

Materialist Mutations of the *Bilderverbot*

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Why should only idealists be permitted to walk a tightrope,
while materialist tightrope walking is prohibited?

Walter Benjamin

I. Secularizations

No idealist, but only a materialist deliverance from myth

Benjamin

What could be at work in the Marxist rendition of the theological prohibition of images? In *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno explicitly binds the by now familiar critique of representation (mediation, mediatization, the society-of-the-spectacle) to the secular imperative to “grasp the object itself” [*die Sache zu begreifen*] in its corporeal truth. Such a “grasp” would seem to re-inflect the theological longing for redemption along decidedly a-theological lines:

It is only in the absence of images that the full object could be conceived. Such absence concurs with the theological ban on images. Materialism brought that ban into secular form by not permitting Utopia to be positively pictured; this is the substance of its negativity. At its most materialistic, materialism comes to agree with theology. Its great desire would be the resurrection of the flesh, a desire utterly foreign to idealism, the realm of the absolute spirit. (ND 207/207)

I propose to use this startling passage — a formulation which seems to announce nothing less than the recoil of the ascetic ideal upon itself — as a starting point to re-examine the well-rehearsed debate between Adorno and Benjamin.

What are we to make of this unholy marriage of theology and materialism? It will in any case be more than a question of finding vague parallels or surreptitious borrowings (an easy dig at Marxism as chiliastic “creed” or “dogma,” a familiar nod towards the Jewish return-to-history): a question not of compatibility nor of complicity, but rather of an “agreement” forged precisely where the antithesis would seem most intractable. For according to such a refunctioning of the monotheistic prohibition, the apparent

mortification of the senses would come to signal not the familiar pay-off of supersensuous fulfilment — the sublime passage from physical blindness to spiritual insight (Oedipus, Teiresias) — but rather the vindication of the body itself at the very point of its most irreparable disfiguration. At its limit, then, materialism is said to absorb or reinscribe theology precisely in speaking of a restitution beyond every idealizing compensation and in this sense intransigently unconsoling.

How does the iconoclastic imperative get attached here to the promise of resurrection? And how would each or both, together or apart, withstand the temptation of otherworldliness? If the redemption of the suffering body precludes any representation or mediation of its singularity, this could only imply a kind of return outside the restricted economy of a salvation predicated on the compensatory exchange of commensurable abstractions. It would thus imply something other than the spiritual metamorphosis of a body raised to divine immortality, rationality, and *apatheia*. It would, in short, indicate the persistence of matter in its utterly unreconciled alterity.

Such redemption would therefore suggest something other than the *theiosis* of the perfected individual formed in the image of the incorruptible divine. This latter notion would inevitably substitute for the banished idol the essentialized image of an incorporeal God. Spiritual insight would redeem the blindness of corporeal vision.¹ “Image of the invisible” (Colossians I:15), the apparition of Christ would present the possibility of a vision ultimately purified of sensuous immediacy and thus the very promise of spirit’s victory over dead matter. The transfiguration of the Pauline grain of wheat — “sown in humiliation, raised in glory” (1 Corinthians 15:44) — presupposes the divine *oikonomia* of a redemption mimetologically secured through the figure of Christ as *imago Dei* and thus guaranteed to humanity precisely as bearer of the heavenly “stamp,” “seal,” or imprint.²

What would it mean to articulate the *Bilderverbot* without recourse to the sublimated mimetology of idealism? And what would a non-transfiguring resurrection begin to look like? It would be here tempting but misleading to quickly confront a “Christian” with a “Jewish” eschatology — Ezekiel’s dry bones pitted against the spiritual body of St. Paul, the mended pot of the Sanhedrin³ pitted against Augustine’s recast statue — in order to mark the essential terms of opposition. The philosophical challenge of thinking a non-reconciling restitution remains nonetheless pressing.

“Redemption” as Benjamin writes (the allusion here is to Kafka), “is no reward or recompense for existence but the last way out” [*die Erlösung ist keine Prämie auf das Dasein, sondern die letzte Ausflucht . . .*] (II.2.423; ILL 125). At stake here is not the return of spiritual commensuration but rather a rupture all the more radical in being premised on an imperceptible difference — a “slight adjustment” [*eine Geringes zurechtstellen*] (II.2.432; ILL 134) — between this world and the next. Whatever the “weakness” of the Messianic power (I.2.694; ILL 254) — the angel of history cannot linger, cannot awaken the dead, cannot make whole what has been smashed, and so on (I.2.697f; ILL 257) — the very identification of the Messianic with the domain of transience or

“downgoing” (II.1.205;R 313) (the Nietzschean overtone is unmistakable) would suggest that redemption cannot be thought beyond or apart from the eternal return of bodily remnants or remainders, without totalizing compensation. If the dead cannot be revived this is no doubt for the same reason that they cannot be said to properly or securely die: “Even the dead are not safe from the enemy if he wins...” (I.2.695;ILL 255).⁴ Our permanent rendez-vous or assignation with “past generations” (I.2.694;ILL 254) indicates precisely the tenacity of dead matter as that which haunts the plenitude of the living present. “Living on” [*Überleben*] becomes thus the perpetual obsolescence that at once both defines and subverts tradition.

Adorno will evoke Kafka somewhat similarly. If the theory of the “unsuccessful death” (Odradek, Gracchus) “is the sole promise of immortality ... permit[ted] to survive the ban on images” (P 286/270f), the very possibility of redemption would hinge precisely on the fact that it inevitably comes too late. Thus the famous litany of missed opportunities: philosophy’s failure to have sublated itself in practice (*Negative Dialectics*), the bourgeoisie’s inability to “find a successor” (P 273/260), the necrology of art announced in the *Aesthetic Theory*. This guilty longevity — the flipside of Kantian deferral — testifies precisely to an imperative all the more urgent for being announced too late. “The resurrection of the dead would have to take place in the auto graveyards” (P 273/260).

Benjamin’s Dilemma

In the notoriously hermetic preface to his *Trauerspielbuch*, Benjamin identifies the regime of vision — *Schau, Anschauung*, the phenomenological projection of horizons — as the acquitive or “possessive” operation of the subject seeking confirmation in what it knows (I.1.215;OGT 35). Famously, truth is said to resist this. Non-intentional and non-relational, truth, according to Benjamin’s formula (which in this respect resembles that of Levinas), “is not an unveiling [*Enthüllung*] that destroys the mystery but a revelation [*Offenbarung*] which does it justice” (I.1.211;OGT 31).⁵ It has become somewhat conventional to read here a continuation and radicalization of a certain tendency within both orthodox and heterodox Judaism towards an attenuation of any positive concept of revelation: the rabbinic emphasis on aurality (the “voice from Sinai”), the kabbalistic emphasis on the divine name. In short: the hermeneutic excess of interpretation over meaning, and thus the demystification of every authoritative disclosure.

The predominance of language over vision, according to such a convention, would suggest a certain privilege of Symbolic over Imaginary and thus the foreclosure of every fantasy of fusion. Visualization invites identification and thus inevitably the spectre of idolatrous confusion: the heterogeneity of the absolute requires a denunciation of “beautiful appearance” [*schöne Schein*] as the renunciation of the appropriative order of the Same.

Benjamin will speak, indeed, of sacrifice. Beauty is to be immolated — but simultaneously seeks “refuge” — on the “altar of truth” (I.1.211;OGT 31). The priority of “truth” to “beauty” in this context (Hermann Cohen is never distant⁶) will elsewhere provoke an extended invocation of a certain sublime (I.1.181): Kant, Novalis, the familiar “fable” of the “veiled image” of Isis, whose unveiling is said to be fatal — shattering, even castrating [*zusammenbrechend*] — for the inquirer (I.1.216;OGT 37).⁷

The prohibition at work here is by no means a simple one. If Benjamin will invoke a traditional enough trope of truth-as-woman — inaccessible invisible inexpressible object of an impossible desire — this is not to reinstate mystery cults under the rubric of iconoclasm. That would be only to reduce the *Bilderverbot* to a simple esotericism — “some enigmatic cruelty in actual meaning” (I.1.216;OGT 36) — and thus ultimately to reify the lost object as simple positivity.

For the exposure of the truth here — the object neither “veiled” [*verbüllt*] nor “unveiled” [*enthüllt*] but rather the object itself in its “being-veiled” (I.1.195) — implies simultaneously both a “surrender” (I.1.184) and an “escalation of appearance [*Schein*] in a final and most extreme form” (I.1.186). The loss in representational or intentional mediacy would involve a corresponding gain in “presentational” [*darstellende*] intensity whereby what is relinquished is enhanced, and this according to the very measure of its own negation. The very sacrifice of the aesthetic — Benjamin speaks in a related context of Proust’s “sacrifice” of character, plot, play of the imagination, and so on (II.1.314;ILL 204) — would be accompanied and indeed counterbalanced by the expansion of a certain “image sphere” [*Bildraum*] in which language itself, as it happens, comes to the fore.

The very kernel of the dispute between Benjamin and Adorno lies just here. For would not such a “sublime” sacrifice appear to involve a compensatory logic familiar at least since Kant and Hegel: less is more, *qui perd gagne*, the slave logic of recuperative self-denial? How to redeem such a sacrifice from the rationalist calculus identified by Adorno and Horkheimer as the dialectic of *Aufklärung* — the mythic circle of renunciation and reward? What will prevent Benjamin’s version of the “saving of the phenomena” from reverting into a simple legitimation of the existent?

This precisely will be Adorno’s final question to Benjamin.

II. Before the Law

In breaking a statue one risks becoming a statue...

Jean Cocteau

How can a prohibition against images be enunciated? Is there not something profoundly contradictory about the very representation of the law forbidding representations of the absolute? Would not the law inevitably transgress itself in its own

pronouncement? Would it not, indeed, stimulate the very iconophilia that it prohibits — this according to the irreducible imbrication of law with desire, proscription with enjoyment — and thus undermine itself in its very enunciation?

The issue here involves somewhat more than the double bind attendant on every law in its self-universalizing force and promise. Hegel had already identified that initial problem, a logical one, in his chapter on “Force and the Understanding”: this is the paradox of a law rendered vacuous by its formal repeatability and hence binding power.⁸ It involves more, too, than the performative self-contradiction of a pronouncement delegitimizing itself precisely by virtue of its own legality. To pronounce the *Bilderverbot* is itself to assume legislative authority — thus to identify with the origin of the law, even if only in order to speak of it and on its behalf — in this sense committing self-idolatry precisely in order to restrict or limit it, contaminating transcendence in the very effort to protect its purity, assuming the essential guilt it would deter. *Follow me/ do not follow me...* Is not the *Bilderverbot* in this respect the most self-transgressive of all laws? Invoked in order to be violated — does it not indeed exemplify the ultimate impossibility of the law as such? There is, however, more than one way of responding to such an impossibility.

At issue here is not only the familiar psychoanalytic point (regarding the return of the repressed as neurotic symptom), nor only the Foucaultian one (concerning the positive productivity of the law in its very negativity). One might remark with equal cogency — this will be my essential argument — that if every prohibition both incites and requires a corresponding transgression, it is also conversely the case that through its apparent self-infracture the law only binds us closer (although to what remains undetermined). In this case the law’s very inability to authorize itself may testify equally to an even deeper, if perhaps ultimately inscrutable, prohibition — but perhaps equally to the claim of an unspeakable desire.

Perhaps something more than dialectical reciprocity is at work in such a chiasmus of law-and-transgression. Perhaps in this doubly contaminating movement of self-deregulating regulation and self-regulating deregulation, another relationship both to the law and to the image may begin to announce itself.

Ambiguity is the imagistic appearance of the dialectic, the law of the dialectic of the standstill
Benjamin

Since Kant, if not indeed since Longinus, it has become habitual to remark on the “meta-sublime” nature of the very law announcing the essential incommensurability between law and manifestation — the Second Commandment here taken to be not only the paradigmatic statement about the sublime but the very paradigm of a “sublime utterance”⁹ — suggesting the ultimate aporia of a law exemplifying itself precisely in pronouncing the impossibility of every example. Thus the Biblical warning regarding

every possible (inevitable) reification of the law. Moses' smashing and rewriting of the tablets at Sinai expresses precisely the necessity of the second-degree iconoclasm necessary to sustain the law by mitigating its eidetic self-evidence, thus marking its origins in a prior event of self-erasure and hence its irreducible inscription within the domain of history. The replacement set — no longer identified as “God’s handiwork” (Exodus 32:16) but inexorably marked as substitute or simulacrum, writing rather than “engraving” — as such signifies the impossibility of any immediate relation to the original. This announces the originary doubling of the law as the permanent imbrication of law and interpretation. “It is from an already destroyed word that man learns the demand that must speak to him.”¹⁰

But if the law thus incorporates its own infraction as the very condition of its own articulation, it holds equally that every adherence is marked by a corresponding violation. The smashing of the tablets anticipates the pulverizing of the golden calf, which in turn in its literalizing aggressivity only confirms the charismatic power of the idol. The accusation of idolatry in this sense typically presupposes (as Hegel points out in his analysis of Enlightenment’s crusade against superstition) a “not very enlightened”¹¹ assumption regarding the relationship between finite being and the absolute, and for this reason mystifies the very act of demystification as a “new serpent of wisdom raised on high for adoration.”¹²

And so on. The point is not simply a formal or logical one, nor is the issue quaintly theological. It exposes a risk which affects every radical politics. For the very renunciation of images threatens precisely to determine the future as a tabula rasa or blank slate receptive to the arbitrary projections of the present day. “Homogeneous empty time” would be reinstated. The old “geometrical conception of the future” — Bataille’s expression — would be re-established. Even setting aside the familiar paradoxes accompanying the notion of a utopia determined essentially as the very absence of determination — the conventional picture of a world without pictures — the danger of abstraction remains ineluctable.

How to avoid a relapse into indeterminate negativity and thus immediacy? Does not every *Bilderverbot* presuppose the familiar Platonic series of bifurcations — essence/appearance, original/copy, truth/ideology — and hence a prolongation of the ascetic ideal?

Much would seem to be at stake here.

Politically: how to resist reifying negativity itself as the very consolation which is being denied?

Theologically: how to resist invoking negative theology as the symmetrical obverse of dogmatic fundamentalism?

We will not yet be able to name the law under which we stand
Benjamin, *Gedanken über Gerhart Hauptmanns Festspiel*

There are, one might say, mythical and non-mythical articulations of the dilemma. That is: the inevitable circle of law-and-transgression can be entered in a variety of fashions. If, to introduce Benjamin's terms, the regime of fate is defined by the compulsive circle of guilt-retribution-guilt which turns the "guilt context of the living" (I.1.138) into the nightmare of a "never ending trial" (II.2.412;ILL 114) — from the tragic cycles of Greek drama to the protracted vertigo of Kafka's *Prozess* — such a regime also harbours an essential "ambiguity" [*Zweideutigkeit*] (II.1.199;R 296) which may conceal unexpected resources.

According to the terms of the "Critique of Violence," the mythical origin of the law (cf II.1.154;R 328) suggests "the ultimate undecidability of all legal problems" (II.1.196; R 293) and eventually points to the inability of the law itself to determine practice. Thus Kafka's "new attorney" no longer practises but only "studies" law (II.2.437;ILL 139) — an impasse which will eventually receive its starkest formulation in Kafka's notion of a trial in which guilt is perpetuated even or especially in every effort at self-exculpation, as indeed in the very judgment which would delimit or contain it. "Does it not turn the judge into the defendant?" (II.2.427;ILL 128f) If this suggests (to Scholem's unease)¹³ a final indeterminacy regarding the status of the law in its "purest" or most paradigmatic form as a Last Judgment (now indefinitely protracted and hence de-finalized owing to its complicity with its object), perhaps no firm distinction can be sustained (at least by way of any tribunal of judgement or "critical" discrimination) between the mythic cycle of retribution and the divine justice which would "only expiate" (II.1.199;R 297).

Adorno has rehearsed the problem with irritating rigour. The inescapable imbrication of myth and enlightenment implies the persistence of superstition in the very taboo which would eliminate it and as such the inevitable relapse of every demythologization into yet another demonology. The blank purity of a world from which idols have been eliminated not only "assumes the numinous character" of a reality still governed by fear and trembling (DA 45;DE 28), but moreover represses the mimetic impulse without which happiness as such — the very possibility of reconciliation — remains unthinkable. Thus the inevitable inscription of the law forbidding representation within the logic of self-preservation (Exodus 33:20: "No man may see me and live."). Absence itself can in this sense become a defence or fetish. "The destruction of illusion does not produce truth but only one more piece of ignorance, an extension of our 'empty space,' an increase of our desert" (Nietzsche).¹⁴

Every move from here can be predicted. Every abstract or undialectical *Bilderverbot* both assumes and stimulates prudish fantasies of purity which only serve to reinforce the mystification under contestation while providing the familiar comforts of self-mortification. The mistakes of others are, as usual, for Adorno, instructive. From

Kierkegaard to, yes, finally, Schönberg, a slavish adherence to the law satisfies a priggish need for punishment while releasing a stream of phantasmagorical productions. Thus Adorno's infamous diagnoses. Kierkegaard's longing for "imageless presence" expresses the (class-based) asceticism which would — in its eagerness to repudiate every finite semblance obstructing the "infinite good of happiness" — only reinscribe the latter within a sacrificial calculus of "goods" or acquisitions, and would in this way mistake the "emptiness of the concept" for the desired gratification (K 190ff/134ff). Veblen's desire for a clean slate is found to be a variation on this. The "splendidly misanthropic" invective against the regime of kitsch or spectacle (P 77/79) presupposes as the price of its insight a Platonizing blindness with respect to the world of "deceptive appearances": this only reproduces the puritanical fantasy of a fresh start regulated by the bourgeois "idol" of production (P 83/83). Ditto (mutatis mutandis) the curmudgeonly abjection — resentful, crypto-Christian — of a Huxley. "His anger at false happiness sacrifices the idea of true happiness as well" (P 105/103). Not even Adorno's Schönberg in the end will be exempted. Schönberg's "entanglement in the aporia of false transition" (P 170/164) will symptomatically betray itself, in *Moses and Aaron*, in a neo-Wagnerian monumentalism which will eventually elide the caesura between myth and monotheism and thus undermine the opera's own iconoclastic momentum: "Moses and the Dance around the Golden Calf speak a single language" (QF 241).

And so on. It's not my interest here either to reprimand Adorno for his unkindness or to rehearse the familiar litany of counter-accusations regarding Adorno's own malingerings in the "grand hotel abyss" of abstract negation. If there's something painfully self-revealing about Adorno's portrait of the raging penitent rubbing himself raw against the prison-bars of self-denial, the point is less to procure from Adorno a corresponding auto-critique (such confessions are not hard to extract, and tend in any case to neutralize themselves) than to consider the specific demand here placed on thought. Adorno himself formulates the dilemma with precision:

How is potentiality to be conceived if it is not to be abstract and arbitrary, like the utopias dialectical philosophers proscribed? Conversely, how can the next step assume direction and aim without the subject knowing more than what is already given? If one chose to reformulate Kant's question, one could ask today: *how is anything new possible at all?* (P 95/93)

It is around just this point that relations between Adorno and Benjamin will eventually become a little tense.

Adorno will finally force the question on Benjamin. Will Benjamin's version of Messianism evade the dilemma here presented as being quite irresistible? Will the dialectical image ultimately escape the antithesis between abstract negativity and the idolatry of the given? The question will also in the end be Horkheimer's. Does Benjamin's "atheological theology" overcome the antinomy between positivism and other-

worldliness? Is every image of the past condemned to confirm the present precisely by insisting on the possibility of redemption?

Both Adorno and Horkheimer will finally charge Benjamin with utopianism. Horkheimer convicts Benjamin of “idealism”: to form a dialectical image of the past is to occlude its “closure” — “the slain are really slain” — and thus to smuggle in some kind of eschatological horizon of consolation (II.3.1332f). Adorno, as we will see, charges positivism: to form any image of the future is inevitably to reify the present and thus to garnish the status quo with its ultimate apologia. Each will therefore come to diagnose Benjamin’s problem as that of “insufficient dialectics.” Too much theology on the one hand, not enough on the other: the symmetrical accusations typify what will indeed soon enough become the standard chorus of reproaches. “Janus-faced,” “two tracked,”¹⁵ Benjamin’s project will be found to fall “between two stools”¹⁶ — a graft as awkward as the stitching of a “monk’s cowl” onto the withered body of historical materialism.¹⁷

III. Illusion of a Future

A prophet facing backwards
Friedrich Schlegel

An early text of Benjamin’s presents the problem “figuratively” [*in einem Bilde*] (II.1.203; R 312). If the disjunction between theology and materialism implies simultaneously a reciprocity, this means, at once, both a foreclosure of every progressivist, secular eschatology and a vindication of its deepest claims. “Nothing historical can relate itself on its own to anything Messianic.” Such a notion relates not only to the apocalyptic mystical strand of Judaism (as glossed by Scholem), but equally (something often overlooked by Benjamin’s readers) to a certain rationalist tradition running from the Babylonian Talmud through Maimonides and beyond.¹⁸ This means that a cataclysmic rupture divides the profane order of history (*olam hazeh*) from the kingdom of God (*olam haba*).

“From the standpoint of history,” the Kingdom of God — redemption — “is not the goal [*Ziel*], but the end [*Ende*]” (II.1.203; R 312). Every teleological determination of history reduces to a narrowly instrumentalist or reformist series of improvements and adjustments — the opposition between a Lenin and a Bernstein in this sense immediately collapses — only sanctioning the hegemony of the present day.

Thus the familiar catalogue of renunciations — the historian as the prophet facing backward (Schlegel), the modern Orpheus who now stands to re-lose his Eurydice by looking ahead (Jean Paul). “Accursed is the rider who is chained to his nag because he has set himself a goal for the future” (Kafka’s bucket-rider) (II.2.436; ILL 138). The angel of history catches not even a glimpse of the future to which his back is turned

(I.2.697f;ILL 257). The “destructive character” who “clears away” without a constructive “vision” of the future leaves “for a moment, at least, empty space [*leere Raum*] in which ‘ways’ or ‘crossroads’ might open up” (IV.1.397f;R 301f). No image, similarly, inspires the revolutionary: neither “the ideal of liberated grandchildren” nor the utopia “painted in the heads” of the Social Democrats (I.2.700;ILL 260). The long view of historicist prognostication must thus contract to the lightning flash of historical materialist intervention.

Benjamin explicitly links such a renunciation to the iconoclastic imperative of Judaism: “we know that the Jews were prohibited from investigating the future” (I.2.704;ILL 264). The messianic moment — “Messianic power” in the “weak” sense (I.2.694;ILL 254) — remains as inscrutable as ultraviolet rays. “Whoever wants to know how a ‘redeemed humanity’ would be constituted, under what conditions it would be constituted, and when one can count on it, poses questions to which there is no answer. He might as well ask about the colour of ultraviolet rays” (I.3.1232).

Kant Avec Marx

The image (yes) presented by Benjamin’s first thesis on history indicates the complexity of the issue. Whatever the nature of the entanglement between “theological” dwarf and “historical materialist” puppet — collusion, codependence, unsublatable contradiction — the figure itself invokes the very spectre of idolatry if only in order to demystify it. The automaton is in any case considerably less automatic than the animated images of Dædalus. To celebrate the unfettered progress of the “apparatus” — Social Democracy, from one side, Stalinism, from the other — is in itself to fall prey to the transcendental illusion which would hypostatize the absolute as already there.

Kant and Marx awkwardly join forces. The error of utopian socialism would be precisely to blur the critical border between the “realm of necessity” and the “realm of freedom” — the vocabularies of Kant and Marx curiously coincide here — thereby contaminating the very ideal of communism with the empirical categories of the present day. Every effort to write “recipes for the cookshops of the future”¹⁹ is guilty of this. Hegel saw this clearly in the preface to the *Philosophy of Right* when he rejected the popular demand to “give instruction” [*Belehren*] — to construct the world “as it ought to be”²⁰ — as presupposing an undialectical collapse of the critical gap between *Sein* and *Sollen*, constative and performative, thus introducing the spectre of unmediated abstraction.

For Marx such a collapse marked the secret complicity between ideology and utopia. The “chimerical game” of painting “fancy pictures of the future structure of society”²¹ could only whitewash the existent precisely by “leaving out the shadows.”²² For Kant such a collapse would introduce the illegitimate miscegenation of a theoretical noumenology. To the “magic lantern of phantoms” projected by natural theology²³ would correspond the commandeering gaze which would “behold” or “prove”²⁴ what should

remain properly conjectural. Presumptive insight [*Einsichtsfähigkeit*] would thereby usurp the place of the “weak glimpse” [*schwache Blick*] of reason.²⁵ The reduction of the law (freedom) to the conditions of phenomenality could only reduce action to the “lifeless” gesticulations of a “puppet” governed by fear and trembling. Hyper-trophic enlightenment would in this way come to signify nothing but the tutelage of a mortified nature.

In either case the result is fetishism: to depict redemption as a logical extension of the present is effectively to confuse potentiality with facticity, freedom with necessity, and thus only to confirm one’s own immersion in the imaginary. Every “ideal of liberated grandchildren”²⁶ cannot fail, in this sense, to function ideologically. The very faith in a better future secretly sanctifies the given by offering placating pictures which would only distract the viewer from the most urgent imperatives of the day. To honour the false god of progress is precisely to fall victim to the “system of mirrors” creating the optical illusion of “transparency,” Enlightenment, or clear sight. If theology today “has to keep out of sight” (dwarfish, “small and ugly”) (I.2.693;ILL 253), this is ultimately because its promise contains the still unredeemed possibility of a happiness unrepresentable within the perspective of the present day.

Everything Benjamin writes, from the earliest exhortations to the youth movement through to the final “Theses on the Philosophy of History” — thus the entire uneasy trajectory from hyperidealism to Messianism — will reiterate this basic point.

The Kantian commitments of the early writings establish the essential problematic. If the task of “youth” is to keep open the critical “abyss” [*Kluft*] (II.1.31) between the absolute and the apparent, any premature sighting of the Idea is tantamount to the “deadly sin” (II.1.32) of naturalizing *Geist* by hypostatizing its incarnation as already or even foreseeably accomplished. This would be the theological hubris of the “great seer” [*der große Schauender*] (II.1.32). Benjamin will target under an identical censure the otherwise contradictory conciliations proposed, variously, by German classicism, by the *Wandervogel*, and by the instrumentalism haunting Weimar, from the academic *Berufsgeist* to the progressivist optimism of *Der Anfang* — each of which will be convicted of a veritable “idolatry of *Geist*” (III.1.320) in its sterile affirmation of the existent. Nietzsche had already identified the modern military state as the newest idol: a “horse of death” masquerading in the name of life itself, and thereby “clattering in the finery of divine honors.”²⁷ Thus, for the young Benjamin (already traumatized from the outset), the degradation of the Idea into the “spirit of 1914” and the harnessing of the youth movement to the patriotic ratification of the status quo.

A certain optical conceit would indeed seem from beginning to end to mark the ideology of “life” as that which prolongs by dissimulating the mortified condition of a fallen nature. Every gaze into the “blue distance” (II.2.620) — from the Romantic *Fernsicht* to the *schauendes Bewußtsein* of a Jung or Klages — would placate the viewer with the consolation of unattainable ideals all the more enticing for being eternal and thus present in their very absence.

Was not such an illusionistic distance precisely the “urbanistic ideal” (V.56;CB 173) of the Second Empire?²⁸ Haussmann’s boulevards would entice the spectator with the long perspectival vistas promising an infinitely deferred gratification (while at the same time effectively forestalling insurrection by preventing the building of barricades). The Eiffel Tower would offer a secure vantage point from which the spectator could admire his progress, reiterating the general point underlying the architecture of all the nineteenth-century world expositions (“modern festivals” [V.267] enabling the workers to gape at the very machinery which was rendering them superfluous), thereby confirming the Saint-Simonian “fairy-tale” that *progrès* is the prospect of the very near future (V.716). The glass architecture of the arcades would foster the illusion of the outside on the inside, promising a visual exteriority while in fact reinforcing the immanence of the exterior (meanwhile new technologies of artificial lighting would be turning the street itself into a domestic *intérieur*²⁹), and would in this way mollify the demand for transcendence by providing the gratification of a good view. The crowds making their daily “pilgrimage” (V.86) to these “enchanted grottoes” (V.1045) of consumerism would enjoy the spectacle of goods whose very appearance of availability only underscores the scopophilic regime of private property — “look, don’t touch” (V.267) — while the peep-show panoramas were to provide the visual sensation of a progressive movement securely contained and oriented within the private confines of a box.

It is no coincidence that the cruciform structure of the arcades will be observed by Benjamin to resemble church architecture (V.105). If the arcades are seen to preserve perspectival space with the same tenacity as cathedrals (V.1049), this is ultimately because the phantasmagoria of progress here would involve nothing less than a generalized fantasy of resurrection. Dead things promise to come alive within these enchanted “temples” (V.86). Vision would seek to confirm itself through the specular return of a gaze emanating from a universe packaged as merchandise, whose inviting glances exemplify the “theological caprices” of which Marx speaks. Thus Benjamin’s re-articulation of the classic chapter on commodity fetishism: “things” acquire speech, glance, personality — the anthropomorphic features stripped from a by now thoroughly reified humanity — in a chiasmic transfer whereby the transfer of “life” as such passes essentially by way of the eyes. Hence the multiplication of optical devices designed to prop up the subject’s faltering sense of sight. “The opticians’ shops were besieged...” (V.830f). The phantasmagoric gaze of the object becomes one more prosthetic extension designed to confirm the eidetic powers of the subject³⁰ whose own ocular anxieties meanwhile betray themselves in obsessive fantasies of an uncanny non-reciprocity and non-simultaneity, as in Baudelaire’s images of jewel-eyed statues, blank-eyed prostitutes, eyes gleaming as vacantly as mirrors (V.1049) or as shop windows — “tes yeux illuminés ainsi que des boutiques” (I.2.649;CB 150). “Jugendstil sees in every woman not Helena but Olympia...” (V.694).

Vision would falsely promise here to fulfil the ego’s fantasy of an immanence which would elide the temporal gap or non-identity at work in all experience. This is the ideo-

logical aspect of the idealist “apotheosis of existence” (I.1.337;OGT 160), exemplified by Weimar classicism and theorized as the reconciliation of finite and infinite in the visual plasticity of the symbol — interpreted, as always, Hegelian-wise³¹ — as the “sensuous embodiment of the idea” (I.1.341;OGT 164). If such an incarnation of the noumenal involves a spiritual animation of nature and specifically the latter’s self-representation, delimitation and perfection in the human — henceforth securely installed [*eingestellt*] along the sacral course of *Heilsgeschichte* (I.1.337;OGT 160) — such a logic of substitution [*Stellvertretung*] (I.1.341;OGT 165) involves a fundamental distortion [*Entstellung*] (I.1.337;OGT 160) underwritten by a politics of “domination” and “usurpation” (I.1.336;OGT 159) whereby not only allegorical distance is occluded but with it the radical transience and suffering of a finite nature (I.1.343;OGT 166).

Such an occlusion would severely restrict the potential space of every action. In its “seamless transition” from phenomenal to noumenal (the “limitless immanence of the ethical world in the world of beauty”), the humanist apotheosis of the perfected individual would constrict the “radius of action” to a mere “radius of culture” [*Bildungsradius*] (I.1.337;OGT 160), would misconstrue particularity [*das Einzelne*] (I.1.343;OGT 166) as abstract inwardness or individuality [*Individuum*] (I.1.337;OGT 160) — would, in short, condemn the ethical subject to the “unmanly” posturings of the beautiful soul. The beautiful images or “constructions” [*Gebilde*] of the symbolic would efface the (Kantian) “abyss” [*Abgrund*] dividing “visual being [*bildliche Sein*] from meaning” (I.1.342;OGT 165) — phenomenon from noumenon — and would thereby erase the “jagged line of demarcation” which etches the traits of nature’s untransfigured countenance as “untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful” (I.1.343;OGT 166); the line of death.

In such a consoling vision of a transfigured nature, the “enigmatic question” [*Rätselfrage*] is suppressed regarding human existence in its (historic) specificity as tied inexorably to a fallen, transient nature (I.1.343;OGT 166). Such occlusion will ultimately define the barbarism underwriting every “document of civilization” (I.2.696;ILL 256) — the secret link between humanism and militarism, “the unity between Weimar and Sedan” (III.1.258). The seven-headed hydra of the *Geisteswissenschaften* (“creativity, empathy, timelessness, re-creation, *Miterleben*,” etc.), with its vitalist identifications and its “lecherous urge for the big picture” (III.1.286) — historicism’s “bordello” (I.2.702;ILL 262) — would institutionalize itself in the “sacred groves” of “timeless poets” (III.1.289) and “eternal values” (III.1.286), in a fanatic “exorcism of history” (III.1.289) which would entrench the hegemony of “Western man” under the cover of a universality posited as already there. It is in this sense that classicism is said to culminate in the “Germanic soteriology” (III.1.254) whose “*Rettung*” (III.1.257) (Benjamin’s scare-quotes) of the dead as *Vorbilder* (III.1.255) — objects of empathic identification — adds up to the *saue qui peut* of a triumphant nationalism. This would occlude the persistence of inherited power relations through an appeal to the presumed continuities of race or caste.

It is no coincidence here that such a soteriology is said to be orchestrated by “seers whose visions appear over dead bodies” (III.259). This is the empathic gaze which would find spiritual return in a past reanimated as ancestral prototype or precursor—so too equally Benjamin’s eventual definition of aura as the inanimate object’s ability to return the gaze³²—an idealizing revival of the dead which inevitably accrues to the profit of the survivors in their triumphal march through the continuum of time.

IV. Bilderflucht: Critical Resuscitations

Re(sus)citations

This is not to exclude the possibility of another gaze, another resurrection. In the face of the “blooming, blazing vision” [*blumenhaft flammende Blick*] of neo-classicist revival, Benjamin opposes the (yes, still fertile) gaze of a *theoria* which would again summon back the dead—not, this time, for adulation, but for interrogation.

We must stand... by the inconspicuous [*unansehnlichen*] truth, the laconism of the seed, of fruitfulness, and thus of theory, which leaves behind the spell of vision [*Schau*]. If there are timeless images, there are certainly no timeless theories. Not tradition, but only originality [*Ursprünglichkeit*], can decide this. The genuine image may be old, but the genuine thought is new. It is of today. This today may be derelict, granted. But be that as it may, one must seize it firmly by the horns, if one is to be able to pose questions of the past. It is the bull whose blood must fill the pit, if the spirits of the departed are to appear [*erscheinen*] at its edge. (III.1.259)

What exactly is the distinction introduced here between “vision” and “theory”? A temporal one, to begin with. Whatever the apparent continuities between flower and seed, between “image” and “appearance,” there is (to be) a fundamental opposition between mythic violence, which would efface time by occluding the position of the present (thereby surreptitiously securing it), and the sacrifice which would vindicate the present precisely by exposing the latter’s vulnerability and responsibility to—its “secret rendez-vous” with (I.2.694;ILL 254)—the past.³³

On this distinction rests the difference between “tradition” and “originality.” The former, we might gloss, aims at re-sur-rection: the spiritual transfiguration, exaltation, and uplifting of the dead as “cultural treasures” (I.2.696;ILL 256) within the homogeneous continuum of mythic time. The latter aims at re-sus-citation: the sollicitation or summoning of the dead as *Abhub* or unsublatable remainder within the fractured discontinuum of a history brought to a caesura or Messianic standstill. The measure of “originality” is thus not the abstractness of a new beginning staked out within the historicist “stream of becoming” (I.1.226;OGT 45). It will express itself rather according

to the diphasic “rhythm” of a finite repetition whereby the past is restored or cited as radically “imperfect” and “incomplete” (cf I.1.226;OGT 45).

Vision” thus sees a face: the specular return-to-self of the viewing subject as it narcissistically constructs itself through the consoling tête-à-tête with the beautified or transfigured other. “Theory” sees a mask: the stain of the death’s head whose vacant stare marks the radical alterity or non-coincidence of viewer and viewed, look and gaze (the Lacanian framework would seem here indispensable),³⁴ and as such the annihilation or traumatic wounding of the self-conscious subject hostage to the claim of an immemorial past. Such non-coincidence marks the scene of history as *facies hippocratica*, non-recuperable alterity, the one-way street of irredeemable transience and suffering.³⁵ “It is as something incomplete and imperfect that objects stare out [*starren*] from the allegorical structure” (I.1.362;OGT 186).

Symbolic resurrection — “vision” — thus calls up the dead as object of consumption: the mourned object devoured or introjected as host or food for thought. Allegorical resuscitation — “theory” — throws up the dead as indigestible remainder and untimely reminder, the persistent demand of unsublimated matter. Thus the appearance of the returning spirits as vampires feeding at the present’s trough.

Resurrection, as we read in the essay on Leskov, is in this sense to be conceived less as an idealizing transfiguration than as a radical disenchantment [*Entzauberung*]: humanity’s liberation from the “nightmare” of mythic immanence (II.2.458;ILL 102f). Such a demystification cannot assume a (mythic) opposition between myth and enlightenment. The operative distinction would seem to work rather within the interstices of myth itself, at the point where myth points towards its own exterior or buried entrails. These are the little “tricks” folded into the apparently seamless fabric of mythic identity — the “liberating magic” of the fairy-tale’s reassuring happy ending — Kafka’s “proof that inadequate, even childish measures may serve to rescue one” (II.2.415;ILL 117).

Theatres of Redemption

The only break from the spell of the imaginary is thus by way of a thoroughgoing immersion. If (as Adorno has insisted) every abstract foreclosure of images elicits a hallucinatory return (as symptom or delirium), it is perhaps conversely the case (this is now what we must consider) that a certain intensification of images may open a breach or rupture within the seamless continuum of mythic *immanence*, and thus indeed point precisely to the *imminence* of what is radically unforeseen. To wit: the apparent violation of the *Bilderverbot* may indeed attest to its most productive power.

Iconophilia itself (or its appearance) may indeed thus come to assume iconoclastic proportions. Writing of the Baroque extravaganza — the *folie du voir*³⁶ of a culture outdoing “even the Egyptians” (I.1.350;OGT 174) in effects of spectacularity — Benjamin perceives in the “eruption of images” of the stage-world a style nothing short of “sub-

lime" (I.1.349; OGT 173). The allegorical detachment of appearance from signification — the "abyss separating visual being from meaning" (I.1.342; OGT 165) — intensifies ocular possibilities so as to heighten the eschatological tension between immanence and transcendence, thereby "securing for the latter the greatest conceivable rigour, exclusivity, and relentlessness" (I.1.359; OGT 183). It is indeed the very profusion of images which will here block any fantasy of premature reconciliation.

If it is part of the very logic of modernity to convert every prohibition of images into yet another image of prohibition — thus the dazzle of negative signposts cluttering the urban landscape of *One-Way Street* ("Post no bills!," "Caution: Steps!," "No Vagrants!," "Protect these Plantings!") — it will take "heroic" (cf I.2.577; CB 74) measures to negotiate the aporia of such a specularly without term.

One-Way Street presents the by now familiar aporia vividly. Here the "imperial panorama" of progress is seen only to prolong the claustrophobia of the interior. Thus the vista of a "glorious cultural future" as ultimate domestic phantasm: a consoling "mirage" projected against the "folds of dark drapery" which mask and reinforce the confinement of the present day (IV.1.98; OWS 58). Not even the most sublime landmarks would remain intact. Mountaintops are shrouded. "A heavy curtain shuts off Germany's sky" (IV.1.99; OWS 58). It would be clearly no escape here to appeal to the presumed neutrality of a "critical standpoint," "prospect" or "perspective" (IV.1.132; OWS 89). Such a perspective could only smuggle in the optical illusion of the panorama, would intensify the phantasmagoria in the very effort to see through it, would therefore reinforce immanence precisely in the claim to externality or transcendence. This is the nightmare of total theater — Proust's aquarium,³⁷ if not indeed Aragon's³⁸ — the no-exit or "dead end" (as *One-Way Street* was originally baptised) of our spectacular modernity:

It is as though one were trapped in a theatre and had to follow the events on stage whether one wanted to or not, had to make them again and again, willingly or unwillingly, the subject of one's thought and speech. (IV.1.98; OWS 57)

The "way out" here can be figured, indeed properly staged, only as a dramatic pause within the phantasmagoria of total vision. If every premature attempt to quit the circle secretly prolongs what it would abandon (cf IV.1.85f; OWS 46), any rupture will require a certain collaboration with mythic forces and will thus assume an infinitely ambiguous guise. "Costume Wardrobe" presents the scene of redemption as nothing more and nothing less than a theatrical occurrence:

Again and again, in Shakespeare, in Calderon, battles fill the act, and kings, princes, attendants and followers "enter, fleeing." The moment [*Augenblick*] in which they become visible to spectators brings them to a standstill. The flight of the *dramatis personae* is arrested by the stage. Their entry into the visual field [*Blickraum*] of

non-participating and truly impartial persons allows the harassed to draw breath, bathes them in new air. The appearance on stage of those who enter “fleeing” takes from this its hidden meaning. Our reading of this formula is imbued with expectation of a place, a light, a footlight glare [*Rampenlicht*], in which our own flight through life may be likewise sheltered in the presence of onlooking strangers. (IV.1.143;OWS 100)

Redemption — breath, here, as always — is thus figured within the *Blickraum* or *Bildraum* of consummated visibility. The decentering of the gaze (the transformation of reader from spectator to potential spectacle) is here presented as a reversal without empathic reciprocity or symmetry. A Brechtian distance characterizes the position both of viewing subject and of object viewed.

This is the “cunning” (V.1213) — “teleological” — whereby the dream, intensifying itself, pushes forward towards its own awakening.

There will, then, “still be a sphere of images [*Bildraum*], and, more concretely” — for this very reason — “of bodies [*Leibraum*]” (II.1.309;R 192). If the modern epoch, despite or because of its hypertrophic specularity, represents the ultimate laming or maiming of the imagination (I.2.611;ILL 159), it is the image alone which will come to redeem a body and a body politic fractured irreparably by the force of time. The expulsion of “moral metaphor from politics” (II.1.309;R 191) — the elimination of the social-democratic *gradus ad parnassum* (II.1.308;R 190) — requires precisely the “opening” or elaboration of a competing image sphere through which alone the body reconfigures itself in time.

This is not the project of aesthetic *Bildung*. In this version of a materialist last judgement, the suffering body submits to a “dialectical justice” (Benjamin’s rewriting of the Hegelian Bacchanalian revel) according to which “no member remains unrent [*unzerissen*]” (II.1.309;R 192). The reconstitution of a new *physis* (II.1.310;R 192) or “new body” (IV.1.148;OWS 104) for the corporeal collective [*leibliche Kollektivum*] (II.3.1041) involves the shattering of every fantasy of aesthetic harmony or immanence. If Benjamin here announces the onset of a veritable “slave revolt of technology” (III.1.238), this is not to be confused with the ascetic consolation which would (as in futurism) vitalistically sublimate or aestheticize the mortified conditions of a damaged life. This is therefore not the resurrection of a body or a body politic spiritualized within the eternal community of mankind. If it is a fissured, epileptic (IV.1.148;OWS 104) body which is to enter the final court of judgement, this is precisely so as to repel every mythic solidarity suggested by the “idol” of a “harmoniously and perfectly formed humanity” — the “phantom of the unpolitical or ‘natural’ man” (II.1.364;R 270). “The subject of history: not mankind [*die Menschheit*] but the oppressed” (I.3.1244). To “work at important locations in the sphere of images” is precisely to protect the revolutionary impulse from degenerating into a “bad poem on springtime” (II.1.309;R 191): this is the “organization of pessimism” of which Benjamin writes.

It could indeed be argued that Benjamin's familiar series of salvage operations (romanticism, surrealism, Proust, Baudelaire, Brecht, Kafka, film, photography, and so on) will be directed precisely towards that kernel in the imaginary which defies idealization, and which thus negotiates an opening to the unforeseen. The Biblical *Bilder-verbod* is thus refunctioned as a *Bilderflucht* (V.410): a flight *from* the mythical image to the dialectical image divested of all consoling force. Benjamin's "dialectical optic" will pit image against image.

Whatever else may be at work in brushing cultural history against the grain of historicist (self)-misunderstanding — Goethe against Gundolf, Romanticism against *Sturm und Drang*, Kafka against Brod, cinema against Riefenstahl, Mickey Mouse against Disney, surrealism against the musty "spiritualism" which would collapse the visionary impulse into the occultism of mystagogues and mediums (II.1.298;R 180) — whatever the force and legitimacy of Benjamin's specific rewritings, it will in each case be a question of a retrieval rather than a repression of ocular possibilities, and as such the vindication of a imaginary burdened by the essential "ambiguity" that announces the very "law" of the refurbished dialectic (V.55;CB 171).

If it is within the world-theatre that Kafka's "hope for the hopeless" is to be realized (II.2.415;ILL 100) — fake sky, paper wings: Adorno will indeed come to suspect this (II.3.1177f) — this is precisely because the only "way out" (as in the *Report to an Academy*) is by recapturing the last vestige of a repressed mimetic impulse (II.2.423;ILL 125). "The mimetic and the critical faculties can no longer be distinguished" (II.3.1050). If Proust's frenetic search for images will involve the "vice" ("one is tempted to say, theological") of obsequious curiosity,³⁹ this will indeed come to imply the inevitable enmeshment of every image of redemption within the "enchanted forest" [*Bannwald*] (II.1.313;ILL 204) of mythic guilt.

All of which will lead soon enough to the predictable charges: bewitchment, cooptation, identification with the aggressor.

V. *Bilderstreit*: Adorno Contra Benjamin

Mosaics

It is with the abortive *Passagenwerk* — "the theatre of all my conflicts and all my ideas" (Br 506;C 359) — that the issues first come to a head. Benjamin will be observed playing sorcerer's apprentice, mesmerized by what he would subvert. Specifically: if it is the ocular regime of modernity which presents the face of history as sheer monstrosity — not only an "oversized head" (V.1011) but indeed (as Marx also observed⁴⁰) a "Medusa head" (I.2.682) — Benjamin will be found petrified by what he sees.

By 1935 Adorno will indeed accuse him of capitulating to the force of capital. Panoramic representations of the panorama, kaleidoscopic representations of the kalei-

doscope — the montage technique is here found not only to mime that of surrealism, but effectively to adopt what will be for Adorno the latter's irremediably conciliatory position. A cryptic affirmation, *Behauptung*, would be detected in the physiognomic determination of Paris as *Hauptstadt der neunzehnten Jahrhunderts*, head or capital of the nineteenth century (a title "privately" translated into French by Benjamin⁴¹ and eventually discarded), which would be thus transfigured as nothing less than the proscribed figure of utopia. Paris, decapitated site of missed revolutionary opportunities,⁴² would be reinstated to centre stage so as indeed to provide the alluring scene or spectacle of redemption. *Caput mortuum* would be thus figured or transfigured as, precisely, face.

It is not simply that Benjamin will aggressively rely on images to tell a story (cf V.596); nor just that what begins as an "album" (V.1324) will soon collapse under its own weight into a "rubble field" (Br 556;C 396) of Bouvard-and-Pécuchet-esque proportions; nor even that the specific images to be culled here — the familiar shopping list: arcades, ragpickers, balconies, and the rest — will for Adorno bear an irredeemably consumerist stamp.

Nor is it only (although this is not irrelevant) a question of the respective commitments of Adorno and Benjamin as cultural critics — high culture vs. mass culture, music vs. photography, aural vs. visual, and all the rest. If Adorno's complaint will come eventually to crystallize in the notorious assault on film culture as mass hypnosis, it is perhaps less the specific example of the medium which is significant here than the actual logic underlying the attack. If Benjamin will be rebuked, following his artwork essay, for the "romantic anarchism" (I.3.1003) which would hypostatize the "actually existing consciousness of actually existing workers" (I.3.1005) and thereby pre-empt revolution precisely by prefiguring it — the charge essentially reproduces Lenin's reproach to Luxembourg — it is important to consider the specific assumptions here at work. Underpinning what will be an otherwise conventional jeremiad linking media culture to mass idolatry (from Baudelaire's 1859 *Salon*⁴³ to Jacques Ellul) is a confrontation over the nature of memory and the specific temporality of the historical imagination.

The very conception of the dialectical image is here at stake. Benjamin's "stereoscopic" (cf V.571) glance into the untimely constellation of an unrealized past and a regressive present will be condemned as doubly affirmative insofar as it would symmetrically entrench both, according to Adorno, within a shared horizon of conciliation. In short: any image of a "redeemed humanity" glimpsed from within the phantasmagoric dream sleep of modernity could only transgress the *Bilderverbot* and thereby inevitably recycle ideology as utopia.

Benjamin's citation of Michelet ("*Avenir! Avenir!*") is here decisive: "*Chaque époque rêve la suivante*" (V.46;CB 159). Benjamin reads here the crucial ambiguity of every image — the "law of dialectic at a standstill" (V.55;CB 171) — the intertwining of regression and utopia visibly at work in every time. "In the dream in which every epoch sees

in images the epoch which is to succeed it, the latter appears coupled with elements of prehistory — that is to say, of a classless society” (V.46;CB 159). Adorno reads in such a coupling the monstrous complicity of nostalgia and otherworldliness. Klages married to Fourier: a “linear” relationship to the future spun from the cocoon of collective consciousness, a hallucinatory wish fulfilment destined only to accommodate the present by posing undialectically as the truth (Br 672;C 495). In short: in succumbing to the “spell of bourgeois psychology” (Br 674;C 497) Benjamin will not only divert psychoanalysis along Jungian lines but indeed disregard Freud’s emphatic denial of all prophetic significance to the work of dream.⁴⁴ “Every epoch not only dreams the next” but in so doing presses “dialectically” (V.59;CB 176) and with “cunning” (V.1213) towards its own awakening. This is Benjamin’s Proustian refunctioning of Hegel’s *List der Vernunft*: the “Trojan horse” (V.495) installed within the dream sleep of nineteenth-century mass culture. Adorno, perhaps the better Freudian here, would see the essential purpose of the dream to prolong our dogmatic slumbers, and thus reads Benjamin as apologist of continuity or consummated “immanence” (Br 672f;C 495f). The dialectical image would in this way forfeit its “objective liberating power” and so resign itself to the sterile reproduction of *das Nächste*.

Adorno will be neither the first nor the last to accuse Benjamin of idolatry. By 1938, the montage-effect will represent the ultimate disintegration of the Mosaic imperative into the concatenations of sheer mosaic — a “superstitious enumeration of materials” (Br 787;C 583) which in its “ascetic” abstention from conceptual elaboration would “demonically” (Br 783;C 580) restrict itself to a pious “incantation” [*Beschwörung*] of the bare facts (Br 786;C 582).

The status of “theory” as such is on the line. From the beginning it will have been for Benjamin a question of refunctioning the “tender empiricism” of a Goethe (I.1.60). “Everything factual is already theory” (Br 443;C 313).⁴⁵ This will come to apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to the neo-Platonic saving of the phenomena proposed in the preface to the *Trauerspielbuch* (“The value of fragments of thought is all the more decisive the less immediate their relationship is to the underlying idea” [I.1.208;OGT 29]); to the artless art of the vanished storyteller (“it is half the art of storytelling to keep a story free from explanation” [II.1.445;ILL 89]); and to the “technique” presented by the *Passagenwerk* (“Method of this work: literary montage. I need say nothing. Only show...” [V.574]). Whatever the shift — Benjamin himself describes it as nothing short of “total revolution” [*vollkommenen Umwälzung*] (Br 659;C 486) — between the earlier “metaphysical” (Benjamin’s word) problematic and the cultural materialist agenda of the late work, the micrological commitment to the object would persistently forswear every claim of a panoptic theory and thus any stable or consistent totalization of what appears. If the “saving of the phenomena” coincides here (as always) with the “presentation of ideas” (I.1.215;OGT 35), this is precisely because the phenomena are to be divested of any self-subsistent or “integral” unity or intactness, and submitted to the fracturing, dispersive and reintegrative, but also constantly self-revising combinatorial

of thought (I.1.213;OGT 33). This marks the fundamental continuity, whatever Adorno suspected, between the philosophical mosaic of the *Trauerspielbuch* and the much maligned (by Adorno) “surrealist method.”

Nothing less than life itself turns out to be at stake here. The issue ultimately concerns the very possibility of resuscitation. A “hopeless fidelity to things” (I.333;OGT 156) will require nothing less than a descent to the “ashes”: a turn to the most recalcitrant or “heavy” remnant of unsublimated matter (I.334;OGT 157). If Benjamin’s version of “theory in the strictest sense” (Br 586;C 586) risks the appearance of a certain empiricism, this is precisely out of a theological ambition to “let what is ‘creatively’ speak for itself” (Br 442;C 313): that is, to restore precisely by abstaining from ventriloquizing or anthropomorphically representing the voice of a fallen nature and thus indeed of a history-now-mortified-as-second-nature.⁴⁶ This is the critical alchemy (I.1.126) or “philosopher’s stone” promised by the “constructive” method (Br 687; C 507) — hope for the hopeless (cf I.1.201) — the allegorical gaze directed towards that which in its very transience and ruination figures precisely as the cipher of resurrection (cf I.1.405f;OGT 232). “In the monad,” writes Benjamin, “everything that was mythically paralyzed [*in mythischer Starre lag*] as textual evidence comes alive” (Br 794;C 588).

Benjamin’s rewriting of Goethe is crucial.⁴⁷ If Benjamin will insist for his presentation on a sense of “heightened visuality [*gesteigerte Anschaulichkeit*]” (V.574) exceeding both the “shabbiness” of Marxist historiography and the “cheapness” of the bourgeois kind (V.1217), the ultimate model for such a pictorial method is to be derived from Goethe’s morphological studies (V.1033). As with the *Urpflanze*, the revelation of the general in the detail involves a certain “unfolding” — “like a leaf,” writes Benjamin (V.577) — in this case, of the specific temporal constellation (never stable) within which every “small individual moment” (V.574) is to be inscribed.

But what is announced here as a “transposition” or “translation” [*Übertragung*] of the morphological principle of observation from the “pagan context of nature into the Jewish contexts” — plural — “of history” (V.577) would seem to obey a familiar enough logic of translation according to which the original (and indeed the original concept of the originary) will by no means remain intact. Whatever else is at work in Benjamin’s “transfer” of attention from an organic nature to a nature-history stripped of all immanent fulfilment, it becomes clear that the concepts of both nature and history will have been radically transformed.

Goethe’s “genial synthesis”⁴⁸ of essence and appearance would have not only involved the “ideal symbol” (VI.38) — timeless, total, instantaneous — but would have moreover privileged the domain of biological “life” itself as the specific object of “irreducible perception” (VI.38). Benjamin’s montage principle, in contrast, will not only introduce allegorical distance or non-simultaneity into the “wooded interior” (I.1.342; OGT 165) of the monad but will, moreover, and for this very reason, force a fundamental revision of the very concept of “life” itself.

If the micrological embrace of lumpen particularity involves as its “truly problematic” assumption the desire to “give nothing up” (V.578) — to consider nothing irredeemably lost or beneath consideration — this is precisely out of a conviction, nothing less than theological, regarding the “indestructibility of the highest life in all things” (V.573). Such an appeal to life will pre-empt any fixed antithesis between living and dead — positive and negative, forward and backward, or, for that matter, constructive and destructive (“and so on *in infinitum*”) (V.573) — just as it will preclude any organicist or “vulgar naturalist” (V.575) theodicy, whether along progressive-evolutionary or regressive Spenglerian lines (V.573).

The familiar figures of cameraman and surgeon again converge here (as in the artwork essay⁴⁹) to initiate the caesura or cut to be inflicted on the historical corpus as living corpse.⁵⁰ Whatever the nature of the historical materialist “operation” — freezing the image, choosing the angle, adjusting the lighting, clicking the shutter (I.3.1165) — it is only within the “darkroom of the lived moment” (II.3.1064) (equally the *camera obscura* of ideology⁵¹) that the full “development” of the image is to be achieved. This is in any case to be distinguished from the “bourgeois” gape [*Schauen*] mesmerized by the spectacle of history as a display of “colourful images” (I.3.1165). A constant shift in visual perspective [*Verschiebung des Gesichtswinkels*] (V.573) eventually presents every negative as positive according to a theology of “historical *apokatastasis*” — the heretical source is Origen (cf II.2.458; ILL 103) — until at the “high noon of history” (V.603), and out of the “dialectical nuances” (V.573) of the messianic optic (“light for shade, shade for light” [I.3.1165], and so on), “life springs anew” (V.573). “As flowers turn their heads towards the sun, so by dint of a secret kind of heliotropism the past strives to turn towards that sun which is rising in the sky of history. The historical materialist must understand this most inconspicuous of all transformations” (I.2.695; ILL 255).

Adorno, notwithstanding, will suspect here an unsublimated naturalist residue — if not, in fact, something like the “neo-paganism” parodied by Baudelaire. If the constructive method will be attacked for collapsing the precarious dialectic of concept and intuition, rationality and mimesis, universal and particular, this is because, like every empiricism, it will be found to bear the stain of a reason which would mask its own domination over the very object it would claim to let speak. Underpinning the theoretical modesty which abstains from conceptual intervention would be the secret hubris of a rationality intent on mastering the very nature that it would redeem. This is Odysseus, strapped to the mast, entranced by a siren song whose ultimate charm will amount to nothing more than the self-seduction of his own controlling ego.⁵² Thus the “philosopher’s stone” would cloak arrogance as humility. It will indeed be Benjamin’s own project which will stand ultimately convicted of self-sanctification.

Gretel once joked that you lived in the cavelike depths of your *Arcades* and therefore shrank in horror from completing the work because you feared having to leave

what you built. So let us encourage you to allow us into the holy of holies. I believe you have no reason to be concerned for the stability of the shrine, or any reason to fear that it will be profaned. (Br 788;C 583)

I want to love and perish that an image not remain a mere image
Nietzsche

It is perhaps unnecessary here to recite at length the familiar chorus of defences: what is “dialectical” about the image is, for Benjamin, precisely what should preclude any assimilation into the continuum of mythic time. The specific historicity of the image would exclude equally both nostalgia and prognostication, and would as such undermine any evidential or pictorial relation to what might come. As already effectively past, or on the verge of disappearing (I.2.590;CB 87) — the model of monetary inflation is never distant (cf II.2.620) — the image disturbs all contemplative reconstruction and so too every consoling blueprint of what might be. Jung and Fourier would here be symmetrically deflected.

As the memory of a lost future and the anticipation of a future absence — “sadness for what was and hopelessness towards what is to come” (I.2.586;CB 82) — the image in fact expresses the rigorously traumatic structure of all experience. The logic of latency would introduce a fundamental anachrony to the image such that any and every anticipation of redemption — the “classless society” — would appear as at once not only radically precipitate but indeed properly legible only posthumously if not, indeed, too late. If the much-trumpeted *Auseinandersetzung* (V.1160) with Jung, Klages, and company never properly as such transpires (indeed it is tempting to blame Adorno himself as much as anyone for this deferral), it becomes clear that any image of *Urgeschichte* could point only to an “origin” fractured by a retroactivity which would pre-empt all retrieval and thus equally every secure vision of a future or consummated end. If in the dialectical image the mutual illumination between past and present is typically characterized as both “flashlike” (V.576) and “explosive” (V.1032), this is because what is ruptured here is both the immanence of every epoch and the immanence of subjectivity, whether of an individual or of a phantom collectivity hypostatized in Jungian garb.

“The place where one encounters [the image] is language” (V.577). If the “authentic image” is the “read image” (V.578f) — the familiar Barthesian problematic opens up here⁵³ — this is precisely because the “point” [*Punktum*] of legibility involves the recognition of the now-time of interpretation in its most “critical, dangerous” responsibility towards the past (V.578). Such punctuality would indeed shatter [*zerspringen*] any timeless plenitude of truth and thus every contemplative relationship to what appears.

The temporal structure of the image converts seeing into reading, image into text. If what is essential about the image is that it is “not seen before being remembered” (I.3.1064), every prophesy would inevitably become but the guilty prophesy of a present

that cannot fail to come too late (cf V.598). “Hell is nothing that awaits us but this life here” (Strindberg) (V.592). This will in fact define the essential shape of Benjamin’s iconoclasm. “To worship the image of divine justice in language... that is the genuinely Jewish somersault” by which the mythic spell is to be broken (II.1.367;R 254).

Conjurations

Nor need we now rehearse the inevitable ripostes and rejoinders. If Adorno’s somewhat hysterical rhetoric of exorcism follows a predictable enough logic of conjuration — demonology/counter-demonology⁵⁴ — it will not take much to expose Adorno’s own secret reliance on the phantasmagoria he would seek to “liquidate” (Br 784;C 580). Thus the frantic appeal to “mediation” as the magic wand which is to “break the spell” (Br 786;C 582) of a “satanic” (Br 783;C 579) positivity.

The charges are by now familiar: Adorno the “devil” (Lyotard), Adorno the “witch” (Agamben), Adorno the drunk, hooked on the “mysticism of the dialectical reversal” (Bürger).⁵⁵ Does not the invocation of the “total process” [*Gesamtprozess*] (Br 785;C 582), to “development” [*Durchführung*] (Br 783;C 580), to “more dialectic” — more thoroughgoing, indeed perhaps more continuous dialectic, *durchdialektisieren* — does not this demand for mediation threaten precisely to reinstate a historicist continuity of the most orthodox Lukacsian sort?⁵⁶ Hegel contra Schelling? Does not the demand for theoretical elaboration threaten to reinvest the “contents of consciousness” with the occult properties which are specifically to be avoided? “Restoration of theology” (Adorno’s request) (Br 676;C 498) as so much more German ideology?

More to the point: does not the very accusation of apologetics assume a linear temporality of the *noch nicht*? Would not the charge of premature reconciliation arrogate to itself the very standard of fulfilment which it would thereby withhold? Would not the very allegation of positivism essentially indict itself in appealing to the proscribed standpoint of totality? Things are complicated. It is indeed possible to argue here (as Benjamin almost does) that Adorno’s own version of “theory” — whether as the esoteric redemption of the phenomena (*Ideologiekritik*) or as the bootstrapping of a philosophical Münchhausen — itself assumes the angelic standpoint or “waxen wings” (Br 793;C 587) of the detached observer. If there is, to be sure, a certain vanguardist conceit in Adorno’s “carpings” (Br 683;C 503) (most clearly marked in his response to the artwork essay⁵⁷), Adorno himself is the first to insist that the price of theoretical success would be not only practical failure but indeed a theoretical blindspot premised precisely on the repression of that original guilt.

If there is a wilful stupidity here — Adorno stubbornly mistakes the dream-image for the dialectical image thereby inviting all the inevitable refutations and rejoinders — the misprision is revealing in that it points to a specific antinomy not yet properly addressed.

It may indeed be that Adorno's suspicions in the end, and despite everything, retain a certain cogency. Perhaps both Benjamin and Adorno share a certain fantasy of premature reconciliation. Perhaps such a fantasy is a necessary one. Suspended between the "desert" of the nineteenth century (V.366) and the "icy desert of abstraction" (NL 571/224), the struggle between Moses and Aaron would seem unbearably long.

Does Benjamin's commitment to a fracturing of totality inevitably reinstate it at a higher level? If there is something resembling historicism in the indiscriminacy of the montage, this is precisely insofar as it would risk arrogating to itself the divine perspective — the "equal value" of Leopold von Ranke's *unmittelbar zu Gott*, Hermann Lotze's "miraculous vision" — from which alone redemption in the strict sense is to be thought.⁵⁸ Does *Rettung* here confuse itself with *Erlösung*?⁵⁹ If the determination to give nothing up is, as Benjamin himself concedes, "truly problematic" (V.578), this is perhaps not automatically due to a simple empiricism or intuitionism but rather (which may however in the end not be so very different) to the secret hubris that would anticipate the perspective of a memory accessible exclusively to God (cf IV.1.10; ILL 70). Is the heap or aggregate of images structured by the regulative ideal of the totality?

If, "to be sure" [*freilich*] — strange concession — "it is only to a redeemed humanity that the past becomes citable in each and every one of its moments" [*in jeder ihrer Momente*: admittedly, not "all" but "each and every" in its singularity] (I.2.694; ILL 254), does the historian here turn into the chronicler who would assume the very reconciliation which would by that very token be rendered void? Does the "weak Messianic power" secretly claim an omnipotence which would subvert even a partial intervention into the past? Whatever the distinction between the consoling universal history of historicism and the "esperanto" proper to the Messianic (I.3.1239), does not the historical materialist risk both, and precisely in the same measure, insofar as he would surreptitiously occlude and thereby hypostatize the present conditions of both thought and deed? If "every second" becomes "the narrow gate through which the Messiah might enter" (I.2.704; ILL 264) — yes, "the" Messiah — how is this different from the homogenizing abstractness which would efface the absolute singularity of the revolutionary event? Does the leap into the "open air" of history (I.2.701; ILL 261) inevitably reinforce the very confinement it would circumvent? Abstract negativity as the secret positivism of the day?⁶⁰

If to make such a charge (as Adorno arguably could have done) is in itself equally to risk being tarred with the brush of a complacent historicism — to charge premature reconciliation is in itself to assume it, and so on — this in itself points to the inextricable interlocking of two "torn halves of a freedom" (as Adorno himself was famously to characterize the stand-off in another context) to which "they do not, however, add up" (I.3.1003). Is Adorno equally guilty of that abstract negativity which would inevitably (Hegel) embrace the present in the exquisite gratification of its own despair? Is this then the interminable stand-off between the beautiful soul and its impatiently naive adversary?

It is perhaps not a question of decision here. However one is to (mis)construe the terms of the *Auseinandersetzung* — autonomous art vs. mass culture, concept vs. intuition, transcendence vs. immanence, consciousness-raising vs. redemptive criticism, scientific vs. utopian socialism, rationalism vs. romanticism, Moses vs. Aaron, Jeremiah vs. Ezekiel (the oppositions are not unrelated, but by no means identical) — the very persistence of the antinomy points in itself to something irresolvable for thought.

Whatever the differences, in the end, between negative dialectics and dialectics at a standstill, the entanglement in itself points to a permanent antinomy facing thought. If both Adorno and Benjamin inevitably transgress the *Bilderverbot* in their most strenuous efforts to honour it, this in itself points to an impatience founded in the radical non-synchronicity of every time. The logic of latency could mean nothing other than the risky venture of an image that cannot fail to come “too early” — but equally “too late.” There is in this sense always a little Fourier mixed into every imagination. It may indeed be, for this reason (as Franz Rosenzweig was to have insisted⁶¹), that false Messianism inevitably comes to define not only the obstacle but equally the very possibility of redemption. Shooting the clocktowers (cf I.2.702;ILL 262) would at the very least shatter any illusion that either redemption or indeed its image could ever come on time. That should equally preclude any easy ontologizing of the issue which would efface the specific urgency of an imperative all the more pressing for appearing inevitably too late.

It would in this light be tempting but scarcely sufficient to conclude here, as Adorno winds up *Minima Moralia*, with the observation that “beside the demand thus placed on thought, the question of the reality or unreality of redemption itself hardly matters” (MM §153).

Notes

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Unless otherwise indicated, all references to the German edition of Benjamin’s works refer to *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and

Hermann Schweppenhäuser, 7 volumes (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1980–1991), and will be indicated in the text simply by volume, part, and page number.

The following abbreviations will also be used:

Br: German edition of Benjamin’s correspondence, *Briefe*, hrsg. Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1978);

BW: Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin, *Briefwechsel 1928–1940*, hrsg. Henri Lonitz (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1995).

English translations of Benjamin's work will be cited (modified where appropriate) according to the following abbreviations:

C: *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin 1910–1940*, trans. Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994);
 CB: *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Verso, 1983);
 ILL: *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969);
 OGT: *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: Verso, 1977);
 OWS: *One-Way Street*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (London: Verso, 1985);
 R: *Reflections*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1978).

Works of Adorno will be cited as follows:

AT: *Ästhetische Theorie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1972) / *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Christian Lenhardt (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984);
 DA: (with Max Horkheimer), *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1984);
 DE: *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1972);
 K: *Kierkegaard: Konstruktion des Ästhetischen* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1962) / *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989);
 ND: *Negative Dialektik* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1966) / *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1973);
 P: *Prismen* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1955) / *Prisms*, trans. Samuel Weber and Shierry Weber (Cambridge: MIT, 1981);
 NL: *Noten zur Literatur* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1974) / trans. Shierry Weber Nicholson, *Notes to Literature*, vol. 2 (New York: Columbia

University Press, 1972);
 QF: *Quasi una fantasia*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Verso, 1992).

1 On some of the medieval controversies concerning the role of the body in the *visio Dei*, see Carolyn Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body 200–1336* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 279–317.

2 See Jaroslav Pelikan, *Christianity and Classical Culture: The Metamorphosis of Natural Theology in the Christian Encounter with Hellenism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 120–135, 280–295, 311–326. On the “economy” of resurrection, see pp. 153, 289f. For the metaphor of the wax seal or stamp in Patristic theology (sometimes related to the parable of the lost coin in Luke 15:10), see 126–128 and Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, 5 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971–1989), vol. 2, 96.

3 *Babylonian Talmud*, Sanhedrin 91a–91b, trans. I. Epstein (London: Soncino Press, 1935). On the various senses of resurrection in rabbinic Judaism, see George W.E. Nickelsburg, *Resurrection, Immortality, and Eternal Life in Intertestamental Judaism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972); George Foot Moore, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era: The Age of Tannaim* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1927, rpt. 1966); Shaye J.D. Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987).

4 See my “Mourning Work and Play,” in *Research in Phenomenology* 23 (1993).

5 “The absolute experience is not disclosure [*dévoilement*] but revelation [*révélation*].” Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press,), 65f.

6 Notwithstanding Benjamin's somewhat perverse claim to have pored over Cohen's *Ästhetik* and to have failed to come up with anything of value. See letter of March 26, 1921 to Gershom Scholem (Br I 259;C 177).

7 Thus the inevitable link between the prohibition against graven images and the prohibition against incest. See, for example, Jean-Joseph Goux's influential reading of the Mosaic injunction as directed in the first place against fusion with the mother. *Les iconoclastes* (Paris: Seuil, 1978).

8 G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 79–103.

9 "Perhaps there is no sublimer passage in the Jewish law than the command, 'Thou shalt not make to thyself any graven image...'" Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. J.H. Bernard (New York: MacMillan, 1974), §29, "General Remarks on the Exposition of the Aesthetic Reflective Judgment," 115.

10 Maurice Blanchot, "Interruptions," in Eric Gould, ed., *The Sin of the Book: Edmond Jabès* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985), 49.

11 G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 344.

12 *Ibid.*, 332.

13 See letters of Scholem to Benjamin of July 9, 1934 and July 17, 1934, in Gershom Scholem, ed., *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem*, trans. Gary Smith and André Lefevere (New York: Schocken, 1989), xxx, 123, 127. Contrast Adorno, "Notes on Kafka," *Prisms*, esp. 259f, 268.

14 Nietzsche, *Will to Power* (New York: Random House, 1967), §603.

15 Gershom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship* (London, Faber and Faber, 1982).

16 Werner Fulda, *Walter Benjamin: Zwischen den Stühlen* (Munich: Hanser Verlag, 1979).

17 Cf Jürgen Habermas, "Walter Benjamin: Consciousness-Raising or Rescuing Critique," in Gary Smith, ed., *On Walter Benjamin: Critical Essays and Reflections* (Cambridge: MIT, 1988), 114.

18 See Rabbi Hiyya b. Abba's representation of Rabbi Johanan's proscription of any prophetic vision of the world "to come" (by way of an idiosyncratic rendering of Isaiah 64:5 — "the eye hath not seen, oh Lord, beside thee, what he hath prepared for him that waiteth for him") in Sanhedrin 99a, *Babylonian Talmud*, together with Maimonides' related critique of eudaemonism in *Mishnah Torah*, "Laws of Repentance," and Hermann Cohen's denunciation of the "utopia of mythic belief" in *Religion der Vernunft aus den Quellen des Judentums* (Wiesbaden: Fourier Verlag, 1928, rpt. 1988), 361–63. The scope of prophesy is here rigorously limited to the messianic (in contrast to the afterlife "to come"). See also Emmanuel Levinas' commentary on the rabbinic subtext *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, trans. Sean Hand (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 59–68.

19 Marx, "Afterword" to the second German edition of *Capital* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1959), vol. 1, 26.

20 G.W.F. Hegel, *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1970), 27.

21 Letter of Oct. 19, 1877 to Sorge, in Marx and Engels, *Selected Correspondence 1846–95*, trans. Dona Torr (New York: International Publishers, 1942).

22 Karl Korsch, *Karl Marx* (Frankfurt: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1967), 53.

23 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Lewis White Beck (Indianapolis: Bobbs Merrill, 1956), 146

- 24 “God and eternity in their awful majesty would stand unceasingly before our eyes (for that which we can completely prove is as certain as that which we can ascertain by sight).” *Critique of Practical Reason*, 152.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 153.
- 26 Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” Thesis XII, in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969).
- 27 Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, “On the New Idol,” in Walter Kaufman, trans., *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York: Viking, 1968), 162.
- 28 See Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989).
- 29 Cf Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *Disenchanted Night: The Industrialization of Light in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).
- 30 Cf Lacan, “The gaze as *objet a*,” *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1978).
- 31 See the proverbial definition — not actually penned by Hegel himself — of beauty as the “sensuous appearance of the Idea.” G.W.F. Hegel, *Aesthetics*, trans. T.M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford, 1975), vol. 1, 247. Ironically, Hegel’s own determination of the symbol, in the *Aesthetics*, would correspond more precisely to Benjamin’s notion of allegory, insofar as it exemplifies the gap or discrepancy between “meaning” and “shape,” *Bedeutung* and *Gestalt* — in Benjamin’s terms, the “abyss between visual being and meaning” (I.1.342;OGT 165) — and thus stands as a cipher of radical non-reconciliation.
- 32 See “Some Motifs in Baudelaire” (I.2.646;ILL 188). For a discussion of some of the ambiguities of this transaction, see my “Framing Redemption: Aura, Origin, Technology in Heidegger and Benjamin,” in Arleen Dallery and Charles Scott, ed., *Ethics and Danger* (SUNY: Albany, 1992), and “Facies Hippocratica,” in Adriaan Peperzak, ed., *Ethics as First Philosophy: The Thought of Emmanuel Levinas* (New York: Routledge, 1995).
- 33 See Irving Wohlfarth’s comments on this passage, “Resentment Begins at Home: Nietzsche, Benjamin, and the University,” in Smith, ed., *On Walter Benjamin*, 225f.
- 34 “You never look at me from the place from which I see you.” Jacques Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, 103.
- 35 Cf I.1.343;OGT 166. It is perhaps for this reason that Lacan associates Holbein’s skull with the melting watches of Salvador Dali: the anamorphic distortion would correspond to the allegorical disruption of the temporal continuum, exemplified by the revolutionary shooting of the clock-towers, as described in Benjamin’s 15th thesis on history. See *Four Fundamental Concepts*, 88.
- 36 Christine Buci-Glucksmann, *La folie du voir: de l’esthétique baroque* (Paris: Galilée, 1986). Cf Buci-Glucksmann, *La raison baroque: de Baudelaire à Benjamin* (Paris: Galilée, 1984).
- 37 Cf Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*, trans. C.K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin (London: Penguin, 1983), vol. 2, 35ff.
- 38 Louis Aragon, *Paris Peasant*, trans. Simon Watson Taylor (London: Cape, 1971), 28.
- 39 The convergence of “*voir*” and “*désirer imiter*” (II.1.318;ILL 209) will be observed to extend to Proust’s eventual stage-management of his own illness (II.1.322;ILL 213).
- 40 Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Werke* (Berlin: Dietz, 1962), vol. 23, 15.
- 41 Br 654;C 482.
- 42 Cf Philippe Ivornel, “Paris, Capital of the Popular Front or the Posthumous Life of the 19th Century,” *New German Critique* 39 (1986), 61–84.
- 43 Charles Baudelaire, “Salon de 1859,” in *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1979), vol. 2, 614–619.

44 Cf Sigmund Freud, *Interpretation of Dreams*, *Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953), vol. 5, 621.

45 Letter of Feb. 23, 1927 to Buber. Also in *Moscow Diary*, trans. Richard Sieburth (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press), 126. Benjamin is here citing Simmel's own citation of Goethe in his *Goethe* (Leipzig: Klinkhardt und Biermann, 1913, rpt. 1918), 57.

46 Compare here Benjamin's comments on Leskov: "The hierarchy of the creaturely world, which has its apex in the righteous man, reaches down into the abyss of the inanimate by many stages. In this connection one particular point has to be noted. This whole creaturely world speaks not so much with the human voice as with what could be called 'the voice of nature' in the title of one of Leskov's most significant stories..." (II.2.460;ILL 104).

47 Benjamin's interest in Goethe's morphological writings is evidenced as early as in a fragment of 1918 on "Symbolism" (VI.38f), is expressed further in the dissertation on Romanticism (I.110–119), in *Goethes Wahlverwandtschaften* (I.147), and in a discarded passage of the *Trauerspielbuch* (I.953), and appears finally in the *Passagenwerk* (V.577), where Simmel's presentation in his 1913 *Goethe* plays a decisive role.

48 Simmel, *Goethe*, 56, quoted by Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 72.

49 I.2.495f;ILL 233f.

50 "To study this period, at once so close and so remote, I compare myself to a surgeon operating with a local anaesthetic; I work in places which are numb, dead; the patient, however, is alive and can still talk." Paul Morand: 1900 Paris 1931, 6/7" (quoted by Benjamin at V.577).

51 See Irving Wohlfarth's astute comments on this passage in "Et Cetera? The Historian as

Chiffonier," *New German Critique* 39 (1985), 163.

52 Cf Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1972), 43–80.

53 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981).

54 Cf Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994).

55 Jean-François Lyotard, "Adorno as the Devil," *Telos* 19 (1974); Agamben, "Le prince et le crapaud," in *Enfance et histoire: Dépérissement de l'expérience et origine de l'histoire* (Paris: Payot, 1978); Peter Bürger, *The Decline of Modernism* (Cambridge: Polity, 1992).

56 Such a point is argued forcefully by Giorgio Agamben (see n. 55 above).

57 See the neo-Leninist avowals in the letter of 18 March, 1936 (I.3.1003 and I.3.1005); Ronald Taylor, trans., *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: Verso, 1977), 122, 125.

58 Cf H.D. Kittsteiner, "Walter Benjamin's Historicism," *New German Critique* 39 (1986), 179–215.

59 "An introduction [to the Baudelaire essay] will establish the work's methodological relationship to dialectical materialism in the form of a confrontation of 'saving' [*Rettung*] with the customary 'apologia.'" Benjamin to Horkheimer, April 16, 1938 (Br 752;L 556).

60 Cf Rolf Tiedemann, "Historical Materialism or Political Messianism," in Gary Smith, ed., *Benjamin: Philosophy, History, Aesthetics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 201.

61 Franz Rosenzweig, "The True and the False Messiah: A Note to a Poem by Judah ha-Levi," in Nahum N. Glatzer, *Franz Rosenzweig: His Life and Thought* (New York: Schocken, 1961), 350.