beyond these predicates and focus on something that they have in common. The concept of the historical progress of mankind cannot be sundered from the concept of its progression through a homogeneous empty time. A critique of the concept of such a progression must be the basis of any criticism of the concept of progress itself.

X I V

Origin is the goal.

—Karl Kraus, WORTER IM VERBAND, Vol. I

History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now [*Jetztzeit*].* Thus, to Robespierre ancient Rome was a past charged with the time of the now which he blasted out of the continuum of history. The French Revolution viewed itself as Rome reemerge. It evoked ancient Rome the way fashion evokes costumes of the past. Fashion has a flair for the topical, no matter where it sits in the thicket of long ago; it is a tiger's leap into the past. This jump, however, takes place in an arena where the ruling class gives the commands. The same leap in the open air of history is the dialectical one, which is how Marx understood the revolution.

X V

The awareness that they are about to make the continuum of history explode is characteristic of the revolutionary classes at the moment of their action. The great revolution introduced a new calendar. The initial day of a calendar serves as a historical time-lapse camera. And, basically, it is the same day that keeps recurring in the guise of holidays, which are days of remembrance. Thus the calendars do not measure time as clocks do, they are

* Benjamin says "*Jetztzeit*" and indicates by the quotation marks that he does not simply mean an equivalent to *Gegenwartig*, that is, present. He clearly is thinking of the mystical *eternum nunc*.

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monuments of a historical consciousness of which not the slightest trace has been apparent in Europe in the past hundred years. In the July revolution an incident occurred which showed this consciousness still alive. On the first evening of fighting it turned out that the clocks in towers were being fired on simultaneously and independently from several places in Paris. An eye-witness, who may have owed his insight to the rhyme, wrote as follows:

Qui le croirait! on dit, qu'irrités contre l'heure
De nouveaux Jousés au pied de chaque tour,
Traient sur les cadrans pour arrêter le jour.*

XVI

A historical materialist cannot do without the notion of a present which is not a transition, but in which time stands still and has come to a stop. For this notion defines the present in which he himself is writing history. Historicism gives the "eternal" image of the past; historical materialism supplies a unique experience with the past. The historical materialist leaves it to others to be drained by the whore called "Once upon a time" in historicism's bordello. He remains in control of his powers, man enough to blast open the continuum of history.

XVII

Historicism rightly culminates in universal history. Materialistic historiography differs from it as to method more clearly than from any other kind. Universal history has no theoretical armature. Its method is additive; it musters a mass of data to fill the homogeneous, empty time. Materialistic historiography, on the other hand, is based on a constructive principle. Thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well. Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock, by which it crystallizes.

*Who would have believed it! we are told that now Joushas at the foot of every tower, as though irritated with time itself, fired at the dials in order to stop the day.

lices into a monad. A historical materialist approaches a historical subject only where he encounters it as a monad. In this structure he recognizes the sign of a Messianic cessation of happening; or, put differently, a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past. He takes cognizance of it in order to blast a specific era out of the homogeneous course of history—blasting a specific life out of the era or a specific work out of the lifework. As a result of this method the lifework is preserved in this work and at the same time canceled*; in the lifework, the era; and in the era, the entire course of history. The nourishing fruit of the historically understood contains time as a precious but tasteless seed.

XVIII

"In relation to the history of organic life on earth," writes a modern biologist, "the paltry fifty millennia of *homo sapiens* constitute something like two seconds at the close of a twenty-four-hour day. On this scale, the history of civilized mankind would fill one-fifth of the last second of the last hour." The present, which, as a model of Messianic time, comprises the entire history of mankind in an enormous abridgment, coincides exactly with the stature which the history of mankind has in the universe.

A

Historicism contents itself with establishing a causal connection between various moments in history. But no fact that is a cause is for that very reason historical. It became historical post-humously, as it were, through events that may be separated from it by thousands of years. A historian who takes this as his point of departure stops telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary. Instead, he grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one. Thus he establishes a conception of the present as the "time of the now" which is shot through with chips of Messianic time.

*The Hegelian term *aufheben* in its threefold meaning: to preserve, to elevate, to cancel.

B

The soothsayers who found out from time what it had in store certainly did not experience time as either homogeneous or empty. Anyone who keeps this in mind will perhaps get an idea of how past times were experienced in remembrance—namely, in just the same way. We know that the Jews were prohibited from investigating the future. The Torah and the prayers instruct them in remembrance, however. This stripped the future of its magic, to which all those succumb who turn to the soothsayers for enlightenment. This does not imply, however, that for the Jews the future turned into homogeneous, empty time. For every second of time was the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter.