

University of Warwick institutional repository: <http://go.warwick.ac.uk/wrap>

**A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD at the University of Warwick**

<http://go.warwick.ac.uk/wrap/4334>

This thesis is made available online and is protected by original copyright.

Please scroll down to view the document itself.

Please refer to the repository record for this item for information to help you to cite it. Our policy information is available from the repository home page.

# The Concept of Remembrance in Walter Benjamin

Adrian Wilding

Ph. D. Thesis

Department of Philosophy, University of Warwick

June 1996

## Summary

This thesis argues that the role played by the concept of remembrance (*Eingedenken*) in Walter Benjamin's 'theory of the knowledge of history' and in his engagement with Enlightenment universal history, is a crucial one. The implications of Benjamin's contention that history's 'original vocation' is 'remembrance' have hitherto gone largely unnoticed. The following thesis explores the meaning of the concept of remembrance and assesses the significance of this proposed link between history and memory, looking at both the mnemonic aspect of history and the historical facets of memory. It argues that by mobilising the simultaneously destructive and constructive capacities of remembrance, Benjamin sought to develop a critical historiography which would enable a radical encounter with a previously suppressed past. In so doing he takes up a stance (explicit and implicit) towards existing philosophical conceptions of history, in particular the idea of universal history found in German Idealism. Benjamin reveals an intention to retain the epistemological aspirations of universal history whilst ridding that approach of its apologetic moment. He criticises existing conceptions of history on the basis that each assumes homogeneous time to be the framework in which historical events occur. Insight into the distinctive temporality of remembrance proves to be the touchstone for this critique, and provides a paradigm for a very different conception of time. The thesis goes on to determine what is valid and what is problematic both in this concept of remembrance and in the theory of historical knowledge which it informs, by subjecting both to the most cogent criticisms which can be levelled at them. What emerges is not only the importance of this concept for an understanding of Benjamin's philosophy but the pertinence of this concept for any philosophical account of memory.

# Contents

Acknowledgements	page 4
Introduction	page 5
I Opening the Past	page 13
II The Construction of Imperfection	page 41
III From Moral Task to Historical Task	page 67
IV A Philosophy of Fragmentation	page 96
V Melancholy Memory	page 123
VI Beyond Commemoration	page 151
Conclusion	page 180
Bibliography	page 189



## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisor Andrew Benjamin for his advice, criticism, and encouragement, and for allowing me the space in which my ideas could be tried and tested. Recognition is also due to the ‘critical agencies’ who, in spirit, watched over this thesis, and I wish to acknowledge my indebtedness to both Richard Gunn and Gillian Rose for their vicarious philosophical guidance. Countless symposia provided an opportunity for me to discuss my ideas in attentive, incisive, and always generous company; their participants, in particular Philip Walsh, Nick Midgley, and Daniel Cardinal, are each to be thanked. I owe a special debt of gratitude to Mark Greenaway whose friendship fostered the will to undertake this project and sustained it through difficult times; our disagreement over the ‘elegiac’ and the ‘hymnic’ is preserved in the pages that follow. Finally I would like to thank my parents who have supported and encouraged me throughout in many ways. I dedicate this thesis to them.

## Introduction

### ‘The Problem of Memory (and of Forgetting)’

In April 1940, five months before his death whilst fleeing Nazi-occupied France, the German philosopher and literary critic Walter Benjamin wrote in a letter to his friend Gretel Karplus of a series of ‘reflections’ he had been composing, eighteen ‘theses’ which had been set down, some on old newspaper wrappers, and which he did not yet want published:

The war and the constellation it brings with it have led me to put down some thoughts of which I can say that I have kept them in safekeeping, yes, safekeeping, with me for some twenty years....Even today I am handing them over to you more as a bunch of whispering grass gathered on pensive walks, than as a collection of theses....They make me suspect that the problem of memory (and of forgetting) which appears in them on different levels, will occupy me for a long time yet.<sup>1</sup>

The tragic irony of this ‘long time yet’ is brought into relief when we bear in mind a phrase of Balzac’s quoted approvingly by Benjamin: ‘memory has value only as foresight’. But what is the ‘problem of memory [*Erinnerung*] (and of forgetting)’ which was to detain Benjamin’s time had he lived longer? The following thesis sets

---

<sup>1</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* (7 vols.) ed. Rolf Tiedemann & Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974-85), vol. 1, pp. 1226-7. Hereafter all references to this work are abbreviated as GS followed by volume and page number. Where available, a reference to the appropriate English translation is given. Existing translations have been modified or amended where necessary. In the case of quotations from authors other than Benjamin (for instance, Adorno or Nietzsche) a reference to the original language work is given only where the translation of particular words or passages raises relevant issues.

out to answer this question. Fortunately, in taking this problem as its subject matter this thesis is not destined to speculation about what might have been said or written had Benjamin not taken his own life. A preoccupation with the problematic of memory and forgetting runs throughout Benjamin's writing; indeed if there is one theme which could be said to crystallize his diverse concerns and influences it would be this. Where then to begin studying this problem? Benjamin's intimation of a collection of 'theses' which deal with the problem of memory and forgetting suggests that it is there that the nature of this problematic will become clearer. The reference is to what is arguably his most important and yet most enigmatic work, the eighteen theses 'On the Concept of History' (*'Über den Begriff der Geschichte'*), and appropriately it is this brief but richly allusive set of aphorisms which will be the recurring focus of what follows. There, however, one finds a discourse not so much on 'memory' (*Erinnerung*) as on 'remembrance' (*Eingedenken*), a particular form of memory to which Benjamin ascribes distinctive characteristics and significant powers. It is this particular concept of memory which appears to raise the many 'problems' that Benjamin planned to address.

The following thesis begins not with 'On the Concept of History' though but with a text to which it refers back and which in important respects provides the key to understanding it: an exchange between Benjamin and Horkheimer from 1937 over the completeness or incompleteness of the past, an exchange in which Benjamin develops the concept of remembrance (*Eingedenken*) as pivotal to his conception of historical time. The first two chapters reconstruct this exchange and highlight the stakes involved, proceeding to look at its implications both for Benjamin's philosophy at large and for any philosophical account of history and temporality. The upshot of the exchange with Horkheimer - that remembrance is for Benjamin 'redemptive' or 'messianic' - calls, however, for a clarification of Benjamin's own messianism and an elucidation of the meaning of redemption. To this end the third chapter looks at the way Benjamin's conception of historical time develops out of a recurring engagement with the Kantian critique of *Heilsgeschichte* or 'redemptive history' and in particular with Hermann Cohen's restatement of this critique. It argues that Benjamin's thinking emerges just as much in opposition to, as in indebtedness to, neo-Kantianism, a fact

which commentators have often downplayed with misleading results. This oversight will have important repercussions for the attempt to found an ethics - Kantian in character - in Benjamin's name, an interpretation which is assessed in the final chapter. The fourth and fifth chapters deal with the difficulties and problems raised by Benjamin's attempt to express his redemptive criticism in terms of an act of remembrance, the attempt to use *Eingedenken* to reinterpret and revitalize universal history and to develop a critical historiography. These two chapters assesses the most persuasive criticisms which can be levelled at his project: Chapter Four evaluates Adorno's opposition to Benjamin's 'monadological' method and looks at how these criticisms impinge upon Benjamin's theories of memory and history; Chapter Five subjects Benjamin's privilege of memory to a genealogy and asks whether the element of forgetting in 'the problem of memory and forgetting' has in fact been neglected. Chapter Six draws together the preceding discussions, bringing them to bear up the legacy of Benjamin's philosophy of memory, its appropriation by contemporary theologians and critical theorists in the form of an ethic of commemoration and a model of Holocaust remembrance.

### **Benjamin's Philosophy: a Preamble**

The difficulties as well as the stakes involved in writing philosophically on Benjamin are considerable. Benjamin's was, in Adorno's words, 'a philosophy directed against philosophy'.<sup>2</sup> According to Adorno, Benjamin 'chose to remain completely outside of the manifest tradition of philosophy. Despite its great culture, the elements of that tradition enter his labyrinth scattered, submerged, obliquely.'<sup>3</sup> This comment points out the problem of Benjamin's philosophical eclecticism, his conscious incorporation of diverse and seemingly incompatible ideas, ideas often drawn from less familiar regions of the philosophical tradition. However, it also suggests that the more manifest tradition may have touched upon Benjamin's work in ways he was not fully

---

<sup>2</sup> Theodor Adorno, 'A Portrait of Walter Benjamin', in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (London: Neville Spearman, 1967), p. 235.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 239-40.



aware of, ways which may in fact be of equal or greater interest. For a study such as this it serves as a useful working hypothesis: on the one hand it allows - against those who deny the value of tracing Benjamin's philosophical heritage<sup>4</sup> - an assessment of his thought within the framework of philosophy and by means of philosophical concepts and arguments; on the other hand it allows his work to be discussed in terms of traditions whose influence may be more implicit than explicit but which clarify the structure of his thinking. The approach advocated in the following thesis is that it is not only possible but necessary to understand Benjamin in terms of certain philosophical lineages: not just the figures of his own apprenticeship (neo-Kantians such as Hermann Cohen, for instance) but also thinkers who he may invoke only briefly but with whom he shares many common concerns (Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, for example). Adorno's characterisation also allows reflection upon the lacunae in Benjamin's relation to the manifest tradition of philosophy: one such figure to whom he relates, if only by glaring omission, is Hegel. But Adorno's portrait also reminds us of the limitations of any philosophical reading of Benjamin and that, because this tradition passes through Benjamin's writing only at a tangent, one must be wary of judging him too hastily in terms of frameworks alien to his thinking. Recognition of both the possibility and the limits of writing philosophically on Benjamin frames a particular critical approach, one which is both immanent in its reference to his own sources and more distanced or reflective in its greater familiarity with the manifest tradition of philosophy. The difficult route between an immanent and a reflective critique is one which this thesis attempts to follow.

Although Adorno, more than any other critic, brings out the philosophical content of Benjamin's thinking, his understanding of that content paradoxically threatens to curtail the project of a philosophically-guided criticism: for Adorno 'the idea of Benjamin's work, rigorously conceived, excludes not just fundamental themes but all analytic techniques of composition, development, the whole mechanism of presupposition, assertion, and proof, of theses and conclusions.'<sup>5</sup> If this were

---

<sup>4</sup> For example Pierre Missac, *Walter Benjamin's Passages*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge, MA & London: MIT Press, 1995), Ch. 2.

<sup>5</sup> Adorno, 'Introduction to Benjamin's *Schriften*' in Gary Smith (ed.), *On Walter Benjamin* (Cambridge, MA & London: MIT Press, 1988), p. 13.

unequivocally true then to write on Benjamin in a manner faithful to his own thinking would require dispensing with such philosophical techniques. That Adorno's portrait is not unreservedly accurate will be an assumption upon which the present thesis rests. In its aim of identifying a 'fundamental theme' to Benjamin's work and by retaining something of an assertive and conclusive procedure, the thesis will show, along the way, the limits of Adorno's characterisation. To agree with Adorno's interpretation immediately begs the question of what is philosophical about Benjamin's thinking if indeed such procedures have been renounced. Adorno's response is to describe an approach which 'delivers itself over to luck and the risk of betting on experience and striking something essential.'<sup>6</sup> The germ of accuracy in this otherwise uncharitable statement is a recognition of the fact that for Benjamin 'the essential', that is, philosophical truth, is to be found not by a purifying process in which the complexity and variety of experience is bracketed-out, but on the contrary may appear only when thought immerses itself in experience's particularity, contingency and contradiction. Again this impinges upon any attempt to write *on* Benjamin: an immanent exposition and critique of Benjamin's thinking entails that experience and its contextual background, the historical and social formation he calls 'modernity', cannot be excluded from the arena of philosophical study.

### Commentary and Criticism

Benjamin's philosophy (Adorno again) 'invites misreading'.<sup>7</sup> This comment makes comprehensible George Steiner's view that most of the critical literature on Benjamin is of 'tedious nullity'.<sup>8</sup> Taking this judgment to its hyperbolic extreme Pierre Missac has suggested, in Humean fashion, that all translations of, and commentaries on,

---

<sup>6</sup> Adorno, 'Benjamin's *Einbahnstraße*' in *Notes to Literature*, vol. 2, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), p. 324.

<sup>7</sup> Adorno, 'Introduction to Benjamin's *Schriften*' in Gary Smith (ed.), *On Walter Benjamin*, op. cit., p. 5.

<sup>8</sup> George Steiner, 'The Remembrancer: Rescuing Walter Benjamin from his Acolytes', *Times Literary Supplement*, October 8, 1993, p. 37.

Benjamin be consigned to the flames.<sup>9</sup> But given that Benjamin's thought cannot be completely disentangled from its reception in the secondary literature, the 'received wisdom' which has emerged through the rehearsal and consolidation of particular interpretations, such a request appears naive. Moreover, such book-burning might prove an endless task: the burgeoning output of secondary literature now constitutes a veritable 'Walter Benjamin industry' (Steiner), cutting across many disciplines and theoretical frameworks; a recent bibliography of material from the period 1983-1992 listed well over two thousand entries.<sup>10</sup> With the centenary of Benjamin's birth coming at the end of this period, a string of commemorative studies has now swelled this number.

The sheer amount and variety of these works is daunting, and yet amongst the vast secondary literature it is possible to delineate trends and tendencies, running themes and dominant approaches. One strand which has become influential in recent commentaries is a criticism informed by poststructuralism and deconstruction. The influence of this particular approach has led to a shift not only in the terms and parameters within which Benjamin's work is discussed but also in what is deemed at stake in commentary or criticism. The character of present debates is revealing. It calls to mind the very different atmosphere in which Benjamin's writings were first received. The initial wave of interest coincided with the publication of his *Schriften* and was split along Marxist (typically atheological) and theological (typically apolitical) lines, each side seeking to appropriate the writer to their own camp. Although dogged by vociferous polemic, fuelling the suspicion that it had been, in Steiner's words, 'skillfully orchestrated', this debate had an urgency which seems to have been lost in present-day criticism. It is noteworthy that the attempt made during this first wave of critical reception by those of the theological camp to downplay and discredit Benjamin's overtly political writings has been realised today in more subtle and sophisticated form. The antinomies and contradictions in Benjamin's thought (exemplified in his simultaneous appropriations of both theology and Marxism), the source of the liveliness of many past debates, are now deconstructed where they might

---

<sup>9</sup> Pierre Missac, *Walter Benjamin's Passages*, op. cit., p. 40.

<sup>10</sup> Reinhard Markner & Thomas Weber (ed.), *Literatur über Walter Benjamin: Kommentierte Bibliography 1983-1992* (Hamburg: Argument, 1993).



have been dialectically thematised, their tensions and their dynamic explored. Deconstruction has not removed these contradictions but has merely rendered them 'undecidable'<sup>11</sup>; it has produced, in effect, an *impasse*. To elucidate Benjamin's own understanding of dialectics (and why he believed it did not preclude holding to both theology and communism) would help to set this debate in motion once again. Dialectics properly understood - and Benjamin's 'destructive' version is exemplary in this respect - does not rest content with talk of the undecidable or irresolvable. It impatiently seeks to remove obstacles placed in front of it. It would never be without a path.<sup>12</sup>

As this reference to dialectics suggests, it is against the grain of contemporary criticism that the present thesis sets out, both in its intent to approach Benjamin philosophically and to revive something of the spirit and the stakes of earlier commentaries and debates. This in turn is to engage indirectly with the wider intellectual trends which are registered in the changing shape of Benjamin-criticism. The shift away from philosophical (and, implicitly, political) interpretations such as Adorno's towards more exclusively 'literary' readings no doubt reflects something of the wider intellectual climate. By implication, to critically engage with the.

---

<sup>11</sup> This term is a recurring motif in Jacques Derrida's essay on Benjamin, 'Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority'' in Drucilla Cornell & David Gray Carlson (eds.), *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 3-67. It reappears in a highly Derridean commentary given by Jeffrey Mehlman, *Walter Benjamin for Children: An Essay on His Radio Years* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1993), esp. pp. 16 & 26. Again with the influence of deconstruction clearly in the background Rainer Nägele has insisted on the 'radical otherness' of Benjamin's 'oppositional terms and positions' [*Theatre, Theory, Speculation: Walter Benjamin and the scenes of modernity* (Baltimore & London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), p. 66].

<sup>12</sup> GS 4, p. 398; 'The Destructive Character' in *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott & Kingsley Shorter (London: Verso, 1979), p. 159.



predominant readings of Benjamin is to ask more fundamental questions of the intellectual culture of the present.

# I

## Opening the Past

### Introduction

'...For nothing takes you deeper and binds you more closely than the attempt to 'redeem' the writings of the past, as I intend to do.'<sup>1</sup> These words of Benjamin written in 1923 in a letter to Florence Christian Rang were designed to convey the aims of his work on the German 'mourning-play', the *Ursprung des Deutschen Trauerspiels*. However they also say something more fundamental about his thought in general, and reveal an affinity between early works such as the *Trauerspiel* book and later writings such as the *Passagen-Werk* and the theses '*Über den Begriff der Geschichte*'. Benjamin's description of his own project raises an immediate question: what does it mean to 'redeem' something from the past? Or, perhaps more appropriately, what does it mean to 'redeem' the past itself? To understand what is meant by this notion of redemption and just why it is so central to any comprehension of Benjamin's thought, it is necessary to recognise something further - that it is memory which he thinks capable of redeeming not only 'writings' or 'works' of the past but historical time itself. Benjamin calls this 'the theological link between remembrance and redemption.'<sup>2</sup> It is not coincidental that an explanation of the term 'redemption', a reflection upon the completeness or incompleteness of history, and an exposition of the capacities of memory, all occur at the same point in Benjamin's writings - an exchange with Horkheimer which dates from 1937, and it is with this exchange that

---

<sup>1</sup> Benjamin, *Briefe*, ed. Gershom Scholem & T. W. Adorno (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1966), p. 309 (hereafter cited as *Briefe*); *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin 1910-1940*, trans. Manfred R. Jacobson & Evelyn M. Jacobson (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 214 (hereafter cited as *Correspondence*).

<sup>2</sup> GS 1, p. 1258.

the present thesis begins, and to which it will return again and again. Although a small number of critics have recognised the importance of this exchange - Rolf Tiedemann writes of its 'explosiveness'<sup>3</sup> for historical materialism; Helmut Peukert (from a very different standpoint) sees it as 'one of the most theologically significant controversies of this century'<sup>4</sup> - it has rarely been taken seriously enough and never examined in sufficient detail. It is this oversight which the present chapter, and indeed the thesis as a whole, seeks to redress.



---

<sup>3</sup> Rolf Tiedemann 'Historical Materialism or Political Messianism? An Interpretation of the Theses "On the Concept of History"' in Gary Smith (ed.) *Benjamin: Philosophy, Aesthetics, History* (Chicago & London: Chicago University Press, 1989), p. 183.

<sup>4</sup> Helmut Peukert, *Science, Action, and Fundamental Theology: Toward a Theology of Communicative Action*, trans. James Bohman (Cambridge, MA & London: MIT Press, 1986), p. 206.

*'A power able to bring about such a number of important results is to my mind wholly divine. For what is the memory of things and words? What further is invention? Assuredly nothing can be apprehended even in God of greater value than this.'*

*Cicero, Tusculan Disputations*

## **Autarky and Affection**

When in February 1937 Benjamin submitted his essay 'Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian' to the Frankfurt School's *Journal for Social Research*, amongst the pages of critical comments from the journal's editor Max Horkheimer, one particular criticism stands out. Horkheimer draws attention to a passage in which Benjamin argues that 'for historical materialism the work of the past is incomplete',<sup>5</sup> and offers the following reflection:

I have long been thinking about the question of whether the work of the past is complete. Your formulation can certainly stand as it is. I have but one personal reservation: that I think this a relationship only to be perceived dialectically. The pronouncement of incompleteness is idealistic if it does not incorporate completeness as well. Past injustice is done and finished. Those who have been beaten to death are truly dead. Ultimately you are making a theological statement. If one takes incompleteness absolutely seriously, then one must believe in the Last

---

<sup>5</sup> GS 2, p. 477; 'Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian' in *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, op. cit., p. 360 (amended).

Judgement. My thinking is too contaminated with materialism for that. Perhaps there is a distinction between positive and negative incompleteness, so that injustice, the terror, the pain of the past are irreparable. Justice in practice, pleasures and works behave differently in relation to time, since their positive character is largely negated by their transitoriness. This is indeed true for individual life, for which death validates its unhappiness, but not its happiness. Good and evil do not relate to time in the same way. Thus discursive logic is inadequate to these categories as well.<sup>6</sup>

Benjamin responded:

I find your excursus on the completeness or openness of the work of the past very significant. I think I understand it thoroughly, and if I am not mistaken, your idea corresponds to a theme that has often concerned me. To me, an important question has always been how to understand the odd figure of speech, 'to lose a war or a court case.' The war or the trial are not the entry into a dispute, but rather the decision concerning it. Finally I explained it to myself thus: the events involved for a person who has lost a war or a court case are truly concluded [*abgeschlossen*] and thus for that person *any avenue of praxis has been lost*. This is not the case for the counterpart, who is the winner. Victory bears its fruit in a way much different from the manner in which consequences follow defeat. This leads to the exact opposite of Ibsen's phrase: 'Happiness is born of loss, / only what is lost is eternal'.<sup>7</sup>

Although the 'works of the past [*Werke der Vergangenheit*]' which Benjamin believes to be incomplete are artworks, literary works, etc., Horkheimer's criticism and subsequently Benjamin's response extend the compass of the debate to the realm of

---

<sup>6</sup> GS 2, p. 1332-3; cited in Rolf Tiedemann 'Historical Materialism or Political Messianism?', in Gary Smith (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 181-2.

<sup>7</sup> GS 2, p. 1338; *ibid.*, p. 182.



history in general. Benjamin makes it clear that he thinks these points concern the nature of history and temporality as such. The significance of Horkheimer's criticism - that 'completeness' (*Abgeschlossenheit*) be perceived 'dialectically' - thus becomes clear. 'Materialism' dictates that the past be construed as complete, as unalterable; on this view the notion of an actual redemption of the past could only be 'idealistic' or 'theological'. The question asked by Horkheimer of Benjamin's original formulation is this: what is the meaning of materialism in 'historical materialism' if it is capable of asserting the (apparently theological) idea that the past is alterable? Benjamin's response proceeds by contrasting 'completeness' (*Abgeschlossenheit*) and 'openness' (*Offenheit*). The term *abgeschlossen* means 'discrete' or 'self-contained', 'complete in itself' (the translators of the Fuchs essay render it as 'autarky'<sup>8</sup>), so that the terms of the debate are drawn around whether the past relates to, or is affected by, the present. Where 'completion' implies self-sufficiency, 'openness' involves a relation or *mediation* between the past and the present. To Benjamin's distinction Horkheimer then adds a further qualification by distinguishing between 'positive and negative incompleteness' which pertain respectively to acts of justice and injustice. This distinction introduces a question of conflict and perspective into the idea of openness or mediation already asserted. Benjamin corroborates Horkheimer's distinction by referring to a mundane example, 'the odd figure of speech, 'to lose [*verlieren*] a war or a court case.'" For him the example shows the way openness and completion are often viewed as unequally distributed between victor and vanquished: whereas defeat guarantees that 'any avenue of praxis' (that is, any recourse or redress) is closed off, the victor emerges from the contest differently. Evil, injustice and pain on the one hand, and justice and happiness on the other, relate differently to time and to transience.

Whilst Horkheimer's objection appears searching and compelling, it is flawed in an important respect. His charge that to view the past as alterable is a necessarily theological statement is insensitive to Benjamin's particular use of theological categories and models. It overlooks the fact that what is being proposed here, like many other instances in which Benjamin invokes theological concepts, can also be

---

<sup>8</sup> 'Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian' in *One-Way Street*, p. 359.

construed secularly. Understood thus, the idea of the incompleteness of history amounts to an assertion that the historical past is 'open' because it is always being reconstituted in the present, that the past is not self-contained but is just as much a creation of the present and that, moreover, the constitutive motor of this process is conflict.

When the time came to make a more considered response to Horkheimer's criticism, Benjamin chooses not to downplay the theological motifs but to clarify the manner in which he is using them. His supporting evidence this time is not the judicial process but something else - a description of the act of memory - adding a new dimension to what he calls 'the question of the incompleteness of history'.

The corrective to [Horkheimer's] line of thought lies in the reflection that history is not only a science [*Wissenschaft*], but no less a form of remembrance [*Eingedenken*]. What science has 'established,' remembrance can modify. Remembrance can make the incomplete (happiness) into something finished, and that which is finished (suffering) into something incomplete. That is theology; but in remembrance we have an experience which forbids us to conceive of history as fundamentally atheological, just as little as we are allowed to attempt to write it in terms of immediately theological concepts.<sup>9</sup>

Benjamin makes it clear that what he thinks gives the lie to the autarky of the past is an understanding of the phenomenon of remembrance. His belief is that in memory one finds a remarkable power to transform the past, to dislodge past events from their original context and to reactivate them. In memory the present can be seen to act upon the past and alter its character. What is interesting as an observation of individual psychological memory becomes highly significant when it is recognised that 'the same applies to our view of the past, which is the concern of history'.<sup>10</sup> Individual memory

---

<sup>9</sup> GS 5, p. 589 (N8,1); 'N [Re the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress]' in Gary Smith (ed.) *Benjamin: Philosophy, Aesthetics, History*, op. cit., p. 61 (amended). Hereafter this work is cited as 'Konvolut 'N''.

<sup>10</sup> GS 1, p. 693; 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968), p. 254.

is mirrored by history because *history is itself a form of remembrance*, or in Benjamin's words, remembrance is history's 'original vocation'<sup>11</sup> - to study the past on the level of collectives, societies or cultures is just as much to engage in remembering as when an individual's past is recollected.

But what is 'remembrance' (*Eingedenken*) and how is it able to render complete or incomplete the past itself? The term performs considerable conceptual labour in Benjamin's response and further examination of it seems necessary. Having no single English equivalent, the German noun *Eingedenken* corresponds to a more commonly used verb, *eingedenk*, 'to bear in mind', deriving from the root *denken*, 'to think', a root shared by *Gedenken*, 'memory' or 'commemoration'. *Eingedenken* captures the sense both of an act of memory, a 'calling to mind', and a state of 'mindfulness',<sup>12</sup> but because of the lack of a sense of temporality in these phrases (a sense that what is called to mind is *the past*), it is perhaps more helpfully rendered as 'remembrance' (thus *Tage des Eingedenkens*: 'days of remembrance'). The weakness of such a translation is that the English prefix implies just that duplication of the past which the concept is meant to avoid. However, as will become clear, there is a necessary repetition-in-difference involved in *Eingedenken*, a paradox which should be borne in mind whenever the term is used. The problem of translation is compounded when it is seen that Benjamin's term may itself be a translation, that *Eingedenken* may correspond to the Hebrew *Zachor*, the Jewish commandment to remember.<sup>13</sup> However, Benjamin's comments on the simultaneously 'atheological' and

---

<sup>11</sup> GS 1, p. 1231.

<sup>12</sup> The first of these is used by the translator of Pierre Missac's *Walter Benjamin's Passages*, op. cit., p. 95; the second is suggested by Aris Fioretos in his 'Contraction (Benjamin, Reading, History)', *Modern Language Notes*, vol. 110, no. 3 (April 1995), pp. 548, n. 15. The present discussion follows the lead of Irving Wohlfarth in translating the term as 'remembrance'. See Wohlfarth, 'On the Messianic Structure of Walter Benjamin's Last Reflections', *Glyph* 3 (1978), p. 197, n. 4. The sense of memory as 'bearing in mind' appears already in Augustine who observed that 'we even call memory the mind, for when we tell another person to remember something, we say 'See that you bear this in mind', and when we forget something, we say 'It was not in my mind' or 'It slipped out of my mind'.' [Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961), p. 220].

<sup>13</sup> Susan Handelman, *Fragments of Redemption: Jewish Thought and Literary Theory in Benjamin, Scholem and Levinas* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana U.P., 1991) p. 150; Gillian Rose, 'Walter Benjamin: Out of the Sources of Modern Judaism' in *Judaism and Modernity: Philosophical Essays* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1993), p. 207. On the history of this term see Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zachor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle & London: University of Washington Press, 1982).



'theological' character of the concept should entail caution in the face of any genealogy which might reduce both the originality and complexity of its usage. The concept will be shown to exceed a sheerly theological meaning and to nowhere carry the force of an imperative or injunction. As these brief points suggest, the problem of translating Benjamin's term raises decisive philosophical questions.

In the same letter in which he describes his project as a redemption (*Rettung*) of works of the past, Benjamin clarifies this quality of historical incompleteness which allows for the past's transformation: 'We know of course that the past consists not of crown jewels in a museum, but of something always affected [*betroffen*] by the present.'<sup>14</sup> He takes it as axiomatic that this antiquarian model of the past together with the historiographical practice to which it gives rise is fundamentally mistaken because it ignores the *relation* between the past and present which constitutes the past as past. A rescue or redemption of historical phenomena is possible because of this 'affection' by which the past is continually constituted and reconstituted. It is this paradoxical relation of determination which gives the lie to past's self-sufficiency. From this insight into the mediation of the past follows an historical and historiographical task very different from the antiquarian model evoked above. By exploiting this affective relation historiography can hope to dispel the illusion of autarky and to articulate the past in a critical manner.

### **The Temporality of Remembrance**

To understand why it is the phenomenon of remembrance which performs the privileged feat of opening up the past from its apparent self-sufficiency it is necessary to observe what happens to time in the act of remembering. It requires recognition that 'the way the past is experienced [*Erfahren*] in remembrance [*Eingedenken*]' is 'neither homogeneous nor empty'.<sup>15</sup> Benjamin finds in the phenomenon of remembering an experience of time which corresponds neither to an 'eternal image of

---

<sup>14</sup> *Briefe*, p. 311; *Correspondence*, p. 215 (amended).

<sup>15</sup> GS 1, p. 704; 'Theses' in *Illuminations*, p. 264.

the past' nor to a sequential and chronological continuum. Memory has the unusual characteristic of contracting the past, of compressing a massive wealth of material into the temporal present. The process which memory enacts is neither eternal (because what is remembered threatens to be lost once recalled - all memories suffer this risk) nor homogeneous (because remembrance isolates past moments according to their significance, juxtaposing them with scant regard for their logical sequence).<sup>16</sup> Remembrance, in other words, does not occur in homogeneous time. On the contrary, remembrance proceeds *as the structuring of time*; time becomes configured around the significance of a particular memory *for us*. 'Experience [*Erfahrung*] accompanies one back into the far reaches of time, fulfilling and structuring [*gliedert*] it.'<sup>17</sup> What is true as a phenomenological description of time experienced in memory is for Benjamin also true of time experienced historically, socially and communally. The example he often chooses to illustrate this is the temporality of the calendar. 'The inaugural day of a calendar functions as an historical time-lapse camera. And it is essentially the same day that keeps recurring in the form of holy days [*Feiertage*], which are days of remembrance [*Tage des Eingedenkens*]. Thus calendars do not tell time like clocks.'<sup>18</sup> The characteristics of psychological memory have a correlate on the social level, the 'massive abridgement'<sup>19</sup> of historical time which the festival day of remembrance represents. Remembrance re-collects past time as if the intervening years had not occurred, as if the past were not over and done with.

• Memory could represent the past 'as it really was' only if it could establish an unbroken homogeneous chain between past and present. Benjamin understood this insight to impinge not only upon any theory of memory but also upon the comprehension of history. The realism Benjamin finds in (particularly Ranke's) 'historicism' assumes this homogeneous chain as the medium in which historical events take place; homogeneous time becomes the hidden precondition of historiographical objectivity. To question such a view of time is to the question any

---

<sup>16</sup> Cf. GS 5, p. 602 (N 15, 1); 'Konvolut 'N'' in Gary Smith (ed.) *Benjamin: Philosophy, Aesthetics, History*, op. cit., p. 74.

<sup>17</sup> GS 1, p. 635; *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet In The Era Of High Capitalism*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Verso, 1973), p. 136.

<sup>18</sup> GS 1, p. 701-2; 'Theses' in *Illuminations*, p. 261.

<sup>19</sup> GS 1, p. 703; 'Theses' in *Illuminations*, p. 263.

realist pretension within historiography: 'History is the subject of a construction [*Konstruktion*] whose site is not homogeneous and empty time, but time filled by the now [*Jetztzeit*].' <sup>20</sup> The argument against seeing time as a purely quantitative (homogeneous) continuum rests upon insight into the equally qualitative nature of time, something for which Benjamin finds evidence in the phenomenon of remembering. It is this process by which the qualitative aspect of a quantitative series makes itself manifest that he terms variously 'now time' or 'the messianic'. <sup>21</sup> The idea of quantity passing over into quality, a familiar theme within dialectical philosophy, is ascribed here the character of an interruption or subversion. Benjamin finds it in even the most mundane experiences of time.

The temporal order which places its homogeneity above duration cannot prevent heterogeneous, outstanding fragments from remaining within it. To have combined recognition of a quality with the measurement of quantity was the work of the calendars in which places of remembrance [*Stellen des Eingedenkens*] are left blank, as it were, in the form of holidays [*Feiertagen*]. <sup>22</sup>

For Benjamin the experience of time, both in individual, phenomenal terms, in social terms and at the level of history, always involves this conflict or contradiction. The order of homogeneous time, whilst seemingly given and natural, has in fact only come to assume predominance by concealing the equally qualitative character of a temporal series. Moreover, Benjamin suggests, this reduction of time to pure quantity has its own genesis and history, and his identification of chronology as 'the regulative idea of

---

<sup>20</sup> GS 1, p. 701; 'Theses' in *Illuminations*, p. 261 (amended). For a discussion of the meaning and philosophical status of Benjamin's term *Jetztzeit* see Peter Osborne, 'Small-scale Victories, Large-scale Defeats: Walter Benjamin's Politics of Time' in Andrew Benjamin & Peter Osborne (eds.), *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy: Destruction and Experience* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 85-9; also his *The Politics of Time: Modernity and Avant-Garde* (London: Verso, 1995), pp. 143-59

<sup>21</sup> The philosophical moment of this messianic model of collective time was already set out in the doctoral dissertation on 'The Concept of Art Criticism in German Romanticism' where Benjamin contrasts the romantics' 'qualitative [*qualitativ*]' conception of time with the 'empty infinity [*leeren Unendlichkeit*]' of 'progress', and suggests that this conception of time typifies the romantics' 'messianism'. (GS 1, p. 91-2).

<sup>22</sup> GS 1, p. 642-3; *Charles Baudelaire*, p. 144 (amended).



wage labour'<sup>23</sup> suggest that it is here in the generalisation of the labour process that the origins of this reduction will be found. Significantly, the manifestation of the qualitative is equated with a liberation from the confines of the abstraction of time; both the abstraction and that which points beyond it are thus seen to have political as well as philosophical implications. Calendar time manifests this enduring and ineradicable presence of the qualitative in the phenomenon of the holiday (literally 'holy day'), a day which is often itself (Benjamin is thinking particularly of the Jewish calendar) a day of remembrance: its situation in the register of social time marks out a suspension of temporal and historical homogeneity. But the ambivalent character of the calendar also expresses something of the forces which structure the experience of time in any given society: thus whilst festivals may constitute 'interruptions' (*Unterbrechungen*) in the normal pattern of lived time, when set against the rhythm of the labour process they often function as mere 'palliatives for monotony'.<sup>24</sup>

The exposition of remembrance proceeds in tandem with a diagnosis of the 'atrophy of experience' (*Verkümmerung der Erfahrung*) Benjamin thinks characteristic of modernity.<sup>25</sup> These irruptive moments of remembrance transcend

---

<sup>23</sup> GS 1, p. 636; *Charles Baudelaire*, p. 137 (amended).

<sup>24</sup> GS 1, p. 1176. It is likely that this anthropology of the festival as a 'suspension of marked time' was informed by Roger Callois whose paper 'Festival' given to the *College de Sociologie* in 1938 Benjamin attended. See *Briefe*, p. 843; *Correspondence*, p. 626; also Callois, 'Festival' in Denis Hollier (ed.), *The College of Sociology 1937-39* trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), esp. pp. 291-2, & p. xxi.

<sup>25</sup> GS 1, p. 611; *Charles Baudelaire*, p. 113. Critics have noted the importance of Benjamin's 'theory of experience' to any understanding of his work but have often overlooked the philosophical heritage of the two terms *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis* which frame that account of experience. The term *Erfahrung* gained currency within the Kantian tradition where it represented the subject matter and starting point of transcendental philosophy. For Kant, although knowledge begins in *Erfahrung*, it does not exclusively derive from it. Kant's philosophy sought to address the following question: taking experience as given, what are the conditions of its possibility, what conceptual and categorial structures make experience possible in the first place? Kant's term is subsequently taken up by Hegel for whom it designates the experience which, in its contradictions (including those hypostasised by Kant), phenomenology seeks to critically thematise. The etymological root of *Erfahrung*, *fahren*, carries a sense of 'to fare, go, or wander', hence the phrase 'to fare well'; it has overtones of an experience which is educative rather than merely passive. *Erlebnis* or 'lived experience' has, by contrast, a more recent lineage, gaining currency in twentieth century phenomenology and particularly within the tradition of *Lebensphilosophie* (e.g. Dilthey, Bergson) where it referred to an experience which is immediate and unreflective. In German you 'make' an *Erfahrung* whereas an *Erlebnis* 'happens' to you. Benjamin takes up this distinction and in turn grounds it in a diagnosis of modernity as the gradual substitution of the former by the latter. This, in turn, is understood as a question of the relation between

(however temporarily) the isolation and privatisation characteristic of a specifically modern form of experience and fuse a social group by means of a common project, generating not just a collective remembrance but a remembrance of collectivity. Days set aside to commemorate past revolutions are what Benjamin has in mind here. Such days involve a doubled remembrance because the events they commemorate were themselves acts of remembering: it is in these terms, as a revivification of earlier times, that Benjamin describes the French Revolution's leap into the classical past. What Marx saw as an unfortunate tendency of revolutions to conjure up the dead of world history is portrayed more favourably by Benjamin as an interruption of history's flow, evinced in the Revolutionaries' establishment of a new calendar.<sup>26</sup> Benjamin finds in such events not simply a politically retarding repetition of past failures but an element of novelty, a transformative use of the past in the cause of distancing and criticising the present. This dialectic of repetition and novelty in the phenomenon of remembrance will have important ramifications for Benjamin's own politicisation of the concept.

It becomes clear that the role played by remembrance in the argument that historical time is both quantitative and qualitative is crucial. Indeed it is possible to say that remembrance provides the key to Benjamin's critique of homogeneous time. This is shown most clearly in the last of the theses 'On the Concept of History' where *Eingedenken* is aligned with a Judaic presentation of history, and both are seen to exhibit a structured temporality which contrasts sharply with the prevailing homogeneous model. Here remembrance is said to be messianic by virtue of its orientation towards the redemptive moments which structure historical time. It holds the future open by paradoxically looking to the past, to as-yet-unrealised possibilities. Significantly, the final sentence of Benjamin's draft fails to appear in the completed version of the 'Theses' - an unaccountable omission because it underlines the importance of *Eingedenken*, showing clearly its fundamental role in articulating the messianic conception of historical time.

---

experience and tradition: whereas *Erfahrung* names experience embedded in tradition and collectivity, experience learned-from and capable of being passed-on, *Erlebnis* denotes an experience which is de-traditionalised, atomised, it is lived in a present devoid of a past.

<sup>26</sup> GS 1, p. 701-2; 'Theses' in *Illuminations*, p. 261-2.

Those soothsayers who found out from time what it had in store for them did not experience time as either homogeneous or empty. Anyone who keeps this in view will get an idea of how the past was experienced in remembrance [*Eingedenken*]: namely in just the same way. We know that the Jews were prohibited from investigating the future. The Torah and prayers instruct them in remembrance [*Eingedenken*], however.... Remembrance, in which lies the quintessence of the Jews' theological presentation of history, disenchanting the future of its enslavement to magic. But it did not thereby render time empty. For each second of time is the small door through which the Messiah might enter. The hinge upon which this door turns is remembrance [*Eingedenken*].<sup>27</sup>

The 'soothsayers' who found out what time had in store for them did not experience time as homogeneous or empty, that is, as predetermined, because they substituted retrospection for expectation, and reoriented their sense of history accordingly. Prohibited from trying to predict the future they looked instead to the past and found in the experience of remembrance a very different model of time than that of predetermination. 'Soothsaying', that is, prediction, can take place only where successive instants follow one another with causal regularity, where there exists an unbroken chain between present and future. To relinquish the attempt to foretell is to disenchant the future of its seemingly 'magical' predictability. Remembrance disenchanting the future by finding hope instead in the past. It yields a conception of time and history which is neither linear nor empty but eschatological and messianic. Each second of time is found to contain messianic possibilities, the potential for the redemptive transformation of the past. This is what Benjamin means in saying that 'remembrance can make the incomplete (happiness) into something finished, and that which is finished (suffering) into something incomplete.' This ability to give a sense of both completeness and of incompleteness to past time is what was contained in the

---

<sup>27</sup> GS 1, p. 704 & 1252.



theological idea of judgement and redemption - eschatology - but here it is rewritten in decidedly this-worldly terms. Benjamin concurs with Horkheimer that the question of whether or not the past can be redeemed is nothing less than the question of 'happiness' (*Glück*) and 'pain' (*Schmerz*) - this is confirmed in works such as the 'Theologico-Political Tract' and the 'Theses' where it is argued that 'our image of happiness is indissolubly bound up with the image of redemption'.<sup>28</sup> Here the experience of time, even on the level of an individual life history, is seen to have a dynamic which mirrors the temporal structure found in the theological idea of redemption - not only does it project fulfilment, that projection finds its most eloquent expression in the wish to make reparations for the past. The way an individual views his or her own past is therefore highly revealing. Benjamin challenges his readers to acknowledge that what is stored up in the theological idea of redemption is in fact shared by our most intimate conceptions of happiness. Moreover, he urges, it is remembrance which is peculiarly privileged to reveal to us the complete or incomplete character of that happiness. The internal relation between history and memory is expressed here in terms of a common dynamic and a mutual orientation. Not that this amounts to a simple teleology, something against which, particularly in its historicist form, Benjamin explicitly protests. This dynamic (compared at one point to heliotropy) is better understood as an *entelechy*, which, rather than denoting a progressive and linear schema, says only that the present *qua* unfulfilled projects fulfilment. The past experienced in memory has this essentially dynamic, because inadequate, character. Benjamin makes it clear that this fulfilment is to be understood as an interruption rather than a culmination, a view for which he finds a precedent in the messianic idea where the time of redemption actually differs markedly from teleology: there, 'the Messiah breaks [*bricht*] history; the Messiah does not appear at the end of a development'.<sup>29</sup>

## A Taxonomy of Memory

---

<sup>28</sup> GS 1, p. 693; 'Theses' in *Illuminations*, p. 254.

<sup>29</sup> GS 1, p. 1243.

To understand further the distinctive role played by remembrance (*Eingedenken*) in Benjamin's work it is important to note the characteristics which distinguish it from the other concepts he uses to categorise memory, and the varying contexts and senses in which each are used. Although a recurring theme of works from this later period of Benjamin's intellectual career, it is not employed univocally. Whilst continuities exist between its use in the 1929 essay on Proust and later works such as the *Arcades Project* and the 'Theses', its invocation in the 1936 essay on Nikolai Leskov, 'The Storyteller' appears as something of an anomaly, not least because of the subsidiary role it plays with respect to other forms of memory. Memory (*Erinnerung*) taken in its widest sense is there understood to be the mediating factor between experience and tradition, it 'establishes the chain of tradition that hands events down from generation to generation.'<sup>30</sup> Likewise it serves as the means by which the historical past is transmitted: historiography is nothing other than 'the record which memory keeps'.<sup>31</sup> Benjamin proceeds to subdivide memory according to the manner in which it 'passes on' experience. His particular preoccupation in this essay is (following Lukács' *Theory of the Novel*) 'epic forms' and the relation each holds to tradition: informed by Lukács' temporally-grounded aesthetic distinctions, Benjamin contrasts the form of tradition in the novel with that transmitted in the story. *Eingedenken* is equated here with the 'muse-derived element of the novel,' it is 'dedicated to the *one* hero, *one* òdyssey, *one* battle' in contrast to 'the *many* diffuse occurrences' which the storyteller's memory (*Gedächtnis*) records.<sup>32</sup> Taken together the two form a unity *Erinnerung* which preserves something of the 'creative indifference' of the various epic forms but which, with the decline of the epic, is already on the point of disappearance. Benjamin's play on the *ein* of *Eingedenken* is not theorised here or followed-through in detail elsewhere, and when the term is mentioned again its sense has shifted.

In a work from 1932 both *Gedächtnis* and *Erinnerung* appear in slightly different guise. 'A Berlin Chronicle' theorises and thematises memory in the form of

---

<sup>30</sup> GS 2, p. 453; 'The Storyteller' in *Illuminations*, p. 98

<sup>31</sup> GS 2, p. 453; 'The Storyteller' in *Illuminations*, p. 97 (amended).

<sup>32</sup> GS 2, p. 453-4; 'The Storyteller' in *Illuminations*. p. 98



autobiographical recollections of Benjamin's own childhood. Here it is not so much the temporal as the spatial dimension of mnemonic concepts which is highlighted, memory's internal topography taken together with the external geography which it invests:

Language shows clearly that memory [*Gedächtnis*] is not an instrument for exploring the past but its theatre [*Schauplatz*]. It is the medium of past experience, as the ground is the medium in which dead cities lie interred. He who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging. This confers the tone and bearing of genuine recollections [*Erinnerungen*]. He must not be afraid to return again and again to the same matter; to scatter it as one scatters earth, to turn it over as one turns over soil. For the matter itself is only a deposit, a stratum, which yields only to the most meticulous examination what constitutes the real treasure hidden within the earth: the images, severed from all earlier associations, that stand - like precious fragments or torsos in a collector's gallery - in the prosaic rooms of our later understanding. True, for successful excavations a plan is needed. Yet no less indispensable is the cautious probing of the spade in the dark loam, and it is to cheat oneself of the richest prize to preserve as a record merely the inventory of one's discoveries, and not this dark joy of the finding itself. Fruitless searching is as much a part of this as succeeding, and consequently recollection [*Erinnerung*] must not proceed in the manner of a narrative or still less that of a report, but must, in the strictest epic and rhapsodic manner, assay its spade in ever-new places, and in the old ones delve to ever-deeper layers.<sup>33</sup>

The use of *Gedächtnis* and *Erinnerung* is of particular interest here. *Gedächtnis* is described as the ground or the 'theatre' in which the past is to be found; *Erinnerung* as an archaeological find. Employing metaphors similar to those used by Freud,

---

<sup>33</sup> GS 6, p. 486-7; trans. 'A Berlin Chronicle' in *One-Way Street*, p. 314 (amended).

Benjamin describes memory as 'a deposit [*Lagerungen*], a stratum [*Schichten*]' which must be 'scattered' or 'turned over' in recollection much as one turns over soil. The excavation of recollections from the ground of memory entails that they be 'severed from all earlier associations', a description which indicates the destructive character of recollection, and points towards a technique of temporal juxtaposition which Benjamin would employ elsewhere. It is as if the disturbing of the ground, the destruction of the original context in which an object lies buried, is inevitable if that object is to be unearthed. But it is not simply the *process* of excavation which is important here; what subsequently occurs to the archaeologist's find is also crucial. 'It is to cheat oneself of the richest prize to preserve as a record merely the inventory of one's discoveries, and not this dark joy of the finding itself.' What the 'inventory' names here is a particular way of encountering the past such that what is remembered is to be preserved in strictly factual and (thus inviolable) form. Benjamin suggests that such a distanced, positivist attitude may in fact militate against a 'genuine' encounter with the past. By implication, if it is to succeed in its task, the interest or the will behind memory must be acknowledged.

As the field upon which recollection takes place *Gedächtnis* names a largely passive medium. In Irving Wohlfarth's words it 'represents memory as a noun, a substantial, quasi-spatial, 'extensive' entity.'<sup>34</sup> As its active partner, *Erinnerung* denotes an act of interiorisation or gathering-together ('re-collection' is a reasonably accurate translation.)<sup>35</sup> The passive sense of *Gedächtnis*, expressed here by means of spatial metaphors, along with the more active, 'destructive' role ascribed to *Erinnerung* is repeated in Benjamin's writings on Baudelaire. At one point he pauses to examine the model of memory at work in Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and compares it with those of a pupil of Freud, Theodor Reik: "The function of

---

<sup>34</sup> Irving Wohlfarth, 'On the Messianic Structure of Walter Benjamin's Last Reflections', op. cit., p. 197. The idea of memory as a 'theatre' and the account of space and time it implies has a long history within traditions of thought (such as neo-Platonism) with which Benjamin was familiar. On the history of this idea see Frances Yates, *The Art of Memory* (London: Pimlico, 1992).

<sup>35</sup> Various critics have noted the Hegelian resonances of this term. However, Benjamin nowhere appears to engage with Hegel's view of knowledge as recollection, and it would be hasty to view - as do Wohlfarth, ['The Messianic Structure', op. cit., p. 191] and subsequently Rebecca Comay ['Benjamin's Endgame' in Andrew Benjamin & Peter Osborne (eds.), *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy*, op. cit., p. 255] - the preference of *Eingedenken* over *Erinnerung* as an implicit criticism of Hegel.

memories [*Gedächtnisses*],’ Reik writes, ‘is the protection of impressions; recollection [*Erinnerung*] aims at their disintegration. Memory is essentially conservative, recollection is destructive.’<sup>36</sup> Reik’s opposition serves to clarify what is for Benjamin the mnemonic component of a specifically modern form of experience, one in which fleeting and disconnected stimuli and unassimilated shocks have become the norm. In this way Reik’s distinction mirrors Proust’s contrast between ‘involuntary and voluntary remembrance [*Eingedenken*]<sup>37</sup>, where the voluntary memory actually destroys impressions in bringing to consciousness what were originally unconscious stimuli. Benjamin quotes Freud: ‘memory fragments are ‘often most powerful and enduring when the incident which left them behind was one that never entered consciousness’. Translated into Proustian terms, this means that only what has not been experienced explicitly and consciously, what has not happened to the subject as an experience [*Erlebnis*] can become a component of the *mémoire involontaire*.’<sup>38</sup> The unconscious in fact preserves memory traces more thoroughly than consciousness, because this process of neutralisation has never had a chance to occur. However, because they entered the psyche surreptitiously, these shock-like experiences may be revived only by another involuntary association.

One more concept should be noted before this outline of Benjamin’s taxonomy of memory is complete. It is to be found in a set of fragments from 1938-9 entitled ‘Central Park’ and, although it was gestured towards in the image of the ‘inventory’, it represents a distinct form of memory. It is termed *Andenken*, the ‘memento’ or ‘souvenir’ (again the etymological root *denken* is noteworthy) and whilst implying a particular object of memory it also denotes a specific manner in which the subject relates to his or her past, a relation which assumes an appropriative, commodified form. ‘The *souvenir* [*das Andenken*] is the complement of ‘experiences’ [*des Erlebnisses*]. It crystallises the increasing self-alienation of the man who inventories his past as dead possessions.’ In cultivating this acquisitive memory the subject has ‘evacuated the surrounding world in order to settle in the inner world.’ The souvenir ‘derives from deceased experience [*Erfahrung*] which calls itself, euphemistically,

---

<sup>36</sup> GS 1, p. 612; *Charles Baudelaire*, p. 114 (amended).

<sup>37</sup> GS 1, p. 612; *Charles Baudelaire*, p. 114.

<sup>38</sup> GS 1, p. 612-3; *Charles Baudelaire*, p. 114 (amended).



'lived' [*Erlebnis*].'<sup>39</sup> In *Andenken*, the subject's relation to their temporal past assumes the character of a lived experience, but more than this, the relation becomes ossified and acquisitive, the investment of memory in things becomes a spur to their ownership or 'collection': 'the distant is captured in the interior like the past in a cabinet of waxworks.'<sup>40</sup> Although it appears as if the withdrawal of things from the realm of circulation strips them of their commodity character, in fact it also succeeds in ridding them of their use-value. *Andenken* consolidates the alienation of experience even in the attempt to transcend it.

It is clear that this quaternary taxonomy - memory (*Gedächtnis*), recollection (*Erinnerung*), remembrance (*Eingedenken*) and the memento (*Andenken*) - is closely related to Benjamin's theory of experience. *Erinnerung* is typically used to describe a form of memory bound up with tradition and serving as the means by which that tradition is handed-on. Similarly, *Eingedenken* refers to a memory embedded in tradition, history, sociality, but one which exhibits a transformative and critical relation to that tradition. *Gedächtnis* is sometimes used in this sense also, as a memory destructive of the past, but more typically it refers to the sedimented ground deposited by tradition which is itself to be disturbed and excavated. *Andenken* appears as the objectified, reified form of an acquisitive tendency in memory, a tendency which Benjamin often expresses in terms of a corresponding character type, 'the collector', shorthand for an inwardly distended subjectivity. Evoking Marx's critique of commodity fetishism and Weber's genealogy of *Innerlichkeit*, Benjamin exposes the individualism and artificiality with which this subjectivity experiences time.

Each of the four concepts of memory performs a specific function in Benjamin's theory of modernity and in the critical historiography which his writings both theorise and enact. Significantly, each is ascribed particular spatial or temporal characteristics, something which links them (even if negatively, as with *Andenken*) to history and to

---

<sup>39</sup> GS 1, p. 681; 'Central Park', trans. Lloyd Spencer, *New German Critique* 34 (Winter 1985), p. 49 (amended).

<sup>40</sup> GS 5, p. 1208. Adorno added a dialectical twist to Benjamin's argument by suggesting that the cultivation of 'inwardness' (*Innerlichkeit*) paradoxically 'rescues and actualises [the past] through 'externalisation' (*Veräußerlichung*'. [*Briefe*, p. 681; *Correspondence*, p. 502 (amended)]. This idea that memory made one's 'ownmost' is also memory at its most externalised or alienated is reworked in an important passage in Adorno's *Minima Moralia*. For a discussion of its implications see Chapter Six, below.

tradition. What is noteworthy for the present discussion is the privileged role played by one of these concepts in accomplishing that redemptive encounter with the past which is so central to Benjamin's critical project. Typically it is *Eingedenken* which plays this (literally) pivotal role of articulating the past, of providing a unique engagement with historical events such that their affinity with the present is made manifest. To understand the significance of *Eingedenken* means recognising this privilege it assumes within the taxonomy of memory.<sup>41</sup> It is revealing therefore that it appears frequently in Benjamin's philosophical statements of and reflections upon his own critical practice, works such as 'Konvolut 'N'', the set of notes on the 'theory of the knowledge of history', and the similarly '*erkenntnistheoretischen*'<sup>42</sup> theses 'On the Concept of History'. The concept of remembrance performs much of the labour of Benjamin's attempt to establish a critical 'method' by which historiography and the philosophy of history might be radicalised. The philosophical difficulties this method subsequently encounters and the questions it raises will be crucial for the success of his project more generally.

## History as Remembrance

The fact that the concept of *Eingedenken*, as one commentator has noted, 'is given sustained theoretical consideration only toward the late 1920s'<sup>43</sup> is significant in that it indicates that it will bear the hallmarks of the shifting emphasis of Benjamin's work which occurred during the mid-1920s, namely the qualification of his Jewish messianism with elements of Marxism. The concept can with justification be expected

---

<sup>41</sup> Whilst the present discussion is indebted to Wohlfarth's excellent study of these concepts of memory, it takes issue with the relative privilege he accords to each. The fact that he reads Benjamin's reflections on memory through the lens of the essay 'The Storyteller' leads him to see *Gedächtnis* and *Eingedenken* as playing an equally important role. In fact that essay is the only place in which *Gedächtnis* plays any significant part; elsewhere it is *Eingedenken* which performs the critical task of redemptively articulating the past.

<sup>42</sup> Adorno, '*Charakteristik Walter Benjamins*' in *Prismen, Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main, 1970-), vol. 10, part 1, p. 250; 'A Portrait of Walter Benjamin', in *Prisms*, op. cit., p. 238.

<sup>43</sup> Aris Fioretos, 'Contraction (Benjamin, Reading, History)', loc. cit.

to carry the simultaneously 'theological' and 'materialist' characteristics which distinguish his thought more generally from that point onward.<sup>44</sup> And such a view finds confirmation in the exchange with Horkheimer. That remembrance outlines a view of history which is both theological and atheological points out the weakness both of Horkheimer's objection as well as more recent attempts to construe the concept in exclusively theological terms. It seems as if Horkheimer unaccountably neglects the dual character of Benjamin's thought or wishes him to relinquish one element of it. Whichever it is, the criticisms miss their mark. As Rolf Tiedemann comments, 'the fact that the theorem of the incompleteness of the work of the past is theological is thus, for Benjamin, no basis for criticism.'<sup>45</sup> It is no basis for criticism because of the manner in which he employs theological concepts, a way which always exceeds an exclusively theological meaning. The idea of historical incompleteness is one such idea which is not limited to an exclusively theological context. Horkheimer's objection is met because the redemption of the past in remembrance can equally be expressed in materialist terms, as the action of collective forms of memory or of an historiographical practice. The incompleteness of the past can be articulated without a discourse of God and without an eschatology (at least as traditionally understood).

In responding to Horkheimer, Benjamin not only clarifies his own peculiar mix of theology and materialism but implicitly distinguishes his own approach to history from that of an historical science. 'The corrective to [Horkheimer's] line of thought

---

<sup>44</sup> Benjamin's second reply to Horkheimer pre-empts the running debate in the secondary literature over the continuity or discontinuity of his own *oeuvre*, a dispute over whether something like an epistemological break occurs in his writings during the mid-1920s. The more perceptive commentators have recognised that his 'early' 'theological' framework is not ultimately incompatible with his 'later' 'Marxian' framework. Thus Michael Löwy argues that 'communism and historical materialism did not supplant his old spiritualist and libertarian-romantic convictions; rather, they amalgamated with them and, in so doing, constituted a singular and unique form of thought.' (Michael Löwy, *Redemption and Utopia: Jewish Libertarian Thought in Central Europe: A Study in Elective Affinity* trans. Hope Heaney (London: Athlone, 1992), p. 97). In similar terms Irving Wohlfarth contends that 'nowhere in Benjamin's writings are theology and materialism...ultimately at odds with one another.' (Irving Wohlfarth, 'On Some Jewish Motifs in Benjamin' in Andrew Benjamin (ed.), *The Problems of Modernity: Adorno and Benjamin* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 202). Bernd Witte writes of 'Benjamin's more radical nihilism...charging worldly actions with religious meaning while at the same time destroying religion's theological content...' (Bernd Witte, *Walter Benjamin: An Intellectual Biography*, trans. J. Rolleston (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991), p. 171).

<sup>45</sup> Rolf Tiedemann, 'Historical Materialism or Political Messianism?', in Gary Smith (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 182.



lies in the reflection that history is not only a science [*Wissenschaft*], but no less a form of remembrance [*Eingedenken*].’ By ‘science’ Benjamin appears to intend several things - not only the assumptions behind Horkheimer’s view of the completeness of the past, but also the positivism of an historical methodology drawn from the natural sciences. The so-called ‘scientific character’ of history is established only by the ‘complete eradication of everything that recalls its original vocation as remembrance’.<sup>46</sup> History fails to correspond to a science because of the essential part played by memory in articulating past time. To recognise that history, like an individual past, can be viewed only by a transformative process of remembering is to acknowledge both the interests and the situation of the historian, and to relinquish any attempt to bracket-out subjectivity from the act of apprehending the historical object: ‘the historian is bound to explain in one way or another the happenings with which he deals.’<sup>47</sup> It follows that ‘to articulate the past historically does not mean to recognise it ‘the way it really was’ [*wie es denn eigentlich gewesen ist*] (Ranke).’<sup>48</sup> Indeed the supposed objectivity and neutrality of historical facts typically conceals an unacknowledged set of values or an unintended allegiance. This can occur even when the subjective component is made explicit, as in Dilthey’s contention that ‘empathy’ is a transcendental condition of the ‘re-creation’ of the past.<sup>49</sup> Dilthey’s insight certainly takes historiography further than the dogmatic realism of Ranke, but only to raise a more serious question of exactly with whom the historian empathises. Whilst something of the subjective dimension introduced by hermeneutics is paralleled in Benjamin’s equation of history and memory, his awareness that empathy may unwittingly consolidate the repression of particular pasts highlights his divergence from that approach; here recognition of the role of subjectivity aims at historical *truths* unavailable to a conflict-free hermeneutics, and the acknowledgement of perspectives

---

<sup>46</sup> GS 1, p. 1231.

<sup>47</sup> GS 2, p. 451; ‘The Storyteller’ in *Illuminations*, p. 96.

<sup>48</sup> GS 1, p. 695; ‘Theses’ in *Illuminations*, p. 255. Benjamin alludes to a programmatic statement of Ranke’s: ‘History has had assigned to it the office of judging the past and of instructing the present for the benefit of the future ages. To such high offices the present work does not presume: it seeks only to show what actually happened [*wie es eigentlich gewesen*].’ [Leopold von Ranke, excerpt from *History of the Latin and Teutonic Nations* in Roger Wines (ed.), *The Secret of World History: Selected Writings on the Art and Science of History* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1981), p. 58].

<sup>49</sup> GS 5, p. 587 (N7, 6).

does not lead to perspectivism. The notion of 'construction' as a critical historiographical method (of which more will be said in Chapter Two) is designed to circumvent the relativism which his critique of historical science appears to court.

In one respect it appears plausible to counter that the equation of history and remembrance has merely subjectivised history. If, as was argued above, it is this alignment which grounds Benjamin's critique of homogeneous time, then it does seem as if the phenomenal experience of time (as structured, heterogeneous, etc.) has merely been substituted for the real (sequential, homogeneous) time of the natural sciences with the result that time becomes in its sheerly phenomenal character, arbitrary. A defence of Benjamin on this point requires that his argument be understood more dialectically, as an awareness of time's simultaneously quantitative and qualitative character. The natural sciences and the practice of time measurement hypostasise or abstract from the former thereby neglecting its derivative nature, they overlook the fact that measurement itself is an (inter-) subjective project with qualitative aims and repercussions: this is clear both in terms of the instrumental reasoning of a natural science with respect to its object, the natural world; it is equally true of the labour process, as Benjamin is keen to underline. But he takes the dialectics of quantity further by giving it a materialist twist: with the predominance of a scientific rationality and the extension and generalisation of the labour process the quantitative character of time takes on a significant *reality*. The experience of time in such a world *is*, in many respects uniform, continuous, repetitive.<sup>50</sup> Homogeneous time can be said to represent a real or 'determinate abstraction' in just the sense Marx understood the categories of political economy such as labour and money: they express (albeit uncritically) a contingent historical reality. It is in this way that Benjamin's view of time avoids arbitrariness, and the charge of phenomenalism may be countered.

This sheds light on the difference between Benjamin's reflections and Bergson's criticism of 'spatialised' conceptions of time. Whilst the two share much in common, notably the idea that memory 'is decisive for the philosophical structure of

---

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Irving Wohlfarth, 'On The Messianic Structure of Walter Benjamin's Last Reflections', op. cit., p. 207, n. 34: 'The "continuity" of the past is *both* historicist ideology and historical reality. Each cements the other.'



experience',<sup>51</sup> there is an important difference between them, and Benjamin's argument that Bergson's philosophy remains unaware of its own social preconditions, is telling. Where Bergson errs is in seeing spatialised time as a mere category mistake since this overlooks its contingent reality, recognition of which gave Benjamin's critique its dialectical, critical character. The historical determination of experience, this real process of abstraction, appears in Bergson only negatively, as that against which he reacts in privileging a preconscious temporal becoming - *durée* - subsequently constrained and misrepresented in the form of spatialised time.

It was important for Benjamin to distinguish his own reflections on the interrelation of time, memory and experience from those found in *Lebensphilosophie*, and highlighting the dimension of tradition concealed in each was the chief means by which this was to be achieved. His criticisms of (particularly Bergson's) life-philosophy clarify Benjamin's own understanding of these phenomena, underlining the fact that whilst history is a form of memory, memory is equally historical in its implicit reliance upon tradition, even in its most subjective and spontaneous expressions. Incognizance of tradition is exemplified in Bergson's view of the relation of memory to time, and in his distinction between a '*vita activa*' and a '*vita contemplativa*' in the apprehension of the past. Bergson assumes that access to the stream of life can be freely undertaken, something which sets him apart from Proust's subsequent use of the dualism. The distinction between 'learned' and 'spontaneous' memory, between the conscious representation of the past and mere habit or association,<sup>52</sup> is adopted by Proust but with a privilege accorded this time to latter, now redefined as *mémoire involontaire*. For Proust the reactivation of 'lost time' will typically come only with an involuntary encounter with some previously known sensory object;<sup>53</sup> the voluntary memory is reserved for processing and recording the associational chain initiated by that encounter.

Benjamin offers criticisms of both views of memory but his greater sympathies lie with Proust, something which will have far-reaching implications for his own

---

<sup>51</sup> GS 1, p. 608; *Charles Baudelaire*, p. 110 (amended).

<sup>52</sup> Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. Nancy Margaret Paul & W. Scott Palmer (New York: Zone, 1991), pp. 81-3.

<sup>53</sup> See for instance Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, vol. 1, trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff & Terence Kilmartin, revised by D. J. Enright (London: Chatto & Windus, 1992), p. 51.

historical and historiographical translation of this mnemonic dualism. Benjamin thinks that Bergson's search for a pure temporal substrate, like Proust's assumption that the subject can receive their past only involuntarily, are in fact two sides of the same experiential coin, and the lack of awareness of history in each approach is telling. A common mode of experience forms the backdrop against which each of these two models of memory become plausible, so that the philosophical task becomes not one of determining the respective priority of the voluntary or the involuntary but of historically and genealogically tracing the formation of this dualism and recognising the will behind it. Thus Bergson's *durée* is described as 'the quintessence of a passing moment [*Erlebnis*] that struts around in the borrowed garb of experience [*Erfahrung*]',<sup>54</sup> implying that if experience is to be learned-from rather than merely lived-through in preconscious manner then it must become cognizant of its own tradition, the historical frame within which even the most intimate and apparently immediate experiences occur. Similarly, in the attempt to ground temporality in 'life' there lies a wilful refusal of the finitude of mortality: 'The *durée*, from which death has been eliminated, has the bad infinity [*schlechte Unendlichkeit*] of an ornament.'<sup>55</sup> Here awareness of history is also awareness of finitude, something which both explains and yet ultimately frustrates the wish for some permanent substratum to experience. Proust, more aware of tradition and its deterioration 'attempts to produce experience (*Erfahrung*) synthetically' because 'under today's conditions...there is less and less hope that it will come into being naturally.'<sup>56</sup> His writing attempts to synthesise *Erfahrung* out of isolated *Erlebnisse*, because the tradition by which experience was once handed-on has been all but destroyed. But it is only in the form of a solitary 'life history' that the past is thereby granted to the present: 'there is nothing more ingenious or more loyal than the way in which he nonchalantly and constantly strives to tell the reader: Redemption is my private show.'<sup>57</sup>

---

<sup>54</sup> GS 1, p. 643; *Charles Baudelaire*, p. 145.

<sup>55</sup> GS 1, p. 643; *Charles Baudelaire*, p. 145 (amended).

<sup>56</sup> GS 1, p. 609; *Charles Baudelaire*, p. 111.

<sup>57</sup> GS 1, p. 643, n.; *Charles Baudelaire*, p. 145, n. 80.

Both the Bergsonian and the Proustian accounts of memory can only gesture towards an emphatic sense of experience, and it is here that the concept of remembrance serves to bridge the divide set up by each, allowing critical evaluation of their ahistorical and individualist presuppositions.

Where there is experience [*Erfahrung*] in the strict sense of the word, certain moments of the individual past come into conjunction in memory [*Gedächtnis*] with material of the collective past. The rituals with their ceremonies, their festivals (quite probably nowhere recalled in Proust's work), kept producing the amalgamation of these two elements of memory [voluntary and involuntary] over and over again. They triggered remembrance [*Eingedenken*] at certain times and remained handles of memory for a lifetime. In this way, voluntary and involuntary remembrance lose their mutual exclusiveness.<sup>58</sup>

Passages such as this show the extent to which, despite his criticisms, Benjamin accepts the terms of debate established by Bergson and Proust, and seeks only to show the possibility of their reconciliation. It also implies that the diagnosis of a deterioration of experience - a development he sees uncritically recapitulated in *Lebensphilosophie* and parried in Proustian life history - has to be understood in a qualified way if it is to be sustained. It is not just that a personalised and de-traditionalised conception of memory is uncritical; it can only provide part of the picture. What it leaves out is the fact that memory is not wholly restricted to working with immediate and spontaneous experiences but, when occurring in a social or collective form, can be brought (at least partly) within the realm of deliberation. By implication, the atrophy of experience attendant upon modernity, though pervasive, is not complete or total; whilst remembrance may appear interstitial and threatened it retains considerable powers. The encounter with an historical past at the level of the collective is not entirely dependent upon chance, even if the atomisation of experience will make fortuitous events of reminiscence the norm. The extent to which Benjamin

---

<sup>58</sup> GS 1, p. 611; *Charles Baudelaire*, p. 113 (amended).



sees this deterioration of experience as entrenched is indicated by his own acceptance of an element of the involuntary in collective remembrance and in historiographical practice. This emerges more clearly in his attempt to use the surrealist technique of montage as a method of historical construction and as a means of historical knowledge. It implies that the fusion of voluntary and involuntary has a counterfactual aspect to it: it is just as much the goal of Benjamin's critical practice as it is one of its axioms.

This lends an embattled quality to remembrance since that which allows critical reflection upon the atrophy of experience is itself threatened by that very process of atrophy. Whilst experience in its emphatic form persists in *Eingedenken*,<sup>59</sup> it remains as marginalised as days of remembrance in an otherwise forgetful calendar. Yet despite this, the power Benjamin finds in remembrance is considerable: 'our life is, as it were, a muscle strong enough to contract the whole of historical time'.<sup>60</sup> Insight into the capacity of *Eingedenken* to confer a character of both completeness or of openness to historical time, to highlight the affection by which the past is constituted, makes it possible in turn to cultivate a critical practice (historico-philosophical, historiographical) which can replicate these effects of opening or fulfilment, can subject the past to destruction or, equally, construct it in a new way. From Benjamin's insight into the transformative capacities of remembrance follow the fundamentals of his critical practice.

It is in this way that the exchange with Horkheimer over the complete or incomplete, the closed or open character of the past, proves decisive for Benjamin's project as a whole, setting out the philosophical preconditions for his redemptive criticism. It is now clear that it is remembrance which realises this open or incomplete character of the past, the capacity for the past to be affected (*betroffen*) by the present. The exposition of remembrance meets Horkheimer's demand that incompleteness be perceived dialectically, that completeness be contained within it. It is precisely because history's original vocation is remembrance that it exhibits this 'paradoxical structure of completeness/incompleteness'.<sup>61</sup> Whilst Horkheimer's reservation that the

---

<sup>59</sup> GS 1, p. 637; *Charles Baudelaire*, p. 139.

<sup>60</sup> GS 5, p. 600 (N13a, 1); 'Konvolut 'N'', op. cit., p. 71.

<sup>61</sup> Peter Osborne, 'Small-scale Victories, Large-Scale Defeats...', op. cit., p. 88.



notion of incompleteness is 'idealistic' or even 'theological' is understandable, it can be seen to have overlooked the more subtle interweaving of theological and secular ideas in the 'Theses' in particular and in Benjamin's philosophy at large. Reading the invocation of theological motifs in this dialectical sense, as an equally secular attempt to understand historical change and discontinuity as well as the retroactive effect of memory, it is possible to construe the Benjamin-Horkheimer debate as setting out something very significant: an account of the openness of historical and temporal concepts which would avoid the closure of a crude materialism, but also the spurious indeterminacy of categories such as infinity and progression.

More will be said of this attempt to differentiate the paradoxical openness of history from a 'bad infinite' in Chapter Three; there it is shown how the dialectic of openness and completion necessitates a revaluation of eschatology, and a critical engagement with 'rational messianism' (Scholem). Firstly, however, Chapter Two examines further the simultaneously destructive and constructive qualities Benjamin ascribes to memory, looking more closely at the development of *Eingedenken* in the essay on Proust and in the *Passagen-Werk*, and the question of just how the past is to be constructed in a way which will avoid the complicity Benjamin finds in existing historiography and philosophies of history.

## II

### The Construction of Imperfection

#### Introduction

The concept of history which appears in Benjamin's late work is formulated in the imperfect tense. It is staked upon the belief that nothing historical can be said to have passed unequivocally into perfection, into completion: 'nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history.'<sup>1</sup> The recurring theme of these late writings is an attempt to formulate historical and temporal concepts which would do justice to this openness of the 'historical object'. Benjamin understood this idea of history's openness to have considerable implications for both historiography and the philosophy of history, and to pose a serious challenge to each of these disciplines. When commentators have recognised the philosophical challenge posed by these last works, they have usually been interpreted as an indictment of the Enlightenment idea of universal history, and lauded or discredited accordingly. In what follows it will become clear that, on the contrary, Benjamin's reflections continue an Enlightenment preoccupation with attempting to understand history as a totality, and that consequently they do not diverge as fundamentally as might be thought from the concepts of history found in German Idealism. But Benjamin's intent is not simply to restate the fundamentals of an Enlightenment view of history but to radicalise them by subjecting them to criticism. What this criticism or 'destruction' of universal history achieves is to clear a space for a *construction* in which the universal can appear, but, crucially, by dispelling a historiographical illusion in which existing universal history was itself complicit. Both moments of this project, the destructive and the

---

<sup>1</sup> GS 1, p. 694; 'Theses' in *Illuminations*, p. 254.

constructive, are vital to the revaluation of universal history; “construction’ presupposes ‘destruction’”.<sup>2</sup> Benjamin’s distinctive contribution to the philosophy of history is therefore to be found in his characterisation of universal history as *the construction of imperfection*, ‘imperfection’ here understood in its double sense as denoting a still-active and yet fragmentary past. The precise nature of this destruction and construction remains to be examined and assessed, and it<sup>is</sup> this which forms the central concern of the present chapter. It will be shown that again it is *remembrance* which assumes a pivotal role in effecting both that destruction and construction of the past which Benjamin seeks, and which in turn allows the development of an alternative conception of universal history. Accordingly, an examination of the simultaneously destructive and constructive powers of memory will be paramount here. Because it is destruction which, as construction’s ‘presupposition’, takes logical priority, it is appropriate for it to assume temporal priority in the exposition and evaluation that follows.



---

<sup>2</sup> GS 5, p. 587 (N 7, 6); ‘Konvolut ‘N’’, p. 60.

*'the passion for destruction is also a constructive passion'*

Mikhail Bakunin, *Protestation of the Alliance*

### **The Destructive Character of Memory**

In the essay 'The Image of Proust' Benjamin writes of the peculiar manner in which Proust's reminiscences apprehend the past. 'We know that in his work Proust did not describe a life as it actually was [*wie es gewesen ist*], but a life as it was remembered by the one who had lived it.'<sup>3</sup> The distinction between a past represented 'as it was' and 'as it was remembered' is crucial for Benjamin because it captures something not only about individual reminiscence but about the way the historical past is encountered too. An examination of the phenomenal character of memory can illuminate much concerning how history is represented and conceptualised. What can be predicated of memory can equally be predicated of history, not by mere analogy but because of the internal relation between the two - history is itself a form of remembrance. Benjamin's questioning of the desire to recall the past 'as it was' thus proceeds on two fronts, although in the last instance both are understood to be dialectically entwined. Proust's construction of a 'life history' exemplifies the former, psychological sense of anti-realism because it acknowledges the role of time in enabling yet also compromising the representation of the past. Proust observes that 'memory by itself, when it introduces the past, unmodified, into the present - the past just as it was at the moment when it was itself the present - suppresses the mighty dimension of Time which is the dimension in which life is lived.'<sup>4</sup> 'Time' here refers to the interval between present and past which frustrates the wish to retrieve

---

<sup>3</sup> GS 2, p. 311; 'The Image of Proust', *Illuminations*, p. 202.

<sup>4</sup> Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time, Vol. 6: Time Regained*, trans. Andreas Mayor (London: Chatto & Windus, 1970), p. 450.



experiences in unadulterated form. To recognise time's effect means to acknowledge what Proust calls the 'weaving of memory', the 're-formation' of the past in reminiscence. This transformative characteristic of psychological memory is subsequently made thematic in Benjamin's own reminiscences, particularly in the way he distinguishes those reminiscences from autobiography: 'For autobiography has to do with time, with sequence and what makes up the continuous flow of life. Here I am talking of a space, of moments and discontinuities. For even if months and years [i.e. chronology, measured time] appear here, it is in the form they have at the moment of remembrance [*Augenblick des Eingedenkens*]. This strange form - it may be called fleeting or eternal - is in neither case the stuff that life is made of.'<sup>5</sup> The second front upon which this questioning of realism in memory proceeds is historical, and it shares much with the first. Benjamin's intent is again to show the concealed assumptions concerning time - in particular those concerning temporal sequence and continuity - which underlie a realist view of the past. The theoretical statements of his own historiographical practice set off sharply his own approach to 'articulating the past' from such realism. Thus in the theses 'On the Concept of History' he attacks any historical study which seeks to 'recognise' (*erkennen*) the past 'the way it really was' (*wie es eigentlich gewesen*).<sup>6</sup> Here his dispute is with the collusions involved in such attempts at authenticity and the naive apprehension of historical time upon which they rest; his concern is to highlight the interest concealed by the supposed 'objectivity' and 'neutrality' of historical facts. This objectivity, Benjamin contends, belies a deeper truth that the history which is handed down to the present is one in which the victorious in each social or ideological conflict have more or less effectively written-out those whom they have conquered. Any historical analysis - and the historicism targeted by Benjamin is exemplary in this respect - will remain hermeneutically uncritical until it appreciates this violently exclusive constitution of its object. The project of recalling the past 'as it really happened' can only recapitulate a history whose continuity is established by the erasure of anomalies and the elision of ruptures, the historiographical correlate of historical conflict. Historical interpretation,

---

<sup>5</sup> GS 6, p. 488; 'A Berlin Chronicle' in *One-Way Street & Other Writings*, p. 316 (amended).

<sup>6</sup> GS 1, p. 695; 'Theses' in *Illuminations*, p. 255 (amended).

Benjamin urges, is riven by the same conflicts which structure history itself, and historiography, if it is to have anything other than an apologetic character, must register such conflicts and the historical discontinuities to which they give rise.

Benjamin often moves seamlessly between these two-senses of anti-realism, the psychological and the historical, indicating that he sees no unbridgeable divide between the spheres of 'personal' and 'collective' memory. The importance of a new conception of memory for each is clear: when applied to history the recognition of the impossibility of capturing in memory the 'authenticity' of the remembered experience has significant repercussions; but in the sphere of the personal or the psychological too it effects a shift in the terms within which memory is usually conceived. What sets-off the Proustian work of remembrance from realism is its affirmation of the transformative effect of remembrance upon the past, an acknowledgement that this transformation is a necessary condition of that past's re-presentation. Benjamin writes: 'For the important thing for the remembering author is not what he experienced, but the weaving of his memory, the Penelope work of remembrance [*Eingedenken*]. Or should one call it rather the Penelope work of forgetting? Is not the involuntary remembrance [*ungewollte Eingedenken*], Proust's *mémoire involontaire*, much closer to forgetting than what is usually called memory?'<sup>7</sup> This reversal of the privilege normally accorded to the voluntary is Proust's significant advance over previous conceptions of memory, including those found in the philosophical tradition. To affirm a type of memory which in its involuntariness is closer to forgetting than to remembering is to question the alignment of memory with an act of will or consciousness (both Proust's term *mémoire involontaire* and Benjamin's translation *ungewollte-* or *unwillkürliches Eingedenken* capture this), along with the corresponding equation of forgetting with a lapse of the will, a set of assumptions common in attempts to theorise memory. Proust reversed this emphasis but without taking either remembering and forgetting completely out of the realm of deliberation. Proust does not subsume the voluntary under the involuntary (literally what is 'beyond the will') but rather demonstrates the operation of both in remembering. He provides an extended phenomenological description of that experience whereby what is

---

<sup>7</sup> GS 2, p. 311; 'The Image of Proust' in *Illuminations*, p. 202 (amended).

consciously remembered mixes with and is informed by what is involuntarily aroused. His critique of the voluntarism with which memory is normally understood consists in showing that it is frequently an *unpredictable* encounter with an object which initiates a reminiscence. The voluntary is thereby reserved a subsidiary but not unimportant role; its task is to process and gather up all that such encounters spark-off. Metaphysically - and it should be noted that the metaphysical resonances of such an experience are of central concern to Benjamin - Proust's <sup>writing</sup> is an attempt to fuse the will with an openness to the play of chance or unpredictability. For Benjamin there is a particular socio-historical context which renders meaningful such a metaphysical experiment. That the capacity which allows for memories being initiated by chance has become largely stifled is closely linked to the routine and repetitive character of modern experience, with the result that any work of remembering has to swim against a tide of no less than historical proportions.

The implicitly metaphysical and historical background to Proust's mnemonic peregrinations goes some way to explaining Benjamin's interest in him and the labour he expended in translating him, for Benjamin too is concerned to rescue the play of *fortuna* found in involuntary memory from its modern fate in an increasingly atrophied mode of experience. He believes that to achieve a renewal of experience would mean primarily to alter and renew the experience of time, and whilst the temporal facets of the voluntary and the involuntary memory may reflect and recapitulate that atrophy they also point beyond it. This deterioration of experience is often expressed by Benjamin in terms of the predominance of the twin temporalities of progress and repetition, temporalities which, under modern conditions of production come to take on the character of second nature, threatening to stifle anything unpredictable before it is even noticed. Like Freud, Benjamin sees an inverse relation between recollection and repetition: where there is repetition the past remains uncognised and unmastered. Recollection therefore corresponds to a temporality significantly different from that in which progression and repetition occur, and Proustian involuntary memory exemplifies this difference both in terms of its openness to chance, to the unpredictable, and by virtue of its cognitive aspect, the understanding it affords of a previously 'lost' past. As such it contains resources



which may work against repetition, offering a renewal of time and, by implication, of experience.

In relinquishing the attempt to capture the past 'as it really was' Proustian memory implies a conception of time not as homogeneous and empty but as structured according to the significance of a particular reminiscence. Paying no heed to temporal sequence, the involuntary memory dislodges isolated events from the ground in which they have become sedimented and, in bringing them into the present, renews and activates them: 'this very concentration in which things that normally fade and slumber consume themselves in a flash is called rejuvenation'.<sup>8</sup> For Benjamin the value of Proust's project lies not simply in the immense labour of voluntary remembrance which it undertakes - this is secondary - but in the fact that by showing the enduring vivacity of past impressions in involuntary reminiscence it highlights the past's latent actuality. Involuntary memory provides a means for engaging with the past which is not restricted to the form in which that past has been consciously transmitted to the present, but on the contrary allows a unique engagement with events which may have become obscured or effaced in that act of handing-on. That methodological principle by which a hitherto concealed or forgotten past is made present is adopted by Benjamin for his own 'theory of the knowledge of history' as a means both of underlining the incomplete character of the past and of drawing-out the consequent affinities between past and present. Involuntary memory represents in psychological terms what a non-realist articulation of the past might look like in historical terms. It is no coincidence therefore that the 'moments' and 'discontinuities' which Benjamin mobilises in his own (highly Proustian) memoirs are just those which are theorised in his critical historiography.

Whilst Benjamin, drawing upon Reik's terms, characterises Proust's involuntary and voluntary memory as respectively 'conservative' and 'destructive', it can be seen that the involuntary also contains a destructive side. This is evident in the way it redemptively transforms the past (Benjamin elsewhere notes destruction's 'rejuvenating' quality<sup>9</sup>) and in the process undermines the past's illusory continuity,

---

<sup>8</sup> GS 2, p. 320; 'The Image of Proust' in *Illuminations*, p. 211.

<sup>9</sup> GS 4, p. 397; 'The Destructive Character' in *One-Way Street & Other Writings*, p. 157.



the apparent homogeneity of temporal sequence. There are critical resources contained within Proust's privilege of involuntary memory which exceed the individualism of Proust's own project, resources which may be employed for the end of a radical encounter with the historical past, allowing previously hidden historical phenomena to be uncovered.

The image of the past that flares up in the now of its recognizability...resembles the images of one's own past that line up at a moment of danger. These images come involuntarily. Historiography [*Historie*] in the strict sense is thus an image taken from the involuntary memory [*Eingedenken*], an image that suddenly presents itself to the subject of history at the moment of danger....What occurs to the involuntary memory is - and this distinguishes it from voluntary memory - never a course of events but solely an image.<sup>10</sup>

This formulation is significant not only for the privilege given to the 'image' as the form taken by the involuntary reminiscence, but also for the difficulty it raises concerning that memory's content. The difficulty, and it is one which Benjamin immediately recognised, is the arbitrary nature of the reminiscences which memory typically conjures up. Can such memories generate a deeper knowledge of the past merely by virtue of being involuntary? The answer is surely no, and it is here that the involuntary, whilst providing many resources for articulating a new form of historical memory, proves by itself inadequate. Here the project of a destruction of the past must be augmented by means of a methodological principle which can be applied with greater precision - that of construction. Both construction and destruction will prove essential for the mode of historical knowledge which is sought here.

### The Constructive Character of Memory

---

<sup>10</sup> GS 1, p. 1243.

'Historical materialism' according to Benjamin, 'presents a specific and unique engagement [*Erfahrung*] with the past.' It does so, he argues, by means of an 'act of construction'.<sup>11</sup> That history is to be not merely recorded but *constructed* is an idea that runs throughout Benjamin's work. In the earliest essays this entails the representation of history in its messianic 'state of fulfilment [*Vollkommenheit*]', from which follows an 'historical task' of 'liberating, through understanding, the forms of the future from their distortions in the present'.<sup>12</sup> In his work from the 1920s and 1930s he understands construction as a form of 'unmasking' (*Entlarvung*), drawing upon the aesthetic techniques of both surrealism and Brechtian 'epic theatre'.<sup>13</sup> The principle of construction here is that of montage, the juxtaposition of past and present in the cause of defamiliarising or estranging that present from itself. The *Passagen-Werk* theorises and practices a form of construction which involves 'carrying the montage principle over into history. Building up the large structures out of the smallest, precisely fashioned structural elements. Detecting the crystal of the total event in the analysis of the simple, individual moment'.<sup>14</sup> In the theses 'On the Concept of History' the idea of construction as unmasking is taken further, and the task of history now seen as a critical exposure of the exclusive manner in which the historical object is constituted. The historical task is now 'not only to give the oppressed access to tradition, but also to create it',<sup>15</sup> to configure historiography in an inclusive rather than an exclusive way.

When Benjamin stresses that such a construction of the historical past needs to be distinguished from 'reconstruction' because "'reconstruction' by means of empathy is one-sided",<sup>16</sup> he links the constructive principle to a critique of historical science. His comments are directed against Dilthey's belief that re-creation of the past is possible because of, and only through, *empathy*.<sup>17</sup> Implicitly he shows that Dilthey's concept of empathy is a normative rather than a descriptive category. In the case of

---

<sup>11</sup> GS 2, p. 468; 'Edward Fuchs, Collector and Historian' in *One-Way Street*, p. 352

<sup>12</sup> GS 2, p. 75.

<sup>13</sup> GS 2, p. 384; 'A Short History of Photography' in *One-Way Street*, p. 255.

<sup>14</sup> GS 5, p. 575 (N2, 6); 'Konvolut 'N'', p. 48 (amended).

<sup>15</sup> GS 1, p. 1246.

<sup>16</sup> GS 5, p. 587 (N7, 6); 'Konvolut 'N'', p. 60.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Wilhelm Dilthey, 'Drafts for a Critique of Historical Reason' in H. P. Rickman (ed.), *Wilhelm Dilthey: Selected Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), pp. 226-8.



historiography, empathy all too easily amounts to empathy with a history from which many have been effectively erased. If it would be more than a mere 'apologia'<sup>18</sup> historiography must instead be simultaneously creative (that is, 'constructive') and refusing (or 'destructive'). On the one hand destruction is necessary in order to disturb the apparently closed or complete nature of what is past and to expose the complicitous manner in which history and tradition are handed-on. The destructive impetus 'is to be understood as a reaction to a constellation of dangers that threatens both that which is being transmitted and those to whom it is transmitted.'<sup>19</sup> On the other hand construction is essential because any engagement with history which was solely destructive would amount to a contradiction in terms: 'a no-saying form of historical knowledge is meaningless.'<sup>20</sup> Destruction explodes the continuum of received history so that it may then be constructed in a way that reveals history's true character, and universal claims can be predicated of it. 'The destructive or critical impetus in materialist historiography comes into play in that blasting apart of historical continuity which allows the historical object to constitute itself.'<sup>21</sup> It is a necessary but not a sufficient criterion of historical knowledge; only a combination of the destructive and constructive principles fulfils this criterion.

If the historical object is to be blasted out of the continuum of the historical process, it is because the monadological structure of the object demands it. This structure only becomes evident once the object has been blasted free. And it becomes evident precisely in the form of the historical argument which makes up the inside (and, as it were, the bowels) of the historical object, and into which all the powers [*Kräfte*] and interests [*Interessen*] enter on reduced scale. The historical object by virtue of its monadological structure, discovers within itself its own fore-history [*Vorgeschichte*] and after-history [*Nachgeschichte*].<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> GS 5, p. 592 (N9a, 5); 'Konvolut 'N'', p. 64.

<sup>19</sup> GS 5, p. 594-5 (N10a, 2); 'Konvolut 'N'', p. 66-7.

<sup>20</sup> GS 3, p. 265.

<sup>21</sup> GS 5, p. 594 (N10a, 1); 'Konvolut 'N'', p. 66.

<sup>22</sup> GS 5, p. 594 (N10, 3); 'Konvolut 'N'', p. 66 (amended).

This destructive blasting of an object from its context serves as a prelude to the task of constructing history in a way which makes visible the powers and interests structuring it. It is only then that the true character of the historical object can appear. 'Sundering truth from falsehood is the goal of the materialist method, not its point of departure. In other words, its point of departure is the object riddled with error, with  $\delta\omicron\xi\alpha$ . The distinctions with which the materialist method, discriminative from the outset, starts are distinctions within this highly mixed object, and it cannot present this object as mixed or uncritical enough.'<sup>23</sup> History, more than any other object of philosophical study, is riddled with untruth, with the conjecture or opinion which Socrates understood to denote incipient knowledge. The materialist method does not simply introduce its own truths in stark opposition to this error-ridden and confused (*gemischten*) object but proceeds, as the reference to Socrates implies, in a dialectical manner. Benjamin stresses not materialism's truth-content but its demystifying character, its force as a recurring questioning of untruth: 'Historical knowledge of the truth is only possible as the transcendence of illusion [*Aufhebung des Scheins*]'.<sup>24</sup>

The constructive moment in this critical engagement with history forms the central methodological principle of Benjamin's great uncompleted project of the 1930s, the *Passagen-Werk*. Indeed he suggests that 'it has the same significance for this book as the philosopher's stone has for alchemy.'<sup>25</sup> The particular form which it takes in this work involves techniques borrowed from both psychoanalysis and the aesthetic use of psychoanalytic theory in surrealism and dada. Here construction entails surrealistically juxtaposing past and present in the cause of estrangement, so transcending the illusions which pervade naive apprehensions of the historical object. As the use of surrealism (and its methodological antecedent in psychoanalysis implies), the principle of construction aims to work upon the memory; through a montage of historical images it attempts to elicit a shock-like encounter with the past which may serve to defamiliarise the present.

Both the methodological principles of destruction and construction can be seen to make use of specific characteristics of memory, destruction mobilising the

---

<sup>23</sup> GS 1, p. 1160; *Charles Baudelaire*, p. 103.

<sup>24</sup> GS 5, p. 1034.

<sup>25</sup> GS 5, p. 1139.



heterogeneous, construction the imaginative character of memory.<sup>26</sup> Much of Benjamin's critical practice flows from the recognition that memory constructs the past in the same movement as it destroys its linear form. Where destruction isolates the historical object from its context, construction imaginatively draws out the massive wealth of past material locked up within it, searching for the trace of the universal contained therein: Benjamin describes this imaginative faculty as 'the gift of interpolating into the infinitely small, of inventing, for every intensity, an extensiveness to contain its new, compressed fullness.'<sup>27</sup>

That memory exhibits an imaginative rather than a straightforwardly repetitive relation to the past impinges upon the way history (as itself a form of memory) is apprehended. In the methodological 'preface' to the *Passagen-Werk* Benjamin stresses the need 'to contrast the theory of history with Grillparzer's comment...: "To read into the future is difficult, but to see *purely* into the past is even more so: I say *purely*, meaning without clouding that retrospective gaze with everything that has happened in the meantime." The "purity" of the gaze is not so much difficult as impossible to attain.'<sup>28</sup> The presentation of the historical object in its most 'mixed' and error-ridden form undermines any desire for historiographical purity, any naive attempt to bracket-out the present from the apprehension of the past.

The difficulty Benjamin's point raises is that his own avowedly impure method risks falsifying the past even in the attempt to demystify it. Once realist assumptions concerning memory are abandoned, once it is recognised that the 'weaving' of memory is not simple embellishment but is the *fabrication* of the past, then the yardstick by which the accuracy of historical record, testimony, etc., are measured, becomes less clear. This can be understood in two ways - as a liberation from a historiographical will to truth or, in less sanguine terms, as a necessary conflict which structures historical knowledge as much as history itself. Some critics have affirmatively drawn the former conclusion, arguing that in Benjamin remembrance

---

<sup>26</sup> On the imaginative moment in memory, this time in the work of Herbert Marcuse, see Martin Jay, 'Reflections on Marcuse's Theory of Remembrance' in Robert Pippin, Andrew Feenberg & Charles P. Webel (eds.), *Marcuse: Critical Theory and the Promise of Utopia* (London: Macmillan, 1988) pp. 29-46.

<sup>27</sup> GS 4, p. 117; 'One-Way Street' in *One-Way Street & Other Writings*, op. cit., p. 75.

<sup>28</sup> GS 5, p. 587 (N7, 5); 'Konvolut 'N'', p. 59.

approaches 'the free-play of interpretation'.<sup>29</sup> But in fact it can be shown that the latter view is closer to Benjamin's own. The stakes in this are high. In historical study, to suspend judgement on competing accounts of the past is often not only inadequate but dangerous; it is often vital that accurate history can be distinguished from 'revisionism'. Benjamin's own historiographical technique anticipates the potential for (often politically motivated) rewritings of the past, and seeks to counter them on strong epistemological grounds. That he acknowledges the danger courted by his anti-realism is clear from the various specifications made to the constructive method. He is keen to stress that the basis upon which construction takes place is not arbitrary, that it need not succumb, as his own genealogical approach might imply, to the play of perspectives. This is so because memory can confer its own objectivity on the past; this objectivity, however, is to be understood as a result, not a presupposition of, its critical application. It is this which distinguishes the truth value of Benjamin's method from that of realism. Even memory in what appears its most intensely personal and subjective form can confer objectivity on the past: 'memory issues strict weaving regulations', as the Proust essay puts it.<sup>30</sup> The consonance with the use of constructions in psychoanalysis is evident. There is a sense in which, like Freud, Benjamin uses mnemonic constructions to free energies 'pathologically' blocked by a particular sedimentation of the past. In both cases the character of the memory induced is the measure of construction's truthfulness. The use of constructions in analysis is a finely crafted art, and those of the historian even more so: materialist historiography 'does not choose its objects casually...its precautions are more extensive, its occurrences more essential'.<sup>31</sup> When applied to images of the historical past the ultimate test of mnemonic juxtapositions is again a practical one: whether by conjuring up startling images of history they can induce the desired estrangement of the present from itself, whether they can place the present in a critical condition. 'The

---

<sup>29</sup> Ned Lukacher, *Primal Scenes: Literature, Philosophy, Psychoanalysis* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1986) p. 275; cf. Carol Jacobs, *The Dissimulating Harmony: The Image of Interpretation in Nietzsche, Rilke, Artaud, & Benjamin* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978). For a cogent critique of Jacobs see Irving Wohlfarth, 'Walter Benjamin's *Image of Interpretation*', *New German Critique* 17 (Spring 1979) pp. 70-98.

<sup>30</sup> GS 2, p. 312; 'The Image of Proust' in *Illuminations*, p. 203.

<sup>31</sup> GS 5, p. 594 (N10a, 1); 'Konvolut 'N'', p. 66.



dialectical interpenetration and actualisation [*Vergegenwärtigung*] of past contexts is a test of the truth of present action'.<sup>32</sup>

### Construction as Philosophy of History

Although a mix of modernist and avant-garde concerns inform this historiographical method, its general tenor is that of an older tradition of thought. Benjamin's call for a construction of history can be seen as an attempt to rescue something of the discredited universal histories of the French Enlightenment and German Idealism by returning to their theological roots in *Heilsgeschichte* or 'redemptive history'.<sup>33</sup> He makes this explicit in the notes to the 'Theses' by arguing for a qualified defence of universal history: 'not every universal history need be reactionary. Universal history *without* a constructive principle is, though. The constructive principle of universal history makes possible the representation of the universal in the partial. It is, in other words, monadological. It exists in redemptive history [*Heilsgeschichte*].'<sup>34</sup> For Benjamin, Enlightenment universal history became reactionary when it sought to cover over its theological origins, when (as in Kant's *Religion Within the Bounds of Reason Alone*) it defined itself in opposition to 'messianism', to the eschatological strand in Judaism and Christianity.<sup>35</sup> In this context the messianic or prophetic concept of history serves as a rejoinder to the universal histories of the Enlightenment

---

<sup>32</sup> GS 5, p. 1026-7 (O°, 5).

<sup>33</sup> Benjamin assumes the same lineage of universal history proposed by Karl Löwith in his *Meaning in History: Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949). For a critique of Löwith's theory of 'secularisation', a critique which can with some plausibility be extended to encompass Benjamin, see Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimation of the Modern Age* trans. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge, MA & London: MIT Press, 1983). A similarly inspired critique, which questions more directly Benjamin's own view of secularisation can be found in Hannah Arendt, 'The Concept of History', *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993).

<sup>34</sup> GS 1, p. 1234.

<sup>35</sup> Kant distinguishes the 'moral' view of history from 'messianism' and 'chiliasm', aspects of a 'holy history [*heilige Geschichte*]' which 'in no way applies to us practically'. [*Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der blossen Vernunft, Werke* ed. Königlich Preußischen Akademie der Wissenschaften (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1968), vol. VI, p. 136, n.; trans. *Religion Within the Bounds of Reason Alone*, Theodore M. Greene & Hoyt H. Hudson (New York & Evanston: Harper & Row, 1960), p. 127.]



by reintroducing a redemptive moment to what is an otherwise boundless faith in providence and progress. Unlike Kant's philosophy of history, whose universal claims depend not only ethically but epistemologically upon postulates and regulative ideas,<sup>36</sup> a monadological view of history allows universal claims to be made at any point because each historical moment contains a representation of the whole. Further, redemptive history augments the monadological view of time by projecting the collation and redemption of these partial representations in the totality. Benjamin's dispute with the philosophy of history is not over fundamentals (over whether it is possible as a field of study) but simply over the manner in which historical universals are to be apprehended. The 'critique of universal history',<sup>37</sup> consistent with Benjamin's definition of a 'true criticism' which 'does not destroy its object' but merely 'exposes its inner nature',<sup>38</sup> entails not the abandonment of this Enlightenment approach but merely the recovery of its original sense. 'The genuine concept of universal history,' he writes, 'is a messianic one'.<sup>39</sup> It is defensible only on the condition that it be understood redemptively rather than progressively. Minus this concept of redemption, the past is, in Benjamin's words, 'nothing more than a jumbled collection of facts [*Geschichtsklitterung*].'<sup>40</sup> To abandon universal history is to abandon the hope of making anything other than regional, contingent and ultimately insignificant claims concerning history. Not that redemption itself thereby amounts to a regulative idea, a principle of thought which, whilst necessary, lacks any historical actuality. On the contrary, redemption is prefigured *within* history in the form of

---

<sup>36</sup> Kant, 'Idea for a Universal History With a Cosmopolitan Intent' in *On History* ed. Lewis White Beck, trans. Robert E. Anchor, Lewis White Beck & Emil Fackenheim (Indianapolis & New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1963), p. 25; cf. 'Conjectural Beginning of Human History' *ibid.*, p. 68, 'Perpetual Peace', *ibid.*, p.106.

<sup>37</sup> GS 1, p. 1239.

<sup>38</sup> *Briefe*, p. 132; *Correspondence*, p. 84.

<sup>39</sup> GS 5, p. 608 (N18, 3); 'Konvolut 'N'', p. 80. This is to imply that there is less of a divide than would first appear between Benjamin's destruction of universal history and Adorno's programmatic demand that 'universal history must be constructed [*konstruieren*] and denied' [Theodor Adorno, *Negativ Dialektik, Gesammelte Schriften*, op. cit., vol. 6, p. 314; *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (London: Routledge, 1973), p. 320]. A reading which stresses the divergence between these two approaches to history can be found in Gillian Rose, 'Walter Benjamin: Out of the Sources of Modern Judaism' in *Judaism and Modernity: Philosophical Essays*, op. cit., p. 207.

<sup>40</sup> GS 1, p. 1245.

messianic 'now-times', moments which give historical time its already heterogeneous structure.

Comments from the conclusion to the *exposé* of the *Passagen-Werk* explain further Benjamin's idiosyncratic conception of universal history: 'Each epoch not merely dreams the next but also, in dreaming, strives toward the moment of awakening. It bears its end within itself and unfolds itself - as Hegel already saw - with cunning.'<sup>41</sup> The 'striving' (*drängen*) mentioned here and invoked in the same breath as Hegel's 'cunning of reason' is indebted in philosophical terms less to Hegelian philosophy of history than to Leibnizian metaphysics. To say that the constructive principle of universal history is monadological means to say firstly that the ~~set~~ of relation which exists between historical particular and historical universal is to be understood as that of monad to totality, and secondly that history exhibits a characteristic entelechy, a dynamic by which that totality strives towards its own complete expression. Monadology is a theory both of relation and of process, of temporality. It is in just these Leibnizian terms that Benjamin understands the capacity of each particular 'moment' of historical time to express something of history's 'final condition',<sup>42</sup> to proleptically represent the collected or re-collected whole of history. The archetype for this monadology is, he notes, 'holy' or redemptive history, and Benjamin adopts elements of this history for his own constructive method: the Christian motif of 'apocatastasis'<sup>43</sup> - the gathering together of past time - and the notion of 'last judgment'<sup>44</sup> - the redemption of that past.

Benjamin's use of monadology is intended to augment the epistemological aspirations of universal history with the theological aspirations which that approach discarded, and to ally this new combination to a critical historiographical practice. His aim is to realise at the level of a critical interrogation of historical sources both the redemptive potential which theology found in history and the totalising scope of the philosophy of history. By augmenting the one with the other he aims to achieve a comprehension of history which does not simply rest upon a regulative idea, or merely

---

<sup>41</sup> GS 5, p. 59; *Charles Baudelaire*, p. 176.

<sup>42</sup> GS 2, p. 75.

<sup>43</sup> GS 5, p. 573 (N1a, 3); 'Konvolut 'N'', p. 46.

<sup>44</sup> GS 1, p. 1245.



*assumes* (whether in terms of providence or progress) history's meaningfulness. His belief is that the principle of historical finitude involved in eschatology and subsequently diluted by universal history is in fact the epistemological buttress which those universal claims require, and that resuscitating this principle in turn undermines the very idea of progress in terms of which those claims are typically expressed. Undeniably, Benjamin's move here involves a revaluation of the eschatology which the philosophy of history sought to transcend, and that consequently his formulations carry connotations of finality and closure unwelcome to critical philosophy (and even less welcome <sup>to</sup> those who have abandoned the philosophy of history altogether).<sup>45</sup> But it is important to note the particular qualifications ascribed to the redemptive dynamic he finds in history and the 'atheological' way in which these eschatological and apocalyptic motifs are employed. Benjamin stresses that his appropriation of Christian apocalypse is to be understood *monadologically*. This sheds light on his 'minor methodological recommendation' that the destructive ('negative') and constructive ('positive') principles have to proceed in tandem '*ad infinitum* until the entire past has been brought into the present in an historical *apocatastasis*.'<sup>46</sup> The apparent incongruity between the infinity of this historical task and its consummative outcome is explained by the monadological character of *Heilsgeschichte*. The infinite invoked here must be construed not as extensive (thus always retreating, never achieved) but as that intensive infinite of which Leibniz wrote and which was understood to be present within the most simple, elemental phenomena. Such an infinite is, by implication, conceivable and attainable, but - crucially - only by thought assuming a standpoint normally reserved for the divine. In Benjamin's hands universal history aspires to this standpoint. Reservations concerning the accent of closure in this rewriting of universal history are understandable. It often appears as if the use of theological concepts has substituted for one form of conceptual closure (that of deterministic homogeneous time) another (a postulating of history's fulfilment and termination),

---

<sup>45</sup> On the difference between Benjamin's 'Theses' and theories of 'posthistory' see Lutz Niethammer, *Posthistoire: Has History Come to an End?*, trans. Patrick Camiller (London: Verso, 1992), Ch. 6.

<sup>46</sup> GS 5, p. 573 (N1a, 3); 'Konvolut 'N'', p. 46 (amended). On the discrepancy between the 'renewal' implied by the *ad infinitum* and the 'finality' implied by *apocatastasis* see Andrew Benjamin, 'Time and Task: Benjamin and Heidegger Showing the Present' in Andrew Benjamin & Peter Osborne (eds.), *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy: Destruction and Experience*, op. cit., p. 235.



and that as a result the constructive principle merely reinstates what the destructive was designed to dispel. What is at stake in this question of openness and closure, though? It is surely a question of the human action enabled or compromised by the conception of history at issue. But this is also a central concern of Benjamin's, the question of whether a certain conception of history is conducive to resignation or to action. Turning the tables on this criticism however, he asks whether there is not a greater closure involved in assuming historical time to be infinitely extended, in assuming history to be interminable.

The space which a particular conception of historical time either opens-up or closes-off is the space of politics, of political action and intervention. It is not surprising therefore that the philosophical statements of the destructive and constructive method also include reflections upon its political intentions and outcomes. Here the double sense of the word 'destruction' serves Benjamin well as he shifts between philosophical and political reflection. In the notes to the 'Theses' he writes of messianic time as

the characteristic revolutionary chance each historical moment carves out of the political situation....In reality there is not one moment that is not accompanied by *its* revolutionary chance....It finds confirmation in the power of the moment to unlock a particular, hitherto locked chamber of the past. Entry into this chamber strictly coincides with political action; and it is through the former that the latter presents itself, however destructively, as messianic.<sup>47</sup>

Political action is here expressed in terms of a redemptive uncovering of a seemingly closed past, a destructive act of remembrance. Only by reactivating a past which had seemed complete does political praxis meet the criterion of being messianic. Like Marxian 'practical-critical activity' Benjamin's 'political action' realises in secular form powers stored up in the theological idea.<sup>48</sup> It is capable of creating messianic

---

<sup>47</sup> GS 1, p. 1231.

<sup>48</sup> The formulations on politics in Benjamin's late work recall the messianic and apocalyptic element he finds in German Romanticism. In his doctoral dissertation Benjamin cites Schlegel's *Athenaeum*

moments and, in much the same way as a critically applied historiography, of redeeming the past: here lies 'a connection between historiography and politics which is identical to the theological link between remembrance and redemption.'<sup>49</sup>

This identity between politicised historiography and redemptive memory eloquently expresses the project of Benjamin's later work, and makes sense of its apparently contradictory impulses. Rather than resting upon exclusively theological assumptions, as Horkheimer objected, Benjamin's view of the openness of the past can be compared to an argument which Nietzsche had already proposed in the *Genealogy of Morals* where he urged the historian to recognise that 'everything that exists, no matter what its origin, is periodically reinterpreted by those in power in terms of fresh intentions'. The past, says Nietzsche, is subject to 'reinterpretation, rearrangement, in the course of which the earlier meaning and purpose are necessarily either obscured or lost.'<sup>50</sup> Nietzsche's emphasis on the power structuring this process of 'reinterpretation' prefigures in important <sup>respects</sup> Benjamin's own view of the conflictual character of the historical object, and highlights the stakes involved in wresting historical interpretation away from its dominant configuration. Equally, it gestures towards the political dimension of claims concerning the historical past.

It is the characteristic latency of the historical object which allows for the past's being 'periodically reinterpreted' (Nietzsche) or 'redeemed' (Benjamin). But it is remembrance, whether in the form of historiographical practice constructing dialectical images or the destructive power of political action unlocking a seemingly closed past, which effects this redemption. Benjamin's conception of historical time is inextricably linked to his account of memory, and *vice versa*. This conception of history is *open* because the historical object it conceptualises is itself understood to be radically open, not least because of the redemptive effect which historical knowledge itself is able to confer. As his stress upon the interrelation of historical knowledge and its object indicates, such claims are to be understood as epistemological, they concern

---

*Fragment 222*: 'The revolutionary desire to realize the Kingdom of God on earth is the elastic point of progressive culture and the beginning of modern history. Whatever has no relation to the kingdom of God is of strictly secondary importance in it.' (GS 1, p. 12 n. 3).

<sup>49</sup> GS 1, p. 1248.

<sup>50</sup> Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals* trans. Francis Golffing (New York: Doubleday, 1956), p. 209.



the relation between apprehending subject and an object of knowledge, they represent a 'theory of the knowledge of history'. The fact that they are not expressed as ontological claims is significant and clarifies the difference between Benjamin's approach to history and that of Heidegger, whom Benjamin explicitly counters on this question. At one point in 'Konvolut 'N'' he mentions Heidegger's notion of *Geschichtlichkeit*, or 'historicality', 'the kind of being which belongs to the historical', and notes that it is itself *ahistorical*.<sup>51</sup> Implicitly he suggests that Heidegger's question 'what is it to be primordially historical?' approaches things the wrong way, since the character of historical time cannot be understood in isolation from the form time itself assumes in particular social and historical contexts. This point conceals a more fundamental philosophical divergence, though, that for Benjamin a more genuine account of historical time is to be found by means of resources already present within the philosophy of history and through just that process of objectification and conceptualisation which fundamental ontology seeks to overcome.

The difference between the two thinkers is in part a divergent relation to their common philosophical background. Benjamin does not wish to completely relinquish that 'historiology' by which philosophy, particularly in its neo-Kantian manifestation, sought to establish the grounds of historical knowledge. Whereas Heidegger claims to have broken with *Erkenntniskritik* by means of ontology Benjamin seeks instead to take his neo-Kantian sources and radicalise them by acknowledging the social or 'material' determinations of the historical object which historiography had omitted. Consequently his own epistemological technique of construction looks to the 'powers' and 'interests' inscribed in that object which come to implicate the subject of historical knowledge too. This materialistically-broadened epistemology allows insight into the conflictual or contradictory character of both the historical object and

---

<sup>51</sup> GS 5, p. 577 (N3, 1); 'Konvolut 'N'', p. 50. On 'historicality' see Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* trans. John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1962), p. 427-8. Discussion of the similarities and differences between the two thinkers is to be found in Howard Caygill, 'Benjamin, Heidegger and the Destruction of Tradition' and Andrew Benjamin 'Time and Task: Benjamin and Heidegger Showing the Present', both in Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne (eds.), *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy*, op. cit.



the historical subject, the power operating in historical interpretation as much as in the dynamic of historical development.

Recognition of this conflict gives rise to a view of the openness or incompleteness not only of history but of historical knowledge as well. Incompleteness pertains not just to the 'historical object' but just as much to the act of its apprehension. The same point can be expressed in another way: the preposition in Benjamin's 'theory of the knowledge of history' is not to be taken as implying an ~~an~~ external engagement between historian and object. On the contrary, historiography must be understood as implicated in that history which it would analyse such that it is obliged to expose at a conceptual level the conflict it reports at the level of empirical history. From this follow crucial insights. That the historical object is essentially a site of conflict means that there can never be the reassurance that history is 'on one's side'. Alongside the redemptive capacity of memory therefore stands an 'infernal'<sup>52</sup> aspect; both qualities derive from the same latency for re-constitution inherent in the past itself. Nietzsche is surely correct in underlining the 'power' involved in this 'periodic re-interpretation' of the past; wrong in seeing no *form* or *relation* to this power. Recognition of form is what makes Benjamin in the last instance a Marxist rather than a Nietzschean. Cognizance of the form of perspectives gives the lie to perspectivism. Benjamin's attempt to 'brush history against the grain' implies an understanding that the uncritical basis of much historiography, has a tendency to consolidate a particular historical interest. A critical historiography, like a 'critical theory', cannot but take up its own allegiance.<sup>53</sup>

All of which makes comprehensible one particular sentence from the sixth of the 'Theses', a phrase which can now be rendered in full. 'To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognise it 'the way it really was'. It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger'.<sup>54</sup> What is opposed to the homogeneous time in which historiographical realism has purchase is the temporality

---

<sup>52</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 1974), p. 166.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. Max Horkheimer, 'Traditional and Critical Theory', in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays* trans. Matthew J. O'Connell et al (New York: Herder & Herder, 1972), an essay with which Benjamin was familiar (GS 5, p. 1300).

<sup>54</sup> GS 1, p. 695; 'Theses' in *Illuminations*, p. 255.

and cognitive characteristics of memory. To articulate the past historically means to grasp it as a memory capable of retroactively altering the past. The moment of danger refers both to the uncritical way in which the past, history, tradition is handed down to the present, and the opportunity opened up by the revisability or latency of the past, a destructive and redemptive opportunity. But this latency which allows for the past's subsequent redemption is also that which allows for an 'infernal' appropriation in which past struggles are written out: 'even the dead' are thereby exposed to a posthumous historical and historiographical defeat. The openness of the historical object, history's *imperfection*, always entails this danger, a danger which threatens both historian and historical subject: 'in every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it.'<sup>55</sup>

### Redeeming Progress

It is not only the epistemological aims of universal history which Benjamin wishes to retain but also the methodological principle of progress, something which for Kant was a precondition for the very possibility of a universal history, the guiding thread which comprehends the seemingly random aggregate of historical phenomena.<sup>56</sup> A common misconception is that the Benjamin's 'critique of universal history' unequivocally indicts the idea of progress and with it the hope that history might develop in anything other than a repetitive manner.<sup>57</sup> The point is plausible in so far as it recognises the negative evaluation he gives to the idea of historical novelty, the way in which he sees novelty itself *produced* as an historical illusion, as a mythical experience of time at the heart of enlightened modernity. That novelty was perfectly compatible with the persistence and repetition of historical conditions was one insight of Benjamin's own dialectic of enlightenment: 'The sensation of the newest, the most modern is in fact just as much a dream form of events as the eternal return of the

---

<sup>55</sup> GS 1, p. 695; 'Theses' in *Illuminations*, p. 255.

<sup>56</sup> Kant, 'Idea for a Universal History With a Cosmopolitan Intent' in *On History*, op. cit., p. 11.

<sup>57</sup> According to Adorno, 'Benjamin teaches' that 'the concept of universal history cannot be saved'. [Adorno, 'Progress' in G. Smith (ed.), *Benjamin: Philosophy, Aesthetics, History*, op. cit., p. 86].



same'.<sup>58</sup> But the presence of a spurious novelty does not for Benjamin rule out the possibility both of a different type of progress and that history might develop in a qualitatively new way. His own concept of the 'truly new' reflects this by standing in just the same relation to novelty as the messianic does to progress traditionally conceived. It consists in the *interruption* of that empty continuum in which both novelty and progress become credible as conceptions of time. Progress 'does not reside in the continuity of temporal succession, but rather in its moments of interference: where the truly new first makes itself felt, as sober as the dawn'.<sup>59</sup> Progress as normally conceived omits the experience of the messianic, the moments of 'interference' which punctuate and break up homogeneous time. What Kant called the 'regular movement of history' turns out to be an irregular and erratic movement.

The attempt to develop an idea of progress grounded in the 'truly new' is an attempt to defamiliarise the present without succumbing to a search for an illusory novelty. But the 'truly new' as a dialectical third opposed to both repetition and novelty encounters a difficulty of how it is to be recognised as new. What would progress look like were it to be truly new? A new unmediated by tradition or past experience or incapable of being subsumed under existing conceptual schemas would be literally incomprehensible. This is where the phenomenon of remembrance can serve as a precedent for that renewal or rejuvenation of the experience of time which Benjamin seeks, and, by implication, for a critical philosophy of history. If existing philosophy of history rests upon 'the concept of the historical progress of mankind', a concept which in turn 'cannot be sundered from the concept of its progression through a homogeneous empty time',<sup>60</sup> then a critical philosophy of history can draw resources from a very different experience of time, one 'neither homogeneous not empty'<sup>61</sup> which exists in remembrance. It is remembrance which offers an experience of time which effects not a repetition of the past but a reworking of it, and in so doing brings to light with a more intense actuality something unacknowledged and hitherto never fully experienced: remembrance can introduce the 'truly new' into history.

---

<sup>58</sup> GS 5, p. 1023 (M°,14).

<sup>59</sup> GS 5, p. 593 (N9a, 7); 'Konvolut 'N'', p. 65.

<sup>60</sup> GS 1, p. 701; 'Theses' in *Illuminations*, p. 261.

<sup>61</sup> GS 1, p. 704; 'Theses' in *Illuminations*, p. 264 (amended).



What is unfamiliar is for Benjamin to be found nowhere else than in the past - a past reworked and reactivated, disinterred from the sediment in which it was originally laid down, a history 'brushed against the grain'.<sup>62</sup> The cognition of a real 'new' would require memory; it would of necessity be a *re-cognition*, understood as a transformation rather than a repetition of the original cognition. Thus one particular critic is correct when he notes that Benjamin 'twists the radical future-orientedness that is characteristic of modern times in general so far back around the axis of the now-time that it gets transposed into a yet more radical orientation towards the past. The anticipation of what is new in the future is realised only through remembering [*Eingedenken*] a past that has been suppressed.'<sup>63</sup>

This impinges not only upon how the critique of universal history is understood but also the nature of the remembrance which in turn grounds that critique. For instance it shows up the inadequacies of placing this concept of remembrance in a Platonic lineage, and rendering it as '*anamnesis*'.<sup>64</sup> It is important to contrast the dialectic of openness and completion in the notion of remembrance (*Eingedenken*) with the closure involved in taking *anamnesis* as a model of memory. *Anamnesis* is a doctrine of a self-sufficient, 'autarkic' past. It is recollection of a knowledge primordially and timelessly inscribed in the firmament, a sense retained in Jung's quasi-Platonism which postulates a 'collective unconscious' peopled by archetypes, a notion Benjamin indicts for 'assigning history a home (*Heimat*) in nature',<sup>65</sup> that is, for substituting the ostensibly innate for what is in fact acquired in experience. *Eingedenken* by contrast, recalls not a prehistory but instead marginalised historical phenomena. The doctrine of *anamnesis* is the paradigm of a realist memory: it says that one need only recall what one already knows,<sup>66</sup> and, since what is recalled is

---

<sup>62</sup> GS 1, p. 697; 'Theses' in *Illuminations*, p. 257.

<sup>63</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures* trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge: Polity, 1987) p. 12.

<sup>64</sup> See for instance Julian Roberts, *Walter Benjamin* (London: MacMillan, 1982) p. 118.

<sup>65</sup> GS 5, p. 595 (N11, 1); 'Konvolut 'N'', p. 67. Ernst Bloch argues that the doctrine of *anamnesis* 'provides reassuring evidence of complete similarity....it makes everything a gigantic *déjà vu*'. [Bloch interviewed by Michael Landmann in 'Talking with Ernst Bloch: Korcula, 1968', *Telos* 25 (Fall 1975) p. 178.] Bloch chooses to base his own concept of memory not upon Platonism but upon Aristotle's notion (taken from the *Poetics*) of *anagnorisis* or 'recognition', which he understands as a shock-like moment in which the past confronts us as if new. The affinities with Benjamin are clear.

<sup>66</sup> Plato, *Meno*, trans. W. K. C. Guthrie (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987), p. 130.

outwith experience, recollection assumes a peculiarly contemplative character. It is no coincidence that Plato's term does not appear in Benjamin's later work. The increasingly frequent invocation of *Eingedenken* and its corresponding privilege in his taxonomy of memory in Benjamin's works after 1929, follows a trajectory away from the apparently Platonic formulations of his own early work, for instance in the essays on language and the 'Prologue' to the *Trauerspiel* book. But one need not look only at this latter period to see his divergence from Plato; the Prologue already finds him wary of assimilating his own approach to that of contemplative *anamnesis*.<sup>67</sup> By the late work remembrance has come to stand for a dynamic act of contestation, both that between historian and historical object and of class against class. This dynamic and conflictual quality of remembrance is lost in a Platonic translation of Benjamin's concept.

Understanding the meaning of remembrance, its temporality and its function, explains in turn how it is able to perform the considerable labour of grounding a critically revitalised philosophy of history. Remembrance plays a double role in this rewriting of universal history, firstly as part of a methodology which aims to blast an object out of the continuum of history and thus to allow its construction in monadological form. Here an understanding of the simultaneously destructive and constructive character of memory explains much of the procedure of Benjamin's critical practice. Secondly the experiential characteristics of memory offer a paradigm for a temporality which is neither repetitive nor ahistorically novel, a temporality which in turn allows a new concept of progress to be formulated: progress as an event of interruption which itself redeems the past. An understanding of remembrance, both in terms of its epistemological characteristics (the 'destructive' or redemptive and the 'constructive' or imaginative) and its temporal attributes (structured, heterogeneous) allows a rewriting of universal history which rescues both the idea of progress and the principle of universality itself. A rescue through critique of the principles of universality and progress by which universal history was guided, stands at the basis of a renewed philosophy of history.

---

<sup>67</sup> GS 1, p. 217; *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: Verso, 1977), pp. 36-7.



This tells us something important about Benjamin's philosophical intent in the methodological works which have been the focus of this chapter - the Konvolut of the *Passagen-Werk* on the 'Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress [*Erkenntnistheoretisches, Theorie des Fortschritts*]' and the similarly inspired theses 'On the Concept of History'. As the title of Konvolut 'N' reveals, an examination of knowledge (*Erkenntnis*) and of progress forms a twin-pronged attack upon existing philosophy of history, but importantly, it is a critique which aims to salvage the systematic aims of that discipline and in turn to radicalise them, such that they might be employed for a critical historiography. It is significant therefore that in attacking the 'epic' viewpoint typical of the philosophy of history, Benjamin does not opt for an historiographical particularism which refuses to make inductions from individual historical phenomena. As will be argued more thoroughly in Chapter Four, his focus upon the fragment, the moment, the isolated event, aims monadologically towards the totality which each moment (however partially) expresses. Benjamin does not substitute a genealogy for the philosophy of history but opts instead to rewrite universal history in materialist terms.

The next chapter takes up the themes of the first two - the dialectic of openness and completion in Benjamin's conception of historical time and this critical defence of Enlightenment philosophy of history. It looks at the development of Benjamin's own conception of history out of a recurring engagement with Kantian philosophy of history and in particular the attempt made in neo-Kantian thought to fuse Kant's historical and moral writings. In the process it becomes clear that a view of the abstract openness of history is not by itself sufficient, and that it in fact raises serious problems, philosophically and politically. When one side of the equation of openness and completion is left out, important misconceptions concerning history arise. It is these which preoccupied Benjamin from his earliest to his very final work.



### III

## From Moral Task to Historical Task

### Introduction

In a letter from October 1917, written whilst at university in Bern, Switzerland, Benjamin tells his friend Gershom Scholem that it is his intention to write his doctoral thesis on Kant's philosophy of history. He reveals the circumstances and lines of thought which have led him to this topic:

The ultimate metaphysical dignity of a philosophical view that truly intends to be canonical will always manifest itself most clearly in its confrontation with history; in other words, the specific relationship of a philosophy with the true doctrine will appear most clearly in the philosophy of history; for this is where the subject of the historical evolution of knowledge for which doctrine is the catalyst will have to appear. Yet it would not be entirely out of the question for Kant's philosophy to be very undeveloped in this respect. Based on the silence that reigns over his philosophy of history, this is what you would have to expect.<sup>1</sup>

Benjamin's preparatory remarks highlight the difficulty inherent in the project from its outset: Kant's writings on history are not only textually separated from his major critical writings; no extended or systematic reflections upon history are to be found in any of the three *Critiques*. If at all, the nearest Kant comes to incorporating historical

---

<sup>1</sup> *Briefe*, p. 151; *Correspondence*, p. 98.

questions into the critical philosophy is to be found in the third *Critique*, the *Critique of Judgement*. Given this difficulty of allying the writings on history to the doctrinal works of the critical philosophy, Benjamin's recourse seems to be to read the one *out of the other*, to extrapolate a philosophy of history from the three *Critiques*. How would this be done? Two options seem available to him: to read a philosophy of history into the moral philosophy of the second *Critique*, the *Critique of Practical Reason*; or to see in the account of 'sensus communis' in the third *Critique* a philosophy of historical development. It should be noted that in neither case is Benjamin's goal fully realised - the fusion of the theoretical and the historical, an account of the 'historical evolution of knowledge'.

A few months later Benjamin again writes to Scholem of his project, relating that he intends to focus upon Kant's idea of the 'eternal task'. This theme comes not from the historical writings but from the second *Critique*. Benjamin explains: 'It is virtually impossible to gain any access to the philosophy of history using Kant's *historical* writings as a point of departure. It would be different if the point of departure were his ethics; even this is possible only within limits and Kant himself did not travel this path'.<sup>2</sup> Benjamin writes that his 'exaggerated expectations' concerning Kant's philosophy of history have 'met with disappointment'.<sup>3</sup> Kant's historical writings (Benjamin cites the *Ideas for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Intent* and *Perpetual Peace*) are 'less concerned with history than with certain historical constellations of ethical interest.' 'I find Kant's thoughts,' he writes in conclusion, 'entirely inappropriate as the starting point for, or as the actual study of, an independent treatise.'<sup>4</sup> In a letter from the following month Benjamin reports that any attempts to grapple with Kant will have to be postponed: 'the development of my philosophical ideas has reached a crucial stage.'<sup>5</sup>

When, shortly afterwards, this thesis plan was abandoned in favour of a study on the concept of art criticism in German Romanticism all that remained of the project on Kant and the philosophy of history was a series of fragments - 'The Infinite Task,' 'On

---

<sup>2</sup> *Briefe*, p. 176, *Correspondence*, p. 116.

<sup>3</sup> *Briefe*, p. 161, *Correspondence*, p. 105.

<sup>4</sup> *Briefe*, p. 161, *Correspondence*, p. 105.

<sup>5</sup> *Briefe*, p. 180, *Correspondence*, p. 119.



the Transcendental Method,' and 'Ambiguity of the Concept of the 'Infinite Task' in the Kantian School'.<sup>6</sup> The titles of these fragments suggest that Benjamin had indeed intended to raise the question of history in terms of practical reason, in terms of Kant's ethics: in so far as it is possible to reconstruct the intentions of the doctoral thesis, it seems that it would have entailed reading Kantian philosophy of history out of the second *Critique*. Correspondence from this period indicates, furthermore, that this encounter with history through the lens of ethics was very much mediated by his readings of the neo-Kantian philosopher Hermann Cohen. Benjamin was familiar with some of Cohen's major works, among them *Kant's Theory of Experience*, *Ethics of Pure Willing* and *Religion of Reason Out of the Sources of Judaism*, the latter a work published just after Benjamin abandoned his project on the philosophy of history but with which he subsequently became acquainted. Cohen's thought (particularly *Religion of Reason*) was crucial to Benjamin's engagement with Kant because it involved an attempt to reconcile concepts from the Judaic religion with Kantian philosophy and to demonstrate the fundamentally ethical content of both.

What will be argued in this chapter is that the uncompleted project of a critical engagement with Kant and the philosophy of history haunts the entire development of Benjamin's thinking, even (and especially) up to his final work 'On the Concept of History' where the notion of 'infinite progression', against which Benjamin's theoretical armature is aimed, figures as the historical and political instantiation of Kantian practical reason. As will become clear, it is not surprising that neo-Kantianism becomes the object of Benjamin's critique in the drafts to his final work, since it is in opposition to just this thinking (of which, it seems, Cohen is taken as representative) that Benjamin will expound his own conception of history. Whilst the influence of Cohen's rewriting of Kantian *theoretical* reason upon Benjamin has been noted (in particular upon the 'methodological' works such as the Prologue to the book on German *Trauerspiel*, and the early essay 'On the Programme of the Coming Philosophy'),<sup>7</sup> a similar but arguably more significant engagement with neo-Kantian

---

<sup>6</sup> GS 6, pp. 50-3.

<sup>7</sup> See for instance, Julian Roberts, *Walter Benjamin*, op. cit.; Bernd Witte, *Walter Benjamin: An Intellectual Biography*, op. cit.; Michael Löwy, *Redemption and Utopia: Jewish Libertarian Thought in Central Europe: A Study in Elective Affinity*, op. cit.. Michael Jennings makes some tentative links between Cohen's Judaic writings and Benjamin's *Trauerspielbuch* but without exploring the



*practical* reason has been largely overlooked. Because the relationship to the former is less critical, this has led to commentators typically assuming a more or less seamless continuity between Benjamin and the neo-Kantian philosophy in which he was schooled. It is the project of the present chapter to redress this imbalance: to highlight Benjamin's more ambivalent attitude to his philosophical heritage by examining his relation to Kantian and neo-Kantian *ethics*, or more precisely to the particular fusion of ethics, religion and history that one finds in Hermann Cohen. It is Cohen's interpretation of *Heilsgeschichte* or 'holy history' in terms of the postulates of Kantian practical reason which can be identified as the intended philosophical target of Benjamin's critique of history as infinite progression.

However, whilst noting Benjamin's concern, particularly in his final work, to <sup>argue</sup> critically and polemically ~~argue~~ against neo-Kantianism, it will become apparent that the severity of his criticisms belies the significant commonalities which exist between their two approaches to history. Agreeing with Cohen that history must be understood in moral terms, he differs only as to the outcome of thus 'applying ethics to history'.<sup>8</sup> At the same time Benjamin's attempt to distinguish his thinking from neo-Kantianism rehearses many central features of Kantian philosophy itself. This is most evident in his critique of the idea of homogenous time where he winds <sup>up</sup> the critical apparatus ~~up~~ a notch and enquires after the preconditions of the model of time upon which Kantianism itself rests. In the process this critique reinstates certain essentially Kantian dualisms, and the undialectical account of the relation between quantity and quality which emerges has repercussions for Benjamin's understanding of history at large.



---

engagement with Kant which informs each. See his *Dialectical Images: Walter Benjamin's Theory of Literary Criticism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), p. 68-9.

<sup>8</sup> GS 6, p. 91.

*'Eternity is not a very long time; it is a tomorrow that could as well be today.*

*Eternity is a future which, without ceasing to be future, is nonetheless present.*

*Eternity is a today which is, however, conscious of being more than today.'*

Rosenzweig, *Star of Redemption*

## Cohen and Ethical History

Between 1912 and 1919 Benjamin studied philosophy at Freiburg, Berlin, Munich and Bern. At Freiburg University, which in those years knew the distinguished neo-Kantians Jonas Cohn and Emil Lask, Benjamin studied under Heinrich Rickert who a few years later would supervise the doctorate of a young Martin Heidegger. Benjamin appears to have found academic life at Freiburg uninspiring: the seminar by Jonas Cohn on Kant's Third *Critique* and Schiller's aesthetics is said to be 'chemically purified of all ideas'; Benjamin describes himself sitting in Rickert's seminar and pursuing his own thoughts, then afterwards agreeing with a fellow student that they themselves are 'more incisive' than their teacher.<sup>9</sup> These experiences did not succeed in completely alienating Benjamin from neo-Kantianism, though. His interest in the following years turned to the Marburg philosopher, Hermann Cohen, with whose works *Kant's Theory of Experience* and *Ethics of Pure Willing* he became acquainted. The greater affinities for Cohen than for Freiburg neo-Kantianism ~~is~~<sup>are</sup> perhaps explicable in light of the fact that Cohen attempts to synthesize just those seemingly opposed fields - idealist philosophy and Judaic religion - which held Benjamin's interest at that time. The means by which Cohen attempted to forge this link was the moral law. This meant drawing out what is only implicit in Kant himself: that the

---

<sup>9</sup> *Briefe*, p. 61, *Correspondence*, p. 31.



values underpinning the critique of practical reason (in particular the postulate of human freedom) also serve as the barely concealed ground of the realm of the theoretical or pure reason. Kant's practical philosophy distinguishes man's natural from his intelligible self, man as desiring from man as dutiful. This division between natural inclination and moral duty is, moreover, understood to be insurmountable, with the implication that the task of striving to be moral is an endless one. This idea is adopted by Cohen but with crucial modifications. Firstly Cohen seeks to base the striving which constitutes morality not in a rigorous distinction between duty and inclination, but in the difference between man and God, finite and infinite. Secondly, he understands *history* as the arena of this ceaseless striving.

Cohen's defence of the Kantian moral will must be seen in a particular intellectual context: with the predominance towards the end of the last century of deterministic models in the natural sciences and in the developing human sciences, little room or legitimacy seemed left for moral action. Of particular relevance here is what Cohen perceived as the denigration of moral and political autonomy inherent in Marxism. He understood his defence of moral autonomy to have both philosophical and political currency. But his moral philosophy does not, as might be expected, follow the more or less orthodox liberalism of Kant's own political writings. Critical of both Marxism and liberalism, Cohen's Kantianism understands its politics to lie somewhere between the two.<sup>10</sup>

It is Cohen's posthumous work *Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism* which will form the central concern of the present chapter, since it is particularly suited to highlighting the similarities and differences between his and Benjamin's thinking. At the cost of isolating this work from the tri-partite *System* to which it refers back, focusing upon this work will help to clarify the genealogy of Benjamin's own thinking of the relation between theology, history and politics. Where Cohen's *Ethics of Pure Willing* was received coldly by Benjamin - the work, he says, 'depressed' him with its 'unbelievable leaps'<sup>11</sup> - *Religion of Reason*, by contrast, was

---

<sup>10</sup> Thomas E. Willey, *Back to Kant: The Revival of Kantianism in German Social and Historical Thought, 1860-1914* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1978), pp. 35-6 & 110-116.

<sup>11</sup> *Briefe*, p. 254, *Correspondence*, p. 173.



welcomed as an 'extremely remarkable book'.<sup>12</sup> *Religion of Reason* was written during the latter part of Cohen's life, and differs in emphasis from the earlier so-called systematic works in its more openly theological character, its attempt to demonstrate the congruence of philosophical Kantianism and Judaic religion. It also serves as an extended response to an attack made by Heinrich von Treitschke some years earlier on the 'un-German' nature of the Jewish religion.<sup>13</sup>

Cohen's book is an ambivalent rehearsal and critique of Kantian philosophy. On the one hand he employs the critical method to show the possibility of providing rational foundations for religious concepts such as holiness and redemption. Consistent with the critical philosophy, such concepts are to be grounded at the cost of relinquishing any speculative or transcendent employment. The reasonable nature of religious concepts can be guaranteed only by restricting the purview of reason itself to a legitimate arena: religion must appear within the bounds of reason alone. On the other hand he offers a critique of Kantian 'ethics' for postulating a God with merely formal qualities and nothing of the compassion of the God of religion: to this end he contrasts the abstractions of 'ethics' with the notion of 'ethical life' (*Sittlichkeit*), Hegel's term for the social, historical and customary environment within which morality subsists.<sup>14</sup> However, instead of pursuing the phenomenological approach suggested by this invocation of 'ethical life', Cohen relies on what are essentially transcendental arguments.

The congruence of Jewish religion and critical philosophy is established not only by filtering religious concepts through the apparatus of practical reason, but by an interpretation of the postulates and regulative ideas of Kant's practical philosophy which stresses their consonance with the prophetic moment in Judaism. The projection by Kant of a 'Kingdom of Ends' (*Endzwecke*) which serves as the regulative idea of moral action, is aligned by Cohen with the Judaic anticipation of a

---

<sup>12</sup> *Briefe*, p. 246, *Correspondence*, p. 167.

<sup>13</sup> Willey, *Back to Kant*, *op. cit.*, pp. 105-6; Eva Jospe, translator's introduction to *Reason and Hope: Selections from the Jewish Writings of Hermann Cohen* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1971), pp. 16-18.

<sup>14</sup> Hermann Cohen, *Religion of Reason Out of the Sources of Judaism* trans. Simon Kaplan (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1972), p. 32; Gillian Rose, 'Hermann Cohen - Kant among the Prophets' in *Judaism and Modernity: Philosophical Essays*, *op. cit.*, pp. 114-5.

messianic Kingdom of God.<sup>15</sup> Against Kant's explicit intention,<sup>16</sup> Cohen reintroduces messianism to the moral view of history. In this transformation the 'Kingdom' loses its subjunctive and hypothetical status and becomes instead an ideal towards which humanity should strive. The striving which characterises morality is understood not - on Kant's terms - as the inevitable conflict between natural inclination and duty,<sup>17</sup> but instead as the inescapable gap between finite human action and the infinite towards which it aims. 'And what is the essence of morality?' asks Cohen. 'It consists of the correlation of God and man,'<sup>18</sup> of the approach of man to the holiness or sanctity of God himself. It is in striving to be moral that man's holiness is realised; conversely in becoming holy the ideal of morality is unfolded. Holiness is that which is shared by man and God, but not equally; man relates to God only in so far as he *correlates* to him through morality. Man can only *correlate* rather than *equate* to God because of the unbridgeable divide which separates the finite from the infinite. Human action is thus 'an infinite task which is determined through [this] correlation....The holiness of man consists in self-sanctification, which, however, can have no termination, therefore cannot be a permanent rest, but only infinite striving and becoming.'<sup>19</sup> What Cohen retains from Kant's practical philosophy is the eternal character of the task which morality inspires. Where he differs from Kant is in his wish to reintroduce messianism into this conception of the task, a move which appears, on the face of it, to go against the very aim of critical philosophy: the *Critiques* sought to delimit thought to the arena of rational knowledge and away from the fields trespassed by dogmatic metaphysics.

Rewriting the messianic idea in Judaism as the 'infinite task' of man's correlation with God allows Cohen to characterise Judaism as a religion of futurity. It is a religion structured by temporality and that temporality points not merely towards the past and

---

<sup>15</sup> Cohen, *Religion of Reason*, *op. cit.*, p. 215.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Kant, *Religion Within the Bounds of Reason Alone*, *op. cit.*, p. 127.

<sup>17</sup> Holiness, according to Kant, would represent the perfect alignment of the will and the moral law, 'a perfection of which no rational being in the world of sense is at any time capable. But since it is required as practically necessary, it can be found only in an endless progress to that perfect fitness'. [Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason* trans. L. W. Beck (New York: Macmillan, 1993), p. 128-9].

<sup>18</sup> Cohen, *Religion of Reason*, *op. cit.* p. 98; 100-1.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 111.



present but 'the newness of a future. This newness consists in the dawning of the ideal in contrast to all actuality.'<sup>20</sup> Even the figure of the Messiah does not escape this temporalising of religious concepts: 'The ideality of the Messiah, his significance as an idea, is shown in the overcoming of the person of the Messiah and in the dissolution of the personal image in the pure notion of time, in the concept of the age....This return to time is the purest idealization....Thus, the thought of *history* comes into being for human life and for the life of the peoples.'<sup>21</sup> This definition of history no longer carries its original Greek sense where it was directed solely to the past; messianism transforms it into 'the being of the *future*.'<sup>22</sup> Cohen goes so far as to say that the very concept of history '*is a creation of the prophetic idea*.'<sup>23</sup>

In line with the exposition of the moral task as an historical task, as the infinite correlation of man with God, of the infinite advent of God's Kingdom, the Judaic notion of redemption is similarly transformed: redemption is not the goal of the task but a station encountered along its way. For Cohen, the Jewish calendar attests to this temporal structure of redemption by giving it 'symbolic' prominence in the Day of Atonement, one of the most important festivals in the Jewish year. Atonement is understood as an act which, momentarily purifying us of sin, returns us renewed and reinvigorated to the task: 'it need not have its only meaning as the final link in the development of mankind, but it can and does take place at each moment in the historical development.'<sup>24</sup> Redemption is interpreted in its role as ritual or custom, situated within the time of dates and chronology, and understood to be transient: with the end of the Day, 'suffering has to become again the disciplinary means for the self-discipline of man.'<sup>25</sup>

This interpretation enables Cohen to distinguish his own account of redemption from the eschatological sense this notion has in other strands of Judaic thought. 'Messianism proclaims and vouches for the infinite development of the human soul. And at this point we can positively see how fateful the confusion of Messianism with

---

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 249.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 249.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 262.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 261.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 235.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 230



*eschatology* is'. Messianism, unlike eschatology, 'remains in the climate of human existence. And if it makes the future of mankind its problem then it is the task of the historical future, the future of the infinite history of the human race, which becomes the task of the holy spirit of man.'<sup>26</sup> Cohen needs to distinguish his messianism from eschatology because the latter conflicts with his specification of the endless task. Where eschatology implies death, destruction, 'the end', Messianism prophecies 'an earthly future, be it of Israel or of all the peoples.'<sup>27</sup> The coming of the Messiah is 'not an actual end, but means merely the infinity of his coming'.<sup>28</sup>

Cohen defines the politics which follows from this characterisation of messianism as 'ethical *socialism*'.<sup>29</sup> Again invoking Kant he grounds this politics in the 'pure will' which shows up the inhumanity of suffering and its root cause, poverty: 'The poor are the sufferers and they are the pious.' Pity towards the impoverished is not mere sentiment (for in this case sympathy would be merely empirical and not *a priori*) but is instead 'a factor of the pure will, as a lever of moral consciousness. It is the fundamental power of the moral universe'.<sup>30</sup> It is socialism which, for Cohen, embodies the ideal of eradicating such suffering. Socialism has the merit of providing the religious idea of judgement and retribution with a this-worldly rather than an other-worldly meaning. Retribution for the suffering and indignity of poverty thus becomes 'a goal for moral culture' since if it were to occur only in the after-life, 'it would be of no use, either for myself or for others.'<sup>31</sup>

This outline of the main themes of Cohen's *Religion of Reason* shows something of its significance, not only as a revival of Kantian thought but as an attempt to fill the lacunae left by Kant's reflections on history. The book's importance lies not merely in its project of underpinning a conception of history by means of the critique of practical reason but also its attempt to provide rational grounds for socialism and for retributive justice. This latter element may explain the favourable reception which Cohen's thought received in some left-wing, particularly social democratic, circles.

---

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 307.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 289.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 315.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 259.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 141.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 314.

During the early part of this century attempts such as this to theoretically underpin socialist ethics appealed not only to the German academy but indeed had some influence upon political programmes and manifestos. It is in this intellectual climate - a philosophical movement which had political pertinence - that Benjamin's own philosophical apprenticeship was undertaken, and whilst he takes his cue from many of Cohen's own assumptions, he is also keen to take many of those ideas in a very different direction.

### *Heilsgeschichte* from Cohen to Benjamin

Already in an early essay of Benjamin's the similarities and differences between his and Cohen's thinking becomes clear:

There is an apprehension of history which, trusting in the endlessness of time, distinguishes only the tempo at which peoples and epochs roll along the highway of progress. To this view properly belongs the incoherence, the lack of precision and force of the claims which this view is capable of offering to the present. The following reflections, on the contrary, are based on a distinct condition in which all of history is gathered into one focal point, as in the historical image of the utopian thinkers. The elements of the end of time [*Endzustand*] do not lie evident as formless tendencies towards historical progress, but are embedded deep in any present as its most endangered, ridiculed and scorned creations and thoughts. To render the immanent state of completion [*Vollkommenheit*] in its absolute purity; to direct it visibly and powerfully into the heart of the present: this is the historical task. The state of completion is not however to be portrayed in its pragmatic details (institutions, morals, and so on) - the description of which, rather, it eludes - but is instead only graspable in its metaphysical



structure, as the messianic kingdom or the idea of the French Revolution.<sup>32</sup>

This apprehension of history which no longer trust in the endlessness of time marks out the extent of Benjamin's divergence from Cohen's neo-Kantianism. Benjamin substitutes for a history modelled on correlation one projecting *Vollkommenheit* or 'completion'; history is defined here not by endlessness but by the presence latent within each historical moment of a condition of fulfilment. History is still, as it is for Cohen, modelled on the prophetic idea, on the anticipation of the Kingdom, but here the meaning of prophecy changes. Benjamin calls this prophetic moment 'utopian', unhelpfully invoking a type of thinking which actually bears little resemblance to his own (as his argument against specification and codification attest). The theory of history outlined here diverges from that of Cohen by substituting the possibility of completion for the notion of infinite progression, a 'metaphysical structure' for the regulative idea. Benjamin's example of this metaphysical structure of *Vollkommenheit* - the 'idea of the French Revolution' - is instructive for political as well as historical reasons. This idea reappears in his later work where it becomes emblematic of an event which breaks with the progression of historical time itself.

Benjamin, like Cohen, understands the Judaic 'Messiah' as a concept of historical time. The difference between the two lies in the model of history which is seen to follow from this temporalising of religion. Whilst for Cohen the interval between the finite (man) and the infinite (God) demands the task of ethical correlation, an infinite approach to the Kingdom of God, Benjamin sees in the messianic view of history the possibility latent within each historical moment for realising the Kingdom. In this context it is telling that Cohen's understanding of history reproduces the characteristics he has ascribed to prayer, those of 'longing': 'The desire for God expressed in prayer is a quest for God and always wants to be quest only; for the finding cannot be actual, but can have as its goal only 'the nearness to God,' only the drawing near to God....For God can never become actuality for human love. The quest

---

<sup>32</sup> GS 2, p. 75.



is the end in itself of the religious soul.’<sup>33</sup> For Benjamin the historical task yielded by *Heilsgeschichte* is very different: it seeks to make manifest that state of completion to which each moment of time monadologically and proleptically points. Short of the realisation of the Kingdom ‘there remains only the task of liberating, through understanding, the forms of the future from their distortions in the present. Critical thinking [*Kritik*] is devoted solely to this task [*dient*].’<sup>34</sup> For Benjamin (and contra Cohen) the anticipation of the Kingdom is nothing without what Rosenzweig calls the ‘wish to bring about the Messiah before his time’, and an awareness that each moment contains the possibility of His coming. Minus this desire to ‘entreat the Kingdom’, the future ‘is only a past distended endlessly and projected forward.’<sup>35</sup> That which Cohen longs-for is in Benjamin urgently and impatiently entreated.

For Benjamin, *Heilsgeschichte* or redemptive history yields an account of time, of history and of political practice which differs markedly from that of Cohen’s neo-Kantianism. Benjamin defends *messianism as eschatology* against *messianism as correlation*. This move changes in turn the temporal orientation of messianism from the almost exclusively futural sense it has in Cohen to encompass the past as well. The importance of this reorientation becomes clearer in the light of Benjamin’s retrieval of history’s original vocation as remembrance. It is clear that the difference between these two thinkers lies not only in the way each construes the ‘sources’ of Judaism but also the use to which they put them. Cohen’s intent is to show that Judaic categories can be rationally grounded, and that they in turn give rise to a distinct conception of ethical life and of politics. For Benjamin religious categories are directly political categories but the politics to which the messianic idea gives rise stands sharply opposed to that assumed by Cohen. Both wish to use these temporalised categories of Judaism to express theories of historical time, but Benjamin’s approach diverges significantly from Cohen’s philosophy of history, grounded as it is in Kantian practical reason. Benjamin’s antipathy towards the ethical structure of Kant’s own

---

<sup>33</sup> Cohen, *Religion of Reason*, p. 375.

<sup>34</sup> GS 2, p. 75.

<sup>35</sup> Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption* trans. William W. Hallo (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), p. 227. On Benjamin’s indebtedness to Rosenzweig see Stéphane Moses, ‘Walter Benjamin and Franz Rosenzweig’ in G. Smith (ed.), *Benjamin: Philosophy, Aesthetics, History*, op. cit., pp. 228-246.

historical writings extends by implication to Cohen's use of Kant. From Benjamin's understanding of the messianic idea flows a conception of historical time opposed to that in which an endless task might occur. Whereas the historical and political task proposed by Cohen reflects an unbounded conception of history, Benjamin's view of the task rests upon a view of time as punctuated by messianic opportunities, where each each historical moment is potentially redemptive. The messianic idea expresses itself politically in the requirement to 'decide at every moment'.

To leave the purely theoretical sphere....will be humanly possible in only two ways, in religious or political observance. I do not concede that there is a difference between the two forms of observance in terms of their quintessential being. Yet I also do not concede that a mediation between them is possible. I am speaking here about an identity that manifests itself only in the paradoxical reversal [*Umschlagen*] of one form of observance into the other (regardless of which direction), given the indispensable prerequisite that every observation of action proceed ruthlessly and with radical intent. Precisely for this reason, the task is not to decide once and for all, but to decide at every moment.<sup>36</sup>

This thesis of the identity of religious and political observation is not without its problems, though. The attempt to avoid 'mediation' (*Vermittlung*) - perhaps because of its Hegelian connotations - is problematic, firstly because if there is 'no essential distinction' between the two terms politics and religion, then a 'reversal of one into the other' is meaningless; secondly, that relation by which one term passes into another is nothing other than the 'mediation' whose possibility Benjamin denies. However, recognising that this thesis of the 'identity' of theology and politics is confused and even contradictory does not detract from its significance. Asserting that the commonality between these two fields lies in their making it possible to conceive 'sudden change,' Benjamin shows that he thinks insight into the messianic

---

<sup>36</sup> *Briefe*, p. 425, *Correspondence*, p. 300 (amended).



opportunities structuring history gives rise to a political task of intervening at every juncture.

### Transition and Transcendence

A critique of any apprehension of historical time which takes as its model Kantian practical reason spans the divide between Benjamin's early so-called 'theological' writings and his later 'Marxist' work. The critique links his first essays on the Youth Movement to his final projects on the Paris of the nineteenth century, and the philosophy of history. What differentiates the early from the later form of this critique can perhaps best be explained by noting the significant effect which Lukács' thought had on Benjamin in the intervening years. Upon reading *History and Class Consciousness* in 1924 Benjamin speculated that his own 'nihilism' would entail an 'antagonistic confrontation with the concepts and assertions of [Lukács'] Hegelian dialectics.'<sup>37</sup> Yet he also notes that the book 'validated' his own thinking. The critique of an infinite temporality formulated in Benjamin's early writings finds support here in the form of a Marxian analysis of the experience of time under modern capitalism, providing the critique of neo-Kantianism with social and historical determinations. Benjamin incorporates into his criticism of the infinite task Lukács' Marxian analysis of the role of quantity and quality in historical time.

The chapter 'Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat' is central to this since it is there that Lukács argues that the idea of infinite moral progression involves an hypostatizing of quantity; it rests upon a model of time which is purely quantitative, one in which the qualitative moment has been effaced or obscured. Both the reduction of quality to quantity and the idea of infinite progression are for Lukács intimately related: quantity and progression are 'abstract categories of reflection' which 'conceal the dialectical structure of the historical process in daily life'.<sup>38</sup> 'It is no mere chance' he says, that 'bourgeois thought should have taken up the idea of

---

<sup>37</sup> *Briefe*, p. 355, *Correspondence*, p. 248.

<sup>38</sup> Georg Lukács, 'Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat' in *History and Class Consciousness* trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Merlin, 1971), p. 165.



infinite progression'<sup>39</sup> since such an idea both conceals and reveals much about that society itself.

For Lukács it is only in a temporality which is homogeneous, one in which all qualitative intervals have been expunged and each moment rendered equal to the next, that the notion of infinite progress can have any purchase.<sup>40</sup> Progress has meaning only where each moment of time can be linked causally and hence predictably to its successor. This experience of time as quantitative equivalence is, for Lukács, an abstraction, one whose social and historical basis can be specified, and hence whose naturalness can be dispelled. It is, for him, the labour process which proves exemplary in reducing the qualitative experience of time to a purely homogeneous continuum. And it is the merit of the labour theory of value, according to which value is determined by socially necessary labour-time, to have critically thematised this quantification by construing it as a real abstraction, 'a reified and reifying cloak' in which the qualitative side of exploitation is obscured. 'The quantitative differences in exploitation which appear to the capitalist in the form of quantitative determinants of the objects of his calculation, must appear to the worker as the decisive, qualitative categories of his whole physical, mental and moral existence.'<sup>41</sup> The fact that Lukács chooses the labour process to show that 'beneath the quantifying crust' lies 'a qualitative, living core'<sup>42</sup> indicates that he thinks what is at stake in the construal of time as quantity is not merely a philosophical category mistake, but the actuality of exploitation and unfreedom.

On Lukács' analysis time is never simply a given but instead a problem of abstraction, one which demands inquiry into its preconditions and determinants. Understanding the nature of time within bourgeois society becomes a question of abstraction because there *time itself becomes abstract* in just the way Marx understood the designation of labour as an abstraction to refer to a very real state of affairs: the expunging of individual characteristics of human creativity in the labour process. For Marx, whoever goes to sell her labour power on the market soon discovers the

---

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 161.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 161.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 166.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 169.

meaning of the term abstract labour. For Lukács, whoever experiences the labour process soon finds out the meaning of the concept 'homogeneous clock time'.

Benjamin's appropriation of Lukács' discussion is a selective one. Most importantly he fails to grasp the Hegelian moment of that analysis which attempts not only to critically expose the subordination of quality to quantity in the notion of infinite progression, but to problematise that very Kantian opposition *as such*. The merit of Hegel's *Science of Logic* upon which Lukács' discussion draws is that there quantity and quality are construed not as inert categories through which we apprehend reality but are presented dynamically in their 'transition' (*Übergang*) into one another. This transition is described by Hegel as a 'leap' (*Sprung*) and he finds examples of it within the realm of nature, for instance in the events which bound natural life: thus 'every birth or death, far from being a progressive gradualness, is an interruption of it and is the leap from a quantitative into a qualitative alteration.'<sup>43</sup> Benjamin's oversight of Lukács philosophical references is significant in that it reveals the often static and undialectical nature of his own construal of quantity and quality. The fact that the interrelation of quantity and quality is undertheorised means that Benjamin's critique of homogeneous time will itself be dualistic, opposing the qualitative experience of freedom to the quantitative experience of alienation. The result is that one of the central features of Benjamin's Marxism - his critique of progress as a mystification of a specific mode of production - will often amount to a purely external form of critique.

It is here that Benjamin's messianism threatens to compromise his Marxism because the act which demystifies homogeneous empty time is described as an external intervention, even when what he is referring to is an immanent development: the spontaneous actions of a revolutionary class. The emancipating breach of history's quantitative continuum from within is expressed as an adventitious breaking of history from without.<sup>44</sup> In his many formulations of the messianic Benjamin reveals that he

---

<sup>43</sup> Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik* in *Werke* ed. Marheineke et al. (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1833), vol. 4, p. 449; *Science of Logic* trans. A.V. Miller (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1969), p. 369-70.

<sup>44</sup> Scholem writes: 'It is precisely the lack of transition between history and the redemption which is always stressed by the prophets and apocalypticists. The Bible and the apocalyptic writers know of no progress in history leading to redemption....It is rather transcendence breaking in upon history, an intrusion in which history itself perishes, transformed in its ruin because it is struck by a beam of light



has construed *transition* as *transcendence*: he sees the movement from quantity to quality as an advent or epiphany, not as something inherent in quantity itself. Thus Hegel's 'leap' appears here in an almost mystical and apocalyptic form: redemption 'looks to the small fissure [*Sprung*] in the ongoing catastrophe'.<sup>45</sup> Correspondingly, the act of emancipation from the catastrophic continuum of history is placed at the limit of understanding and deliberation: messianic time is defined as 'an extraordinary event bordering on the miraculous and incomprehensible (*Unbegreifliche*)'.<sup>46</sup> It sometimes appears as if Benjamin has salvaged freedom from Kant's postulates only to reinstate it in Kant's noumenal realm.

The influence of Lukács is further visible in the *Passagen-Werk*, Benjamin's project from the 1930s, where the critique of infinite progress is incorporated into a critique of ideology, and brought to bear upon mystificatory conceptions of time. 'Konvolut D' of the mass of notes on the history of Paris is entitled 'Boredom, Eternal Recurrence' and attempts to show the affinities between two conceptions of time popular in the 19th century. Despite their apparent exclusivity and the fact that one is often pitted against the other, both the notion of endless perfectibility and that of eternal recurrence share a common social background which Benjamin, following Marx, calls 'generalised commodity production'. Where eternal recurrence paradoxically rationalises the repetitive nature of mass production - the time of 'starting all over again', he writes, is little more than the 'regulative idea' of 'wage labour'<sup>47</sup> - the notion of endless perfectibility (in equally paradoxical fashion) mythicises the empty time of accumulation where surplus value production has become an end in itself. Raised to philosophical principles, both conceptions of time conceal their lowly origins.

---

shining into it from an outside source. The constructions of history in which the apocalypticists (as opposed to the prophets of the bible) revel have nothing to do with modern conceptions of development or progress, and if there is anything which, in the view of these seers, history deserves, it can only be to perish. The apocalypticists have always cherished a pessimistic view of the world. Their optimism, their hope, is not directed to what history will bring forth, but to that which will arise in its ruin'. [Gershom Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality* (New York: Schocken, 1971), p. 10.]

<sup>45</sup> GS 1, p. 683; 'Central Park', op. cit., p. 50.

<sup>46</sup> GS 4, p. 927.

<sup>47</sup> GS 1, p. 636; *Charles Baudelaire*, op. cit., p. 137 (amended).



Belief in progress, in endless perfectibility (-an unending moral task-) and the picture of eternal recurrence are complementary. They are ineluctable antinomies, in the face of which the dialectical concept of historical time needs to be developed. Against this dialectical conception, eternal recurrence emerges as precisely that 'flat rationalism' of which the belief in progress is accused, and this latter belongs to the mythical mode of thinking just as much as does the picture of eternal recurrence.<sup>48</sup>

The rationalism of the notion of eternal recurrence complements the mythical nature of endless progression. Prefiguring Horkheimer and Adorno, Benjamin finds within the apparently mythical, incipient enlightenment, within the ostensibly enlightened, resurgent myth. Against these 'antinomical' principles a third needs to be articulated: this 'dialectical conception' of historical time will aim, by contrast, 'to grasp the actual as the obverse of the eternal in history,'<sup>49</sup> it will set itself against the element of the eternal shared by both these accounts of time. What gives the lie to the 'eternal in history' whether it is moral task or amoral repetition, is an understanding of redemption. Here lies an affinity with Benjamin's earlier critique of the infinite task. What distinguishes these present criticisms is the ideological dimension of particular conceptions of time and the correspondingly material ground by which they are explained. The 'messianic' which dispells the eternal in history is found just as much in the dialectical structure of experience as in holy- or redemptive history.

### **Empty Time Versus Messianic Time**

To think 'the obverse of the eternal in history', to think history as radically open but not spuriously open-ended, means thinking history in its 'original vocation as

---

<sup>48</sup> GS 5, p. 178 (D10a, 5).

<sup>49</sup> *Briefe*, p. 459, *Correspondence*, p. 325.

remembrance [*Eingedenken*].<sup>50</sup> It means recognising the redemptive capacity of memory, that 'the way the past is experienced in remembrance' is 'neither homogeneous nor empty'.<sup>51</sup> For Benjamin remembrance yields an experience of time not as linear and sequential but as punctuated by qualitative, ecstatic moments, moments which 'stand out from time'.<sup>52</sup> Memory is peculiarly privileged to uncover this 'time filled by the presence of the now' because it itself does not correspond to a homogeneous temporal continuum. More precisely it does not occur 'in' time at all, time understood as mere form. On the contrary, remembrance proceeds as the structuring of time; time becomes configured around the experiential significance of a particular memory. 'Experience [*Erfahrung*] accompanies one back into the far reaches of time, fulfilling and structuring [*gliedert*] it.'<sup>53</sup>

That this heterogeneous structure pertains just as much to historical time as to individually lived time is illustrated in the temporality of the calendar, the way it manifests the experience of historical time peculiar to a society or social group. 'The inaugural day of a calendar functions as an historical time-lapse camera. And it is essentially the same day that keeps recurring in the form of holy days [*Feiertage*], which are days of remembrance [*Tage des Eingedenkens*]. Thus calendars do not tell time like clocks.'<sup>54</sup> The characteristics of psychological memory have a correlate on the social level, the massive abridgement of historical time which the festival day of remembrance represents. Days of remembrance themselves preserve something of the transformation of the calendar which often accompanies social change; they interrupt the normal pattern of time in this double sense.

The 'day of remembrance' was also a concern of Cohen's in *Religion of Reason*, but there it is understood in a significantly different way. Cohen's intent was to draw out the unconditional nature of the remembrance practised in the Jewish religion (his paradigm appears to be the commandment to remember, *Zakhor*) and to highlight its moral message. This contrasts with Benjamin's interest in the day of remembrance

---

<sup>50</sup> GS 1, p. 1231.

<sup>51</sup> GS 1, p. 704.

<sup>52</sup> GS 1, p. 637; *Charles Baudelaire*, p. 139.

<sup>53</sup> GS 1, p. 635.

<sup>54</sup> GS 1, p. 701-2; 'Theses' in *Illuminations*, p. 261.



which is directed towards the contingent social and political reality which this and other elements of calendar time express. For Cohen,

all commandments and all festive celebrations are a sign of 'remembrance of the exodus from Egypt.' Hence the entire Torah is a remembrance of the liberation from Egyptian slavery, which, as the cradle of the Jewish people, is not deplored, let alone condemned, but celebrated in gratitude....However, while it should remember the liberation from Egypt, this remembering is changed into an active duty: thou shalt remember that thou hast been a slave in the land of Egypt. Through this the memory changes into the social virtue of loving the stranger, as well as into the gentle treatment of the slave and the promotion of his liberation.<sup>55</sup>

The difference between Benjamin's materialist analysis of the calendar and Cohen's extraction of its rational core is one not just of approach but also of the politics each associates with remembrance. Thus Cohen's social democratic call to philanthropy contrasts sharply with Benjamin's Marxian interest in the Revolutionary calendar. Further, the fact that Benjamin expounds remembrance by means of a phenomenology of, rather than exhortation to, political action, reveals much about how he intended his own concept of 'remembrance' to be taken.

These two differing conceptions of remembrance, of history and of the historical and political 'task' can only be understood in terms of divergent conceptions of time, and it seems that Benjamin finds in the neo-Kantian view of history the same empty time, time as mere 'form' awaiting 'intuition' (or in historical terms, awaiting 'event'), that organised Kant's transcendental aesthetic. Time is understood here (as it was for Newton) as a receptacle filled or 'fulfilled' by events. But for Benjamin, where time is mere form it remains essentially unfulfilled, something which the encapsulation of empirical events does not alter.<sup>56</sup> In Benjamin's terms it is not

---

<sup>55</sup> Cohen, *Religion of Reason*, pp. 431 & 441.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. Benjamin's 1916 essay '*Trauerspiel und Tragödie*' (GS 2, p. 134). For a discussion see Howard Caygill, 'Benjamin, Heidegger and the Destruction of Tradition', *op. cit.*



surprising that when transposed to history this conception of time produces a spurious infinite, since its lack of fulfilment is implicit from the outset. Elements of his early criticism of the 'emptiness' of neo-Kantian time can be seen to combine with a subsequent diagnosis of the 'homogeneous' character of neo-Kantian history to produce the critique of 'homogeneous empty time' which one finds in Benjamin's later works. His own model of time, one which gives rise to a divergent concept of history, is a time capable of fulfilment but only by the very interruption or destruction of that historical continuum assumed by neo-Kantianism. Here Benjamin's dispute is not with Kant's belief in the ideality as opposed to the reality of time (this he takes for granted) but with the formalism which emerges from the anti-realist turn. As becomes explicit in essays such as 'On the Programme of the Coming Philosophy' Benjamin's work is repeatedly concerned to criticise Kantian and neo-Kantian thought for its impoverished and formalised notion of experience, its 'unconscious complicity with positivism'.<sup>57</sup> Primarily though, it is the experience of time which is at issue. Whereas in his early work this criticism assumes a theological guise (thus the unfulfilled and unredeemed nature of the historical continuum), in the later work (and subsequent to his encounter with Lukács) it is given a materialist twist, with the suggestion that Kant's formalism is itself socially grounded. The formal experience recorded by Kantianism could gain credibility only within a society which itself impoverishes and renders abstract the experience of time.

It is worth repeating that Benjamin's conception of the messianic idea does not imply a rejection of all notions of progress. In fact he is keen to *defend* a certain idea of progress, one which 'does not reside in the continuity of temporal succession, but rather in its moments of interference: where the truly new first makes itself felt'.<sup>58</sup> This idea of progress grounded in discontinuity or interruption proves to be the exact opposite of Cohen's conception of history in which 'only *continuity* is the methodological signpost. For it, however, there is no standstill, no regress, but only that progress which is the true and the only one; it is progress which is based on continuity, which itself is independent of such contingent and external matters as

---

<sup>57</sup> GS 3, p. 565.

<sup>58</sup> GS 5, p. (N9a, 7); 'Konvolut 'N'', p. 65.

before and after, and even contemporaneity; continuity overcomes and permeates all these.’<sup>59</sup> At the cost of some simplification the difference between these two ideas of progress - the one grounded in temporal continuity, the other in the ‘truly new’ - might be represented figurally. If, as Hegel says, ‘the image of the progress to infinity is the *straight line*,’<sup>60</sup> then in Cohen’s neo-Kantianism this line becomes an asymptote of ever-nearing ‘approximation’ to God’s kingdom, the Kingdom of Ends. In Benjamin’s version of *Heilsgeschichte*, by contrast, the horizontal line of progression is interrupted at each point by the vertical axis of messianic time.<sup>61</sup> Each historical moment - and the ‘moment’ (*Augenblick*) here is not a chronological concept, since this is to confuse now-time and homogeneous time - contains the possibility of the redemptive destruction of historical time itself.

### The Complicity of Progress

By 1939 the critique of infinite progress takes on a certain currency, urgency even, with the signing of the Hitler-Stalin pact which freed the <sup>Nazi's hands</sup> ~~Nazi hand~~ to invade Poland. For Benjamin the pact proved socialism’s inefficacy in halting the rise of Fascism. In Germany the social democratic left had proved no more effective in stemming the flow of working class support to racist ideology. Reminiscent of the arguments of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht prior to the previous war (thinkers to whom he alludes in his final work), Benjamin’s feeling was that social democracy’s faith in gradual change would lead it in the last instance to support militarism. In replaying the critique of the idea of infinite progress in his theses ‘On the Concept of History’ Benjamin returns to one of his earliest preoccupations, showing the way in which the endless task actually undermines rather than grounds the moral and political action it was thought to inspire. The fact that the doctrine was adopted by certain social democrat thinkers as a theoretical underpinning for their gradualism, had implications that were not just philosophically problematic but politically disastrous. In projecting

---

<sup>59</sup> Cohen, *Religion of Reason*, p. 177.

<sup>60</sup> Hegel, *Science of Logic*, op. cit., p. 149.

<sup>61</sup> Cf. GS 5, p. 600 (N13a, 2); ‘Konvolut ‘N’’, p. 72.



an endlessly futural democracy, one which could be approached only through pragmatism and compromise, such thinking would remove democracy from actuality and the only political practice which might make it possible. For Benjamin a democracy perpetually deferred is an unrealisable democracy, that is, no democracy at all.

The trouble arises in that social democratic thought raised the notion [of a classless society] to an 'ideal.' It was defined in the neo-Kantian teaching as an 'endless task.' And this teaching was the school philosophy of the Social Democratic Party....Once the classless society was defined as an endless task, then the empty and homogeneous future was transformed, so to speak into an anteroom in which one could wait more or less sanguinely [*mit mehr oder weniger Gelassenheit*] for the arrival of the revolutionary situation.<sup>62</sup>

The 'endless task' induces what Benjamin calls '*Gelassenheit*', a sort of passivity, the intent to 'let things be'. This passivity, however, derives not, as he implies, from the imminent anticipation of a political ideal but from its infinite deferral. Applying the temporal structure of the postulates of practical reason to an historically periodised classless society establishes not so much the *inevitability* as the impossibility of its realisation: the political outcome is an infinitely remote ideal. This inversion of openness into the closure of unrealisability is for Benjamin the necessary outcome of any thinking of time which invokes a purely extensive infinite. The diagnosis of *Gelassenheit* or 'passivity' amounts to the charge that the outcome of Kantian ethics and social democratic politics is not only good conscience but inactivity - or rather it is precisely in its progressivism that social democracy is most conservative. To charge social democracy with *Gelassenheit* is to point out a fundamental contradiction, that to the prescription of practical reason, which exhorts struggle without hope of success, resignation is a perfectly *reasonable* response.

---

<sup>62</sup> GS 1, p. 1231; cf. Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology*, trans. David Smith (London: Burns & Oates, 1980), p. 176: 'We are not made apathetic by the apocalyptic feeling for life, but by the evolutionary idea.'



In the infinite moral task, futurity becomes empty and homogeneous, an indefinitely extended line. It transforms an open (because unpredictable) future into an empty and predictable series stretching endlessly away. Such thinking commits an injustice not only to the future but the past as well: it implies the continuity of successive historical moments, failing to realise that such continuity is itself *produced*, this by the erasure of anomalies and the elision of ruptures, an historical anamorphosis in which relations of power are inscribed. 'Progress [as traditionally understood] stands in no relation to the ruptures of history. These ruptures are prejudiced by the doctrine of endless perfectibility.'<sup>63</sup>

The political correlate of the replacement of endless progress with 'interference' is the replacement of gradualism with spontaneism. Benjamin's writings from the mid-1920s onwards apply the theory of a radically indeterminate history to a theory of political organisation and action. 'The classless society,' is thus 'not the final goal of historical progress, but the ultimate success of the often-frustrated attempts to interrupt it.'<sup>64</sup> Benjamin urges that there cannot be *progress* towards communism; to think this possible is to misunderstand the dynamic of subversion and reaction which defines historical struggles: 'History knows nothing of the bad infinity [*schlechten Unendlichkeit*] contained in the image of the two combatants [capitalist and worker] locked in perpetual struggle.'<sup>65</sup> History, Benjamin contends, knows nothing of Manichean images.

Insight into the messianic opportunities structuring history gives rise to the political 'task' of 'deciding' at every juncture, and 'there is not a single moment that does not carry with it *its own* revolutionary opportunity.'<sup>66</sup> Benjamin sees in history a radically open (but not thereby formless or unstructured) process, and with this the possibility of alternative courses of development being taken just when everything seems governed by fate. Redemptive history properly construed (and this means breaking with the idea that theology implies preordination) provides an archetype of this: it offers a way of thinking history at odds with fatalism or foreclosure. To

---

<sup>63</sup> GS 1, p. 1243.

<sup>64</sup> GS 1, p. 1231.

<sup>65</sup> GS 4, p. 122; 'One-Way Street' in *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, op. cit., p. 80 (amended).

<sup>66</sup> GS 1, p. 1231.

understand historical time redemptively means to have a basis for acting politically in the here and now rather than a deferred future. Whether or not this amounts, in the words of one critic, to 'actionistic naïvete',<sup>67</sup> that it leaves political judgement at the mercy of arbitrariness, the attempt to think history in such a way as would allow intervention is surely a laudable one. The twist to this analysis is Benjamin's belief that in the name of openness, neo-Kantianism and social democracy have paradoxically achieved just the opposite: fulfilling precisely what they decried in Marxism, they have foreclosed the future, leaving no justification for the politics they would incite. Thus one important upshot of the critique of neo-Kantianism is that the openness which Benjamin thinks characteristic of historical time is not to be confused with an abstract or spurious openness towards the future, one which 'trusts in the endlessness of time'. In distancing himself from neo-Kantianism Benjamin realises the need to distinguish the openness of the historical object from a spurious infinity of historical time. The critique of neo-Kantianism thereby involves developing a paradoxical and dialectical qualification to his conception of history: now history is seen to be both open and bounded, its openness consists precisely in the potential it leaves for a transcendence of history's bad infinity.

A reconstruction of Benjamin's critique of neo-Kantianism sheds light on the origins of many of his distinctive theories of time, history and politics. Yet it also demonstrates the ambivalent relation in which he stood to his own philosophical background. It underlines the fact that despite his antipathy towards neo-Kantianism, and despite the vehemence with which he criticised the philosophy in which he was schooled, Benjamin never definitively broke with that philosophy. His critique of Kant and neo-Kantianism even in its most hostile moments shares many of the assumptions of each; thus his invocation of the religious category of messianic time as an antidote to the formalism of the transcendental aesthetic resembles a tendency of neo-Kantianism itself to combine critical and metaphysical or pre-critical modes of philosophising. Such an invocation of theology lends credence to Adorno's picture of

---

<sup>67</sup> Rolf Tiedemann, 'Historical Materialism or Political Messianism? An Interpretation of the Theses "On the Concept of History"', in G. Smith (ed.), *Benjamin: Philosophy, Aesthetics, History*, op. cit., p. 198.



'Benjamin's indifference to the Kantian restrictions on philosophy'.<sup>68</sup> The contradictory character of this critique is further complicated by the fact that Benjamin seems to borrow his most powerful argument from a very different tradition of Kant criticism: it was Hegel who had criticised the 'bad infinity' of Kant's theoretical and practical philosophy, an infinite whose unattainability testifies 'not to its grandeur but its defect.'<sup>69</sup> Similarly it was Hegel who, before Benjamin, expresses the movement of a quantitative into a qualitative alteration as an interruption, a 'leap'. In his haste to avoid Hegel, a thinker who he says 'totally repelled him',<sup>70</sup> Benjamin may have overlooked many resources for just the critique which he seeks to mobilise. The fact that instead he draws his philosophical armature from pre-critical thinkers such as Leibniz (thus the use of ideas such as monadology and entelechy) may be seen to weaken the critical force of his engagement with Kant.

The problems raised by Benjamin's use of metaphysical ideas are taken up in the next chapter by means of an assessment of the importance of Leibniz's monadology to Benjamin's own 'monadological' method. Recognising the influence of Leibnizian metaphysics on the philosophical foundations of this critical method also means acknowledging the difficulties to which it gives rise, the limits of its compatibility with dialectics and with Marxism. When Adorno characterises Benjamin's as a 'philosophy of fragmentation' he points to the potential complicity of this metaphysical aspect of Benjamin's thinking, and the problems it poses not only for Benjamin's Marxism but also for his conception of history.<sup>71</sup>

---

<sup>68</sup> Adorno, 'Introduction to Benjamin's *Schriften*' in Gary Smith (ed.), *On Walter Benjamin*, op. cit., p. 7.

<sup>69</sup> Hegel, *Science of Logic*, op. cit., p. 149. Benjamin's acknowledgement of Hegel is to be found at GS 1, p. 1177.

<sup>70</sup> *Briefe*, p. 171; *Correspondence*, p. 113.

<sup>71</sup> One might be forgiven for thinking that debate over the merits over 'infinite progress' was peculiar only to a bygone age, one inspired by the promise of boundless scientific or economic development. That this is not the case is evinced by an unexpected revival of this issue in contemporary thought, a revival which serves to demonstrate that Benjamin's analysis (despite the faults pinpointed above) is still topical and pertinent. The persistence of this problematic can be demonstrated by reference to the recent work of Jacques Derrida which, drawing upon Benjaminian concepts, attempts to establish a 'deconstructive politics'.

In a work from 1991 entitled *The Other Heading*, Derrida describes the democratic ideal as a 'promise', expositing it by analogy with Kant's 'infinite task'. The promise denotes in ethical terms what the notion of *différance* is designed to achieve in 'deconstructing' the 'metaphysics of presence'. The promise provides a model of temporality which highlights the moral implications of that



---

deconstruction. A promise is for Derrida something which is by its very nature *futural*: it is a performative announcement which is never fulfilled in a temporal present. To say, however, that it is futural is for Derrida insufficient, since our conception of the future tense itself rests on a temporal prejudice: the future tense is a future *present*. To avoid this Derrida introduces the notion of the 'to come' or *à-venir*, a pun on the French term for 'the future'. Writing 'the future' as 'to come' transforms it from a future present to something always in advance of the present. To then characterise democracy as a promise means to say that democracy can never be achieved in a present, it is always 'to come'; it is an endlessly renewed and incomplete task. Derrida says that such a continual reprojecting of democracy implies 'infinite vigilance'. Politically, he admits, it is a notion of democracy which 'will no longer be "revolutionary," and it must take its time'. [Jacques Derrida, *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today's Europe* trans. Pascale-Anne Brault & Michael B. Naas (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), p. 108]. In a contemporaneous essay, 'Force of Law: The "Mystical Foundation of Authority,"' part of which comprises a reading of Benjamin's 'Towards a Critique of Violence,' he again invokes the *à-venir*, this time in Benjamin's name. For Benjamin, he says, democracy is always 'to come'. [Derrida, "'Force of Law: The "Mystical Foundation of Authority"' in Drucilla Cornell *et al.* (eds.), *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 39]. A subsequent book *Specters of Marx* again replays the theme of the *à-venir*, this time finding it prefigured in Marx's understanding of 'communism'. Marx, according to Derrida, theorises time futurally: for him communism is never realised in a present but is 'distinguished...from every living present understood as plenitude of presence-to-itself.' [Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, The Work of Mourning and the New International* trans. Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 99]. In Marx, the future 'is not described, it is not foreseen in the constative mode; it is announced, promised, called for in a performative mode.' (ibid, p. 103) The promise here carries a temporality of a task, a task Derrida describes as 'messianic' with repeated allusions to Benjamin. The 'messianic' names, in Derrida's words, an 'historical opening to the future', but also, crucially, 'a structure of experience rather than a religion,' (ibid., p. 167) an experience of 'waiting without horizon of expectation.' (ibid., p. 168). There should be no expectation because 'if one could count on what is coming, hope would be but the calculation of a program. One would have the prospect but one would no longer wait for anything or anyone.' (Ibid., p. 169). Although Derrida (with some qualifications) defines both democracy and now communism along Kantian lines - as regulative ideas - he misrepresents the lineage of his own thinking. The notion of democracy as always 'to come' owes more to what Scholem calls 'the messianic idea in Judaism' than it does to Kant. Furthermore, with this formulation of messianism as an infinite task he comes closer to Cohen than he ever does to Benjamin. (It is perhaps no mere coincidence that Derrida was also writing on Cohen at the same time as formulating this political theory. [See Derrida, 'Interpretations at War: Kant, the Jew, the German', *New Literary History* 22 (1) Winter 1991, pp. 39-95. For a critique of Derrida's essay see Gillian Rose, 'Of Derrida's Spirit', *Judaism and Modernity: Philosophical Essays*, op. cit., especially pp. 79-87.] Derrida sees Benjamin's concept of the messianic as a regulative idea, as always 'to come'. However, in the light of the exposition of the term 'messianic' given in this chapter, in particular its role in providing a critical response to Cohen's moral task, it should be clear that Derrida's invocation of Benjamin is misplaced and inaccurate. In Benjamin's name Derrida has returned the messianic interpretation of communism and the communist interpretation of messianism to Cohen's philosophy, thus overlooking Benjamin's strong antipathy to the idea that communism should be grasped in terms of Kantian practical reason. This misreading would be of merely scholarly interest did it not have ramifications for Derrida's own thought: his interpretations perform considerable labour in the attempt to establish a deconstructive politics. What has been said thus far of Benjamin's real understanding of the 'messianic' should point up the weaknesses in Derrida's own ideas of democracy, of communism, and indeed of temporality.

---

Derrida shows an inability to think politically just that which Benjamin's notion of the messianic was designed to capture: 'sudden change' (*Briefe*, p. 425, *Correspondence*, p. 300). In writing communism as 'to come' Derrida commits what is for Benjamin the dangerous error of conflating the time of a classless society with the time of class-ridden society (cf. GS 1, p. 1245). It fails to appreciate that the deferral of our political aspirations is something at which our present society proves highly adept. Attempting to theorise an 'historical opening to the future', Derrida thinks instead only the closure of an unattainable goal. Derrida's Messiah is not God but Godot.

Benjamin says at one point that the infinite task is like climbing a mountain in which each crest that is reached proves to be only an illusion of the summit; the peak 'seems ever to back away' revealing yet another to be climbed, so that 'the goal flees totally ungraspable into the distance.' This is, he says a 'perfectly empty kind of infinity'. (GS 6, p. 53) Derrida's politics of the 'to come' - and in this he shows the persistent and pervasive influence of neo-Kantianism - can be pictured as just such an ever-retreating goal, a perfectly empty kind of infinity. The unattainability of the deconstructive infinite attests not to its grandeur but its defect.



## IV

### A Philosophy of Fragmentation

#### Introduction

The aim of the present chapter is to explore what Benjamin understands by 'the monadological structure of the historical object'<sup>1</sup> and to argue that this predication rests in turn upon another, that history's 'original vocation' is 'remembrance'.<sup>2</sup> In what follows it will be proposed that these two qualities of the 'historical object' are intimately linked, and that recognising that *remembrance, like history, is monadological* provides an invaluable key to understanding Benjamin's thought. This, of course, begs the question of what is meant by 'monadology'. To answer this requires a discourse on method: it demands that we follow the development of Benjamin's historical methodology from the early *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* to the late *Passagen-Werk*. Benjamin himself relates the methodological elements of these two texts: in a letter to Scholem he writes that the *Passagen-Werk*, like the book on German *Trauerspiel* will need 'an introduction which deals with the theory of knowledge, and this time, especially with the theory of the knowledge of history.'<sup>3</sup>

As well as illuminating the role played by memory and remembrance in structuring Benjamin's philosophy of historical time, the discussion that follows will throw into relief the strengths and weaknesses of his method. In particular it will allow

---

<sup>1</sup> GS 5, p. 594 (N10, 3); 'Konvolut 'N'', p. 66.

<sup>2</sup> GS 1, p. 1231.

<sup>3</sup> *Briefe*, p. 506; *Correspondence*, p. 359 (amended).



an assessment of significant criticisms made by Adorno of the 'fragmentary' nature of Benjamin's method and the 'lack of mediations' in his critical practice. Exploring and evaluating this use of monadology equally serves to highlight the complex and often contradictory philosophical lineage of Benjamin's thinking, in particular his relation to Leibniz and to critical philosophy. This appropriation of Leibniz centres around the contention that each temporal moment contains in latent form the collected or recollected entirety of history; particularity (e.g. individual memory, the instant) is understood as a compressed representation of the whole ('collective consciousness', the entire span of past history). Adorno's dialogue with Benjamin restages critical philosophy's encounter with metaphysics: his critique of the monadological method invokes (explicitly) Hegel and (implicitly) Hegel's criticisms of Leibniz. For Adorno, the 'immediacy' in the Leibnizian account of the relation between 'monad' (particular) and 'universe' (universal) is a significant flaw, especially when applied to social and historical questions. Adorno asks the searching question of whether it is possible to employ monadology as a critical method once it is acknowledged that monads replicate the illusory veneer of individuality or immediacy which attends modern conditions of production.



*'It is certain that whoever could write the history of his own life from its very ground would have thereby grasped in a brief conspectus the history of the universe.'*

Schelling, *Ages of the World*

### **'Methodological Observations'**

In a letter written during the composition of his work on German *Trauerspiel*, Benjamin announces that the work's Prologue is to involve a series of 'methodological observations' on the study of literature.<sup>4</sup> Although couched in the language of philosophical aesthetics and informed by neo-Kantian *Erkenntniskritik* ('critique of knowledge'), the Prologue amounts to much more than that. Indeed Benjamin's '*Erkenntniskritische Vorrede*' can be seen as a methodological preface to his thought in general; the philosophical and historiographical approaches of his later work find expression here in germinal form in this critique of aesthetic categorisation and periodisation. Under the guise of a critique of aesthetic knowledge, Benjamin reflects upon the grounds of knowledge *per se*.

The Prologue sets forth a definition of philosophy's task as 'the representation [*Darstellung*] of Ideas'.<sup>5</sup> Through a critique of aesthetic methodology it develops philosophical themes which exceed their sheerly aesthetic deployment in the work itself. On the one hand Benjamin castigates an 'inductive methodology' which 'abstracts...rules and laws' from particulars on the grounds that it risks 'nominalism'

---

<sup>4</sup> *Briefe*, p. 342; *Correspondence*, p. 238.

<sup>5</sup> GS 1, p. 214; *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, op. cit., p. 34.

and, by implication, 'scepticism'.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand he rejects a deductive method which can only 'project a pseudo-logical continuum' of concepts and attempt to fit particulars under it.<sup>7</sup> Criticising both induction and deduction, Benjamin urges that the truth can be revealed only by a specific *configuration* of particulars in the Idea, for which he provides a formula - 'Ideas are to things as constellations are to stars'.<sup>8</sup> A configuration of objects or phenomena in the Idea is at the same their 'salvation': when seen 'as points in such constellations, phenomena are subdivided [*aufgeteilt*] and at the same time redeemed [*gerettet*].'<sup>9</sup> This Ovidian metamorphosis of phenomena rescues the empirical by revealing its truth-content, its expression of universality. Yet thought can only apprehend the timeless Idea virtually, by means of concepts; similarly, it is only through concepts that the subdivision and redemption of phenomena can occur. To have recognised this was the merit of the great 'systems' of ideas. Although Plato, Leibniz and Hegel<sup>10</sup> are mentioned at this point, Benjamin proceeds to explicate his philosophical method with reference to only the first two thinkers. He takes as a prototype for a method which would avoid both induction and deduction the account in Plato's *Symposium* of an Erotic 'ascension' from sensible particulars to the realm of truth. The *Symposium*, Benjamin points out, 'presents truth - the realm of ideas - as the essential content of beauty. It declares truth to be beautiful' and classifies it in terms of 'the stages of erotic desires.'<sup>11</sup> According to the *Symposium* Eros holds to that in the particular which partakes of the Idea of the Beautiful; passing from a sense of physical beauty to moral beauty and the beauty of knowledge until attaining the True itself.<sup>12</sup> Whilst 'ascension' appears to imply the derivation and induction already criticised, and the more familiar Platonic model by which phenomena 'partake' of the forms seems to imply a similarly questionable deduction, Benjamin gives his reading of Plato a Leibnizian twist by construing it as highlighting the presence of the Idea, the universal, within particulars themselves.

---

<sup>6</sup> GS 1, p. 221; *Origin*, pp. 40-41.

<sup>7</sup> GS 1, pp. 223-5; *Origin*, pp. 42-44.

<sup>8</sup> GS 1, p. 214; *Origin*, p. 34.

<sup>9</sup> GS 1, p. 215; *Origin*, p. 34

<sup>10</sup> GS 1, p. 212; *Origin*, p. 32.

<sup>11</sup> GS 1, pp. 210-11; *Origin*, pp. 30-31.

<sup>12</sup> Plato, *The Symposium*, trans. W. Hamilton, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1951), p. 94-5.



For the remainder of the Prologue it is Leibniz who becomes Benjamin's philosophical interlocuter, something which is significant for any understanding of these methodological observations and for any understanding of Benjamin's use of the 'monad' more generally. In a letter from this period written to his friend Florence Christian Rang (the only person he believed qualified to fully understand the *Trauerspiel* book) Benjamin explains that his aim in the Prologue is to augment a Platonic conception of the Idea with aspects of Leibnizian metaphysics: 'Ideas' intensive infinitude characterises them as monads....I am adopting Leibniz's concept of the monad for a definition of ideas.'<sup>13</sup> This comment is revealing and makes comprehensible not only the more difficult themes of the Prologue but also Benjamin's use of Leibniz's terms elsewhere. But what does it mean? To grasp the meaning of 'intensive infinitude' it is helpful to set out Leibniz's intention in formulating the notion of the monad. This is helpful for the further reason that Benjamin himself never explicitly addresses the question of his relationship to Leibniz's philosophy. His appropriation of the terms 'monad' and 'monadology' is typically decontextualised from the original metaphysical dispute in which they were formulated.

Leibniz's monad was devised as a response to a perceived inadequacy in the attempts of Descartes, Spinoza and the atomists to understand substance. His belief was that their philosophies foundered when required to justify the relation between parts and whole which their account of substance entailed. Leibniz's solution to their difficulties involved proposing a model of simple substance that in some way reflects the whole. The problem with which Leibniz wrestled was how to retain the distinction between parts and whole whilst holding to the immanence of the one in the other. His answer was to assert that while the part cannot contain the whole in *complete* form, it can contain it either as a partial representation, or as a potential to be realised. The monad's quality of representing the whole he terms 'perception', the potential for unfolding the whole, 'appetition'. Perception itself is twofold since it can be either an unconscious representation or consciousness proper ('apperception'); the former is described as the perception involved in a 'deep dreamless sleep...or a swoon', the

---

<sup>13</sup> *Briefe*, p. 323; *Correspondence*, p. 224.

latter is distinguished by its being 'accompanied by memory'.<sup>14</sup> Both perception and appetite are essential characteristics of the monad: if there were only perception then the representation of the whole in each monad would be static; appetite names the latency inherent in each monad, the dynamic movement which makes possible the representation of the whole in its diversity. The relation *between* the monads thereby becomes significant: each 'monad', according to Leibniz, is simple indivisible substance exhibiting an intrinsic self-sufficiency or autarky which leaves it unaffected by other monads. Its only relationship is to the whole which it 'expresses', an infinite which, because it is immanent to the monad itself, is intensive rather than (as on Descartes' model) extensive; a monad's infinity is thus qualitative rather than quantitative, intensive rather than extensive.

Benjamin's intention in invoking Leibniz's terminology during the Prologue appears to be twofold. Firstly it offers a more adequate account of the relation of particularity to universality than he finds in Platonic derivation and Kantian deduction, and when used as a characteristic of the idea, a more adequate theory of truth. Secondly, in the notion of 'appetition' it provides a teleology which does justice to what he sees as the essential *dynamic* of the object of knowledge. 'The tendency of all philosophical conceptualisation is thus redefined in the old sense: to establish the becoming of phenomena in their being. For in philosophical science [*Wissenschaft*] the concept of being is not satisfied by the phenomena until it has absorbed all its history.'<sup>15</sup> Consistent with Leibniz, the epistemological and vital aspects of monadology are united in the underlying theme of the Prologue - that the whole (truth) necessarily stands in a dynamical relation to the part (phenomena).

That 'philosophy is meant to name the Idea, as Adam named nature'<sup>16</sup> indicates the unusual amalgamation of Platonism and theology which defines this early conception of the philosophical project: the ascent from sensible particulars to the realm of truth (the Idea) is at the same time the recovery of the original meaning of objects, lost in the multiplication of languages and meanings. The need for

---

<sup>14</sup> Leibniz, 'Principles of Nature and of Grace', §4, *Philosophical Writings*, ed. G. H. R. Parkinson, trans. Mary Morris & G. H. R. Parkinson, (London: Dent, 1973), p. 197

<sup>15</sup> GS 1, p. 228; *Origin*, p. 47 (amended).

<sup>16</sup> *Briefe*, p. 323; *Correspondence*, op. cit., p. 224.



configuration is given by the multiplicity of names (meanings) in a lapsarian world: 'philosophy is - and rightly so - a struggle for the representation of a limited number of words which always remain the same - a struggle for the representation of ideas.'<sup>17</sup> This clearly problematic notion of the 'word' need not concern us here, for the aim of this reconstruction is merely to contextualise the later invocation of monadology as a philosophical-historical method. It is sufficient to note that this lapsarian account of language becomes very much marginalised in Benjamin's application of monadology to the 'historical object'. For the purposes of the present argument then, for which this exposition serves as a preamble, what is important is the use of a Leibnizian framework as a means of arriving at philosophical truths. That framework allows a critique and a modification of the philosophical procedures of induction and deduction as traditionally conceived.

Consistent with Leibnizian monadology, the 'Prologue' does not set the particular against the whole, the fragment against the system,<sup>18</sup> but sees the former as the *mirror* of the latter. Monadology, Benjamin stresses, concerns itself with the 'totality'; it is invoked in order to sophisticate, rather than undermine, systematic philosophy. A philosophy can therefore be 'systematically oriented' without being 'systematically developed'.<sup>19</sup> It is merely the method of approach to this totality which is different from that taken by systematic philosophy. Benjamin concludes: 'And so the real world could well constitute a task [*Aufgabe*], in the sense that it would be a question of penetrating so deeply into everything real as to thereby reveal an objective interpretation of the world. In the light of such a task of penetration it is not surprising that the philosopher of the *Monadology* was also the founder of the infinitesimal calculus.'<sup>20</sup> Monadology ironically inverts the infinite task into an infinitesimal task -

---

<sup>17</sup> GS 1, p. 217; *Origin*, p. 37.

<sup>18</sup> As Anson Rabinach argues in his Introduction to Gershom Scholem (ed.), *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem 1932-1940*, trans. Gary Smith & Andre Lefevere (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. xx. In a similar vein Michael Jennings argues that Benjamin's use of the fragment is directed against the idea of totality. See Jennings, *Dialectical Images: Walter Benjamin's Theory of Literary Criticism*, op. cit., p. 46.

<sup>19</sup> Benjamin cited in Irving Wohlfarth, 'On The Messianic Structure of Walter Benjamin's Last Reflections', op. cit., p. 212, n. 52.

<sup>20</sup> GS 1, p. 228; *Origin*, p. 48.



one of interpolating into the minutiae of perception and experience so as to reveal the totality represented, however partially, within.

### Monadology as Historiographical Method

The use of monadology in the Prologue to the *Trauerspielbuch* contextualises and illuminates its subsequent reformulation in the methodological ‘preface’ to the *Passagen-Werk* and *Über den Begriff der Geschichte*. ‘Konvolut N’, the set of notes on the ‘theory of the knowledge of history’, and the similarly inspired theses ‘On the Concept of History’, can now be examined more fully in the light of the early work. Whilst formally resembling a neo-Kantian preoccupation with the justification of knowledge, these works display a philosophical content which is predominantly Leibnizian. The idea of applying monadology to historical study, although prefigured in Benjamin’s early messianic writings, can be traced in this instance to his readings of Hermann Lotze during the preparation of the *Passagen-Werk*. It appears that Lotze’s mobilisation of Leibnizian metaphysics against the Kantian critical philosophy, and in particular against the formalism of Kant’s conception of time,<sup>21</sup> proved influential upon Benjamin’s thinking at this point.

Both the monad’s qualities of ‘perception’ and ‘appetition’ are invoked in the ‘Konvolut ‘N’’ and the ‘Theses’, but this time they are expounded as characteristics not of the ‘monadic structure of the Idea’ but of the ‘monadological structure of the historical object’. The ‘historical object’ (*Gegenstand der Geschichte*) names both historical phenomena and history-as-object and fuses the epistemological and dynamic characteristics of the monad. Like the phenomena rescued in the constellation of the Idea, the historical object is ‘whatever is redeemed by knowledge’.<sup>22</sup> What was for Leibniz an account of the temporal latency of simple substance becomes for Benjamin a model of historical time where future, present and past interpenetrate. For Leibniz, ‘every individual substance involves in its perfect notion the whole universe, and

---

<sup>21</sup> See for instance Hermann Lotze, *System of Philosophy, vol.2, Metaphysic*, trans. Bernard Bosanquet (Oxford: Clarendon, 1884), esp. p. 246.

<sup>22</sup> GS 5, p. 595-6 (N11, 4); ‘Konvolut ‘N’’, p. 67.

everything existing in it, past, present and future.’<sup>23</sup> ‘The present is big with the future and laden with the past’ such that ‘in the smallest substance eyes as piercing as those of God could read the whole sequence of things in the universe: ‘The things that are, the things that have been, and those that are presently to come.’<sup>24</sup> In similar terms Benjamin contends that ‘the historical object, by virtue of its monadological structure, discovers within itself its own fore-history [*Vorgeschichte*] and after-history [*Nachgeschichte*].’<sup>25</sup> The historical object’s capacity for representation is at once its entelechy, since the whole strives towards its own more adequate expression. Thus history, in Benjamin’s words, ‘bears its end [*Ende*] within itself’;<sup>26</sup> this end is nothing other than history’s complete revelation. In its ‘striving’ (Leibniz, Benjamin) or ‘heliotropy’ (Benjamin) the isolated historical monad thus betrays the most ‘inconspicuous’ and yet significant of transformations.<sup>27</sup> The historiographical method to which these twin definitions of the historical object gives rise is, like the epistemological method of the Prologue, a relentless interpolation into minutiae, in the cause of revealing both the object’s fore- and after-history and the dynamic by which the historical totality seeks to manifest itself therein. As historiographical method, monadology seeks to make unconscious representation into distinct apperception; with its help the historian’s eyes can aspire to become ‘as piercing as those of God.’

The ‘theory of the knowledge of history’ which underlies Benjamin’s late studies, like the ‘critique of knowledge’ which organised the Prologue, attempts to expose the limitations and weaknesses of inductive and deductive method, only this time in the context of the philosophy of history and historiography. Benjamin declares against, on the one hand, the attempt to subsume particular historical objects (events, phenomena) under a predetermined schema, a schema which is itself typically ahistorical, ‘eternal’. On the other hand, he indicts a method which seeks to establish ‘a causal connection between various moments in history’.<sup>28</sup> In both cases universal claims concerning

---

<sup>23</sup> Leibniz, ‘Primary Truths’ in *Philosophical Writings*, op. cit., p. 90.

<sup>24</sup> Leibniz, ‘New Essays on the Human Understanding’ in *Philosophical Writings*, op. cit., p. 156.

<sup>25</sup> GS 5, p. 594 (N10, 3); ‘Konvolut ‘N’’ p. 66.

<sup>26</sup> GS 5, p. 59; *Charles Baudelaire*, p. 176.

<sup>27</sup> GS 1, p. 694-5; ‘Theses’ in *Illuminations*, p. 255.

<sup>28</sup> GS 1, p. 704; ‘Theses’ in *Illuminations*, p. 263.



history rest upon an unexamined assumption of temporal continuity: their method 'is additive; it musters a mass of data to fill the homogeneous, empty time.'<sup>29</sup>

'Konvolut 'N'' along with the 'Theses' in their various stages of completion show Benjamin working out his own ambivalent relationship to universal history. Between these sets of formulations he both calls for its 'destruction [*Abbau*]'<sup>30</sup> and offers a qualified defence of it: 'Not every universal history need be reactionary. Universal history without a constructive principle *is*, though. The constructive principle of universal history makes possible the representation of the universal in the partial. It is in other words monadological.'<sup>31</sup> To 'destroy' universal history clearly does not imply its eradication, its abstract negation; on the contrary the invocation of monadology is intended to *rescue* the critical potential of the philosophy of history by redefining it: 'the genuine concept of universal history is a messianic one'.<sup>32</sup> A monadological or messianic conception of history differs from an inductive approach by recognising the universal within each moment of historical time, or rather by perceiving (counterfactually) the potential gathering of time which each temporal moment presents. 'Every moment' is thus 'one of judgment over particular preceding moments.'<sup>33</sup> From this account of the universality latent within particular moments of time follows an approach which, whilst still recognisably situated within the tradition of universal history, diverges from its previous formulations in that history's meaningfulness is understood to be visible within particular events rather than in their progressive succession.

The sense of 'monadology' in this critique of historiography has not diverged as far from its original Leibnizian meaning as may appear.<sup>34</sup> To set a monadological conception of time against the purely homogeneous conception visible in existing historiography entails adopting in turn Leibniz's own understanding of the monad as

---

<sup>29</sup> GS 1, p. 704; 'Theses' in *Illuminations*, p. 263.

<sup>30</sup> GS 1, p. 1240.

<sup>31</sup> GS 1, p. 1234.

<sup>32</sup> GS 5, p. 608 (N18, 3); 'Konvolut 'N'', p. 80.

<sup>33</sup> GS 1, p. 1245.

<sup>34</sup> For a view of the relation between Benjamin and Leibniz which emphasises their differences see Andrew Benjamin, 'Time and Task: Benjamin and Heidegger Showing the Present' in Andrew Benjamin & Peter Osborne (eds.), *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy: Destruction and Experience*, op. cit., pp. 237-9.



non-extended substance. Again it should be borne in mind that Leibniz conceived the monad as a means of exposing flaws in the Cartesian view of substance as something extended, quantitative and continuous. For Leibniz 'extension is nothing but an abstraction [which] presupposes some quality, some attribute, some nature in the thing, which quality extends or diffuses itself along with the thing.'<sup>35</sup> Retained in Benjamin's usage of 'monadology' as a model of historical time is this recognition of the purely quantitative as an abstraction in which the qualitative is concealed. If the homogeneous and continuous conception of time upon which existing historiography rests is nothing but an abstraction from time's qualitative character, then a monadological account of time cannot but take up a critical relation to history as commonly conceived. Monadology in Benjamin's hands opposes the intensive universality of the instant to the extensive, purely quantitative, continuum of time - the only conception within which 'progress' is meaningful. Benjamin's own descriptions of the qualitatively structured nature of time show that he not unaware of what is entailed by redefining historical time monadologically, and that he ~~is~~ acknowledges the lineage and origin of his philosophical concepts.

If the Prologue understands truth to consist in 'the sum total of all possible meaningful juxtaposition' of Ideas, then in the 'Preface' to the *Passagen-Werk*, historical truths are to emerge from the precisely crafted juxtaposition of past and present events. The 'constellation' of the Prologue becomes the 'construction' of 'Konvolut 'N'', an arrangement or configuration of particulars from which historical truths may be read off. The specifications given to the constructive method show the extent of the continuity between the monadology of Benjamin's early work and that of his last works: construction involves 'carrying the montage principle over into history. Building up the large structures out of the smallest, precisely fashioned structural elements. Detecting the crystal of the total event in the analysis of the simple, individual moment'.<sup>36</sup>

The difference between the early and later senses of monadology is that now it takes on 'materialist' qualifications: as an account of the relation between part and

---

<sup>35</sup> Leibniz cited in translator's introduction to *The Monadology*, trans. Robert Latta (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1898), p. 28, n. 2.

<sup>36</sup> GS 5, p. 575 (N2, 6); 'Konvolut 'N'', p. 48.

whole, between phenomena and truth, monadology provides not just an approach to universal history which would avoid deduction and derivation but also a way of thinking about social phenomena. In Benjamin's hands it becomes a timely response to a situation in which it has become increasingly difficult to divine the social totality: under such circumstances the question of how to pass from the observation of isolated phenomena to general reflection upon society and history becomes all the more difficult. In the *Passagen-Werk* this is formulated as a Marxian problematic: how to uncover social relations from their own self-produced illusions of immediacy, when society commonly appears in its most elemental, that is, unmediated, form.<sup>37</sup> For Benjamin, Marx's analysis of the commodity expresses the problem of induction eloquently, since the commodity in its apparent immediacy and self-sufficiency both conceals and yet points towards the entire set of social relations which constitute commodity-producing society. In the context of this illusory (though nonetheless 'real') immediacy, monadology becomes a critical and defetishising approach to historical and social analysis. Yet its critical deployment carries with it a significant danger, as will become clear: whilst the intention is to reveal the universal in the particular, to detect 'the crystal of the total event in the analysis of the simple, individual moment', its result often appears as a fetishism of the immediate.

### Monadological Memory

In informing his belief that the 'historical object' is structured monadologically, the importance of Benjamin's understanding of memory cannot be overestimated. If history is a form of remembrance then both can be expected to share the same fundamental characteristics. That remembrance is, like history, monadological is confirmed in Benjamin's writings on Proust. These writings in turn reveal the benefits and limitations of moving directly from personal psychological memory to collective

---

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. I, trans. Ben Fowkes, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), p. 125.



memory and history. Benjamin believed the *Passagen-Werk* to be undertaking for the presentation of history what Proust had achieved with respect to an individual life.<sup>38</sup>

Benjamin draws upon Proust's rich descriptions of the fortune and work of memory whilst distancing himself from their individualism. Proust's model of memory amounts to a relentless attention to minutiae; it stakes itself on the belief that in the most innocuous objects of experience, in the smallest details, one may find withheld an entire lived past. In the involuntary reminiscence, Proust tells us, 'the materials of memory no longer appear singly, as images, but tell us about a whole [*Ganze*]'.<sup>39</sup> Whereas 'an experienced [*erlebtes*] event is finite,...a remembered [*erinnertes*] event is infinite [*schrackenlos*], because it is a key to everything that happened before and after it'.<sup>40</sup> The remembered event opens monadologically onto all that preceded and succeeded it. Correspondingly, it is the task of the work of remembrance to rescue all that is thus involuntarily evoked. 'What Proust began so playfully became awesomely serious....remembrance advances from small to smallest details, from the smallest to the infinitesimal, while that which it encounters in these microcosms grows ever mightier.'<sup>41</sup> Not only does Proustian memory exhibit the monad's quality of 'perception', it also captures its dynamic 'appetition': in the involuntary reminiscence it is as if past time itself strives towards its own manifestation.

But for Benjamin the resources which Proust provides for theorising the power of remembrance are qualified by the problematic assumptions upon which his writing rests, the impoverished experience which his defence of memory implicitly articulates. The hard lesson of *À la recherche* is that it is only by chance that one comes upon the key which might unlock the 'microcosm' of life-history, and where remembrance is thus serendipitous it is, paradoxically, melancholic: 'The wrinkles and creases on our faces are the registration of the great passions, vices, insights that called on us; but we,

---

<sup>38</sup> GS 5, p. 580 (N4, 3); 'Konvolut 'N'', p. 52.

<sup>39</sup> GS 2, p. 323; 'The Image of Proust' in *Illuminations*, p. 214.

<sup>40</sup> GS 2, p. 312; 'The Image of Proust' in *Illuminations*, p. 202.

<sup>41</sup> GS 6, p. 467-8; 'A Berlin Chronicle' in *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, p. 295-6. One implication of Benjamin's interpretation is that Proust's writing is not - as Gilles Deleuze has characterised it - a 'deviant monadology', but rather a perfectly *orthodox* monadology. See Deleuze, *Proust and Signs* trans. Richard Howard (New York: Braziller, 1972).

the masters, were not home.’<sup>42</sup> For Benjamin, Proust’s defence of *fortuna*, of chance, unwittingly testifies to an experience become routine and habitual; his writing is ‘nonchalant’ with regard to this, its own precondition, and instead of acknowledging the deterioration of experience it seeks to preserve its purity by individualising it. Proust aestheticises remembrance and in the same movement, delimits it. His definition of ‘art’ as the act of ‘gymnastics’ by which an artist’s own experiences are translated into ‘generalities’<sup>43</sup> exposes the limitations of his monadology. The ‘brief lightning flashes’ of reminiscence attest to the fact that an entire life can be ‘illuminated’, ‘restored to its true pristine shape’, but only - crucially - ‘within the confines of a book’.<sup>44</sup> Memory becomes a solitary act of autobiography. For Proust - and Benjamin’s judgement is crushing - ‘redemption is my private show’.<sup>45</sup>

In its individualism, its restriction of reminiscence to the purview of living memory Proust’s work attests to a deterioration of tradition, the dissolution of an earlier form of remembrance. ‘Proust could appear as an unprecedented phenomenon only in a generation that had lost all bodily, natural substitutes for remembering [*Eingedenken*], and, poorer than before, was left to its own devices, and thus could only get hold of [its past] in an isolated, scattered, and pathological fashion’.<sup>46</sup> The difficulty for Benjamin is that this pathological element of the involuntary reminiscence threatens to taint his own use of the concept. Any historical translation of Proust’s terms would need to rid involuntary memory of the accent of individualism which attends it and the pathological arbitrariness with which it operates. When involuntary memory is equated with the retroactive effect of political action the dangers are exacerbated further. A translation of these redemptive powers of Proustian reminiscence into qualities of historical remembrance (the actions of a social group, a collective, a class) would need to critically thematise the psychologism and individualism in their original formulation,<sup>47</sup> otherwise the idea of a collective

---

<sup>42</sup> GS 2, p. 321; ‘The Image of Proust’ in *Illuminations*, p. 211-12.

<sup>43</sup> Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, vol. 6: *Time Regained*, op. cit., p. 275.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 457.

<sup>45</sup> GS 1, p. 643, n.; *Charles Baudelaire*, p. 145, n.

<sup>46</sup> GS 5, p. 490 (K1, 1).

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Robert Alter, *Necessary Angels: Tradition and Modernity in Kafka, Benjamin, and Scholem* (Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard University Press, 1991) p. 106: ‘There were two imaginative steps [Benjamin] found it difficult to take. One was from the Jewish focus on the vista of the past to the



memory could rest methodologically upon a mere aggregation of individual (isolated) memories. For the politicisation of memory to be critical, it would need to problematise the social atomism from which theories such as Proust's derive their legitimacy, but without offsetting this illusory individuality by hypostatising an equally spurious collective. That Benjamin failed to find a way beyond these two possibilities was, as will be seen, Adorno's final judgement upon the *Passagen-Werk*.

Despite diagnosing the privilege afforded to the involuntary as a 'pathological' expression of the decline of tradition, Benjamin still thinks it possible to put Proustian categories to historical or historiographical use. He sees in Proustian memory an analogue of the redemptive power of historical remembrance which highlights the crucial involuntary moment in that act of recovery. He does not wish to completely eclipse the involuntary in reminiscence; the redemption of the past through remembrance requires both elements of the Proustian dualism. The dualism allows him to express the necessarily unexpected and unforeseeable character of redemption along with the instantaneous character of the insight which it affords. Yet in this very enthusiasm for Proust the paradox of Benjamin's relation to his own diagnosis of the decline of tradition becomes clear: the attempt to employ the involuntary reminiscence for a critical historiography stands alongside an awareness of the impoverished experience out of which this form of memory arises.

The more monadology is applied to social and historical questions in Benjamin's writings from the 1930s, the more its potential weaknesses are exposed. It is on the legitimacy of this movement from the most individual experience to the universal or collective, a shift in which the identification of memory and history plays a key role, that the philosophical soundness and political credibility of Benjamin's thinking of historical time seem most open to question. It is hardly surprising that the trajectory of his thought at this point inspired uneasiness in those to whom he revealed his ideas. The above exposition and contextualisation of Benjamin's monadology provides the necessary background to reassess the objections which were levelled at his thinking, in particular, important criticisms posed by Adorno. Such an assessment in turn allows

---

Jewish expectation of a future redemption - a paradox he states at the end of his 'Theses' without satisfactorily explaining. The other was the step from the private, aesthetic revelation of *déjà vu* to the collective memory of revelation that Jewish tradition took as its matrix.'

an answer to the question - what in Benjamin's 'method' is it either possible or necessary to defend?

### A 'Philosophy of Fragmentation'

A criticism made by Adorno of the Prologue to the *Trauerspielbuch* is instructive in that it highlights the ambivalent relation in which he stood to Benjamin's thought. It demonstrates that even in the midst of a seemingly damning critique Adorno could still find elements worthy of commendation and even appropriation in the latter's work. The Prologue, he contends, 'despite marvellous things like the concept of configuration' - fails because of its 'blatant historically oblivious, and in the end, veritably Mythological Platonism, which not by accident must take frequent recourse to phenomenology.'<sup>48</sup> According to Adorno, Benjamin subsequently conceded these points. The vociferousness of this reaction to the book on the German mourning-play sets the scene for the protracted exchange which would take place over Benjamin's later formulations of monadology throughout the latter part of the 1930s. Frequently, it seems that isolated observations on Adorno's part would amount to important and searching criticisms of Benjamin's thought in general.

Adorno's criticisms divide into two elements which he himself often conflates but which it is important to separate: the first is directed at Benjamin's use of the monad, something he thinks implies a wish to render philosophy surrealistic. The second is a critique of the reductive nature of Benjamin's Marxism, that as an explanation of cultural and historical phenomena, it is inadequate. The first element of this criticism stems from Adorno's belief that the monadological or 'micrological' method fetishised the monad or particular in its immediacy, failing to critically interrogate the appearance or illusion (*Schein*) of immediacy which masks a more fundamental mediation. According to Adorno,

---

<sup>48</sup> Adorno cited in Gary Smith, 'Thinking Through Benjamin' in G. Smith (ed.), *Benjamin: Philosophy, Aesthetics, History*, op. cit., p. xxvii.



[Benjamin's] micrological and fragmentary method never entirely integrated the idea of universal mediation [*Vermittlung*], which in Hegel and Marx produces the totality. He never wavered in his fundamental conviction that the smallest cell of observed reality offset [*weige*] the rest of the world. To interpret phenomena materialistically meant for him not so much to elucidate them as products of the social whole but rather to relate them directly, in their isolation, to material tendencies and social struggles.<sup>49</sup>

As should be clear thus far, the fragmentary or the micrological does not 'offset' a preoccupation with the social and historical whole, but merely shifts analytic emphasis onto *particular instantiations* of that whole.<sup>50</sup> Monadology names that capacity to 'detect the crystal of the total event in the analysis of the simple, individual moment'. It addresses the question of how to reconstruct social relations from their own self-produced illusions of immediacy, when society commonly appears in its most 'elemental', that is, unmediated, form. But this project is complicated by the fact that both (Kantian) deduction and (Platonic) derivation have been ruled-out. Benjamin's assumption appears to be that since the illusion of immediacy has itself become 'second nature', no simple derivation of social relations is possible. On the contrary only a shocking juxtaposition of social phenomena may allow insight into the concealed totality. The focus upon 'extremes' in the Prologue and the invocation of surrealism in subsequent works is a response to this state of affairs.

According to Adorno, Benjamin's aim 'was not merely for philosophy to catch up with surrealism, but for it to become surrealistic....[But] his philosophy of fragmentation remained itself fragmentary, the victim, perhaps of a method, the feasibility of which in the medium of thought must remain an open question.'<sup>51</sup> This

---

<sup>49</sup> Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften*, op. cit, vol. 10, part 1, p. 247; *Prisms*, op. cit., p. 236 (amended).

<sup>50</sup> Pierre Missac argues that 'to understand Benjamin's intentions, one would have to stop opposing the fragmentary or rhapsodic presentation to the systematic and the methodical to the chaotic'. On the contrary, he argues, does not 'the aphoristic...influence or lend aid... [to] the systematic'? [Pierre Missac, *Walter Benjamin's Passages*, op. cit., p. 143.] But *pace* Missac there is not simply a relation of influence of support between the fragment and the system; monadology collapses the divide between these two stylistic and methodological approaches.

<sup>51</sup> Adorno, 'A Portrait of Walter Benjamin' in *Prisms*, op. cit., p. 239.

'fragmentary philosophy' had good intentions, though: it 'sought to avoid the danger of estrangement and reification, which threaten to transform all observation of capitalism as a system into a system itself.'<sup>52</sup> The charitable appearance of these latter comments is explained by the fact that Adorno wishes to ally Benjamin to his own project of resuscitating denigrated particulars in a strategic evasion of totalising thought. In fact Benjamin never counterposes his focus upon particularity to systematic thought, and never equates (as Adorno does) systematicity with ideology. His use of 'configuration' or 'construction' is directed only against inductive and deductive forms of thinking as normally conceived, not against systematic thought *per se*. Acknowledgement of the fragmentary form of much of Benjamin's writing should not deflect attention from its systematic aims. Benjamin's use of configuration does, it must be admitted, consolidate induction in a different, an 'eccentric' form.<sup>53</sup> But if this is to be characterised as a 'rescue [*Rettung*] of induction' (Adorno)<sup>54</sup> then 'rescue' must be understood in Benjaminian, that is *destructive*, terms.

Adorno's criticism misconstrues Benjamin's use of the term 'monadology', something which is all the more curious given that elsewhere he praises the critical potential of monadology when employed as a literary technique. In a debate over the progressive merits of modernism, Adorno argues (contra Lukács) that modernism's use of a monologue or what he calls a 'monadological' style is commendable because it makes explicit its own social preconditions. Monadology is, to this extent, 'the hidden truth common to all men'. The monologue form (Adorno cites Joyce and Beckett as examples) attests to this: 'They objectify themselves by immersing themselves totally, monadologically, in the laws of their own forms....The voice of the age echoes through their monologues: this is why they excite us so much more than works which simply depict the world in narrative form. The fact that their transition to objectivity remains contemplative and fails to become praxis is grounded in the nature

---

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 236.

<sup>53</sup> Adorno contends that the Prologue 'undertook a metaphysical rescue [*Rettung*] of nominalism: throughout inferences are made not from top to bottom but rather, in an eccentric manner, "inductively".' [Adorno, 'Einleitung zu Benjamins Schriften' in *Noten zur Literatur, Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 4, p. 570; 'Introduction to Benjamin's *Schriften*' in Gary Smith (ed.), *On Walter Benjamin*, op. cit., p. 5.]

<sup>54</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialektik, Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 6, p. 357; *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (London: Routledge, 1973), p. 365.



of a society in which the monadological condition persists universally, despite all assurances to the contrary.’<sup>55</sup>

Adorno’s reception of ‘monadology’ oscillates between a Marxian awareness of the danger of abstraction - that as method it uncritically takes as foundational and primordial the kind of atomism which obtains only in a highly developed (that is, mediated) society<sup>56</sup> - and a more sympathetic reading of its methodological individualism which sees in it ‘a stage on which objective realities are made visible.’<sup>57</sup> Significantly for the present discussion, his appraisal of monadology as a literary style is subsequently extended to Benjamin’s philosophical method: ‘in Benjamin and Proust...the most specific experiences, those which are completely submerged in particularity, are transformed into universality.’<sup>58</sup> Given that monadology, when employed as a literary form, is deemed praiseworthy because it acknowledges its own social determinations (‘the monadological condition’), why is it deemed invalid as a philosophical approach, especially when literary form and philosophical style are so closely bound together in Adorno’s own thinking? In this light such reproaches against Benjamin’s ‘lack of mediation’<sup>59</sup> seem somewhat inconsistent.

Adorno’s second criticism centres upon Benjamin’s Marxism which he thinks reductively determinist. His reservations concern in particular Benjamin’s attempt to augment a model of a causal relation between ‘base’ and ‘superstructure’ with the notion of ‘expression [*Ausdruck*]’ such that cultural phenomena are to be understood to express the ‘economic system [*Wirtschaft*]’ of a given historical epoch.<sup>60</sup> According

---

<sup>55</sup> Adorno in *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: Verso, 1980), p. 166.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. Marx, *Grundrisse* trans. Martin Nicolaus (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1973), pp. 83-4.

<sup>57</sup> Adorno in *Aesthetics and Politics*, op. cit., p. 160.

<sup>58</sup> Adorno, ‘Ernst Bloch’s *Spuren*: On the Revised Edition of 1959’ in *Notes to Literature vol. 1* ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), p. 213. In the same way Adorno finds in Proust ‘the dictum from Hegel’s *Logic* that the particular is the general and vice versa, with each mediated through the other [and where] the whole, resistant to abstract outlines, crystallizes out of intertwined individual presentations.’ [‘Short Commentaries on Proust’ in *ibid.*, p. 174].

<sup>59</sup> Adorno in *Briefe*, p. 785; *Correspondence*, op. cit., p. 581.

<sup>60</sup> GS 5, p. 573-4 (N1a, 6); ‘Konvolut ‘N’’, p. 46-7. Whilst from the context of Benjamin’s proposition it appears that ‘*Ausdruck*’ is being used in its physiognomic sense (cf. Jürgen Habermas, ‘Consciousness-Raising or Rescuing Critique’ in Gary Smith (ed.), *On Walter Benjamin*, op. cit., p. 116), to read his formulation (as it seems Adorno does) as a reference to Leibniz (‘*Ausdruck*’ translates Leibniz’ French ‘*expression*’, his term for the monad’s capacity to represent the whole) makes it all the more illuminating. For the meaning of this term see, in particular, Leibniz, letter to Arnauld of 9

to Adorno, 'to interpret phenomena materialistically meant for [Benjamin] not so much to elucidate them as products of the social whole but rather to relate them directly, in their isolation, to material tendencies and social struggles.'<sup>61</sup> Adorno's point is that qualification of the base-superstructure model is insufficient; the model must be dispensed with entirely: 'Materialist determination of cultural traits is only possible if mediated by the total social process.'<sup>62</sup>

Whilst the criticism of reduction is well-taken and alerts us to the flaws in (still) prevalent interpretations of Marx, Adorno goes further - perceiving an essential link between this reductive Marxism and the idea of monadology. Both imply an isolation of phenomena from the social totality which produces them. The point fails to hit its mark though because this is not Benjamin's understanding of monadology, a term which, on the contrary, seeks to *highlight* the social whole concealed within social phenomena. Thus Benjamin's redefinition of dialectics as a theory of the monad<sup>63</sup> entails an historical task of constructing (which in this case means *reconstructing*) the social determinants of seemingly immediate, isolated and self-contained phenomena. Benjamin understands the theory of commodity fetishism in precisely these monadological terms: just as from the predicates of simple substance every other can be inferred, so from the elementary form of economic wealth the entire set of social relations of a given epoch can be inferred. The commodity renders monadology materialistic in the same way Marx understood it to render (Hegelian) dialectics material. In a world where experience itself is commodified, the theory of commodity fetishism becomes a necessary means of understanding experience's concealed determination. It becomes clear that the application of monadology to social theory need not involve an economic reduction; on the contrary, if it were applied consistently then social phenomena would be seen as expression of the social *whole*. Whilst Benjamin may be reproached for frequently reducing the social totality to the 'economic' (*wirtschaftlich*) this reduction is not a *necessary* outcome of the monadological method; indeed it is not even a consistent outcome.

---

October 1687 in *Die Philosophische Schriften von G. W. Leibniz* ed. C. I. Gerhard (Berlin: Olms, 1965) vol. II, p. 112; *Philosophical Writings*, op. cit., pp. 71-2.

<sup>61</sup> Adorno, 'A Portrait of Walter Benjamin' in *Prisms*, op. cit., p. 236.

<sup>62</sup> Adorno, in *Aesthetics and Politics*, op. cit., p. 129.

<sup>63</sup> GS 5, p. 596 (N11, 4); 'Konvolut 'N'', p. 67.



The element of truth in Adorno's criticism is that phenomena construed as monads can be related to the universal only *directly*, without reference to other phenomena, since the monad, containing as it does all its relations, predicates or events, cannot be affected by other monads. Monads, in Leibniz's words (repeated by Benjamin), have no 'windows'.<sup>64</sup> Thus when Adorno argues that monadology relates phenomena 'directly, in their isolation to material tendencies and social struggles' he means that their determination is understood without reference to their mediation *by other phenomena*. This criticism rehearses in turn a point made by Hegel against Leibniz - that the monad's relation to itself is one of mere 'abstract universality'.<sup>65</sup> Hegel had argued that 'to gain the freedom of substance it is not sufficient to represent it as a totality that is *complete within itself* and has nothing to receive *from without*. On the contrary, the mechanical [*begrifflose*: literally 'conceptless'], merely mirrored relation to itself is precisely a passivity towards another.'<sup>66</sup> In the uni-directional relation of mirroring the monad adds nothing either to other phenomena or to the universal. Like Kant, Hegel sees monadology as lacking conceptuality - the monad is taken to be the thing-in-itself<sup>67</sup> - but he goes further in seeing this lack of conceptuality as entailing a deficit of mediation, for in mediation 'the active object has...its determination only by means of another object.'<sup>68</sup>

Monadology allows *expression* of universality but not *mediation* of and by it, for mediation (and thus Adorno's understanding of determination) is a two-way relation: each term of the relation *is what it is* by virtue of that relation. The Hegelian notion of totality which stands behind Adorno's criticism is just this mutual determination of

---

<sup>64</sup> GS 3, p. 51.

<sup>65</sup> Hegel, *Science of Logic*, op. cit., p. 714.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 715.

<sup>67</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* trans. Norman Kemp Smith (London: Macmillan, 1978), p. 283.

<sup>68</sup> Hegel, *Science of Logic*, p. 715. Cf. *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, trans. E. S. Haldane & Frances H. Simson (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1955), vol. III, p. 345: 'From a single grain of sand, Leibniz holds, the whole universe might be comprehended in its entire development - if we only knew the sand thoroughly. There is not really much in all this, though it sounds very fine; for the rest of the universe is considerably more than a grain of sand, well though we knew it, and considerably different therefrom....To the sand grain much must be added which is not present and since thought adds more than all the grains of sand that exist, the universe and its development may in this way certainly be comprehended.'

universal by particular and particular by universal, something unthinkable under the monadological assumption of the integrity and autarky of the monad.<sup>69</sup> One can understand Adorno's sympathetic exposition of literary monadology (where Benjamin is favourably compared to Proust and where the focus upon particularity in each is seen to yield universal observations) to be only a partial endorsement; Adorno's reservation is that whilst such approaches may express universality, the relation between particular and universal upon which they rest is ultimately abstract and one-sided. In this light Adorno can be seen to view monadology as *both true and false*: true in that it methodologically reflects a social actuality; false in that this social condition is neither absolute nor ineluctable.<sup>70</sup> It is possible to understand Adorno's fear that Benjamin's thinking remained 'undialectical' in just these terms - as attempting to develop a more dialectically measured appraisal of monadology.

The cogency of this criticism impinges upon Benjamin's attempt to use monadology to translate characteristics of individual experience into qualities of a collective (for instance remembrance or political action). Benjamin's invocation of a social collective as subject of historical knowledge in response to the methodological individualism by which memory is commonly understood can only underline the strength of this criticism. The charge that Benjamin uncritically shifts from the individual to the collective without mediation is most forceful on the question of his application of psychoanalytic theory to social collectives. The 'collective' in collective memory is a generality which is just as abstract, indeterminate and illusory as the individual to which it is opposed. Benjamin struggles with the problem of how a group psychology would be possible which does not hypostasise the spurious

---

<sup>69</sup> In an attempt to defend Benjamin against Adorno's criticism, Giorgio Agamben has unhelpfully caricatured the latter's use of 'mediation' as mere causalism by another name: 'The hypocrisy implicit in the separation of economic structure and cultural superstructure remains exactly the same if the economic process is made the determining cause, and it is left to mediation to give it a bashful covering with its dialectical veil.' [Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History: Essays on the Destruction of Experience*, trans. Liz Heron (London: Verso, 1993), p. 120]. The point Agamben overlooks is that the concept of the social totality which inspires Adorno's criticism renders inappropriate not only the causal relation between, but the very separation of, 'economy' and 'culture'. The origins and lineage of Adorno's concept of totality are more fully explored in Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality: the Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas* (Cambridge: Polity, 1984).

<sup>70</sup> Cf. Gillian Rose, *The Melancholy Science: An Introduction to the Thought of Theodor W. Adorno* (London: MacMillan, 1978), p. 124.



collectives and imaginary communities which bourgeois society itself produces. Reporting Horkheimer's sardonic observation that a social collective exists only in disasters and catastrophes, Adorno contends that just as Benjamin's universality is not a totality, so his invocation of collectivity overlooks the fact that the social totality is a *divided* totality, a conflict ridden society. In both cases, Adorno's criticism is directed at an inadequate understanding of the meaning of totality. The monadology which, substituting expression for mediation, makes possible a direct movement from the personal to the collective, cannot but hypostasise both particularity and universality.<sup>71</sup> Adorno reminds Benjamin of some rudimentary elements of Marxism: that just as there is no such thing as society except as an abstraction, so equally the 'individual' amounts to a mystification of social relations.

If I reject the use of the notion of the collective consciousness, it is naturally not in order to leave the 'bourgeois individual' intact as the authentic *substratum*. The interior should be made transparent as a social function and its self-containedness [*Geschlossenheit*] should be revealed as illusion [*Schein*]. As illusion, however, not vis-à-vis a hypostasised collective consciousness, but vis-à-vis the real social

---

<sup>71</sup> An alternative response to Adorno's criticism would be to argue, following Rainer Nägele, that since Benjamin's monad is not a particular in the first place, the criticism of a lack of mediation is inappropriate. Nägele writes: 'The model of the monad allows Benjamin to formulate certain constitutive elements of his mode of thought that set it apart from a tradition of dialectics and mediation based on the mediating category of the particular (*das Besondere*),' that is, the 'harmonious reconciliation of the general and the individual.' [Rainer Nägele, *Theatre, Theory, Speculation: Walter Benjamin and the scenes of modernity*, op. cit., p. 68.] Nägele's interpretation is plausible in so far as Benjamin never explicitly defines the monad as particular; it falls down once it is recognised that the term could not convincingly refer to anything else. If the monad is, as Nägele thinks, 'radically singular', Adorno's criticism would have been circumvented only by succumbing to an equally arresting insight of Hegel's - that the search for singularity is chimerical because all specification itself requires universals. [Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 58-66; cf. Marx, *Grundrisse*, op. cit., p. 84.] Whilst it is undeniable that there are motives behind Adorno's incorporation of Benjamin's terminology into the dialectical framework of particularity/universality, the framework (itself originating in Plato) is not as alien to Benjamin's thought as Nägele suggests. Furthermore, by crediting Benjamin with having appreciated the illusory nature of singularity or individuality, Adorno's critique actually redeems the monadological method somewhat.

process itself. The 'individual' is a dialectical channel which may not be mythologised away but can only be sublated [*aufgehoben*].<sup>72</sup>

Benjamin's own criticisms of the individualism of Proustian memory (where memory is mere *autobiography*, the act of an isolated individual or 'private person'<sup>73</sup>) substitute a collective for an isolated subject in a way which for Adorno finds dangerously uncritical. The self-containedness of the individual as social monad must be exposed as illusion, but not by transferring its qualities onto a putative collective. Adorno urges that this underestimates the extent to which 'the real social process' itself produces individuality as a 'social function'. The realm of the circulation of commodities, the veneer upon the process of production, is the proper sphere of liberal assumptions of individuality and personality, but the individual cannot be mythicised away because of the contingent actuality of the mode of production which determines it, and which it in turn legitimises.

Inadvertently, Adorno's criticism draws attention to an inconsistency in Benjamin's formulation of the 'monadological structure of the historical object'. With this definition he wished to assert the historical object's relation with the present: 'by virtue of its monadological structure, the historical object discovers within itself its own fore-history [*Vorgeschichte*] and after-history [*Nachgeschichte*].'<sup>74</sup> The after-history or after-life of the historical object is that capacity which enables the past to be subsequently rescued, redeemed or reinterpreted. To this extent the past just is a relation with the present; the past is constituted in and through the present. On this basis, and as was seen earlier, Benjamin strenuously argued against assumptions of the past's 'completeness' (*Abgeschlossenheit*). Yet at the same time monadology necessarily carries with it a supposition of the autarky or self-sufficiency (in Benjamin's phrase, 'inalienable isolation') of the monad,<sup>75</sup> with the result that construing the historical object as a monad risks consolidating rather than exposing

---

<sup>72</sup> *Briefe*, p. 681-2; *Correspondence*, p. 502 (amended).

<sup>73</sup> GS 1, p. 611; *Charles Baudelaire*, p. 113.

<sup>74</sup> GS 5, p. 594 (N10a, 3); 'Konvolut 'N'', p. 66.

<sup>75</sup> GS 1, p. 228; *Origin*, p. 47. Cf. Leibniz, 'Monadology' § 18, *Philosophical Writings*, op. cit., p. 181.



this presumed autarky of the past event. Might this be the most serious drawback of Benjamin's attempt to ally Leibnizian metaphysics to his own critical project?

The persistent scepticism which Adorno held towards Benjamin's method can be understood as a worry that monadology fails to allow a sufficiently critical grasp of the illusions of immediacy which plague both philosophical thinking and the social reality it seeks to comprehend. Each of the criticisms discussed above can be summarised under the heading of *a critique of spontaneism*: the 'spontaneity' (Leibniz) of the monad which allows it to unfold the universal, a capacity which is methodologically emulated in the 'unfolding [*Auswicklung*]' of Benjamin's own subject matter;<sup>76</sup> the spontaneity of Proustian involuntary memory which Benjamin would enlist as an analogue of historical knowledge; and the spontaneism of the politics which results when mediation is underestimated. It cannot be denied that Benjamin consciously privileges the immediate. In one concise but telling phrase he writes: 'That which is fruitful in the fullest sense lies enclosed within the hard shell of immediacy [*Unmittelbarkeit*].'<sup>77</sup> Of course this formula can be read more or less sympathetically, that is, *dialectically*: it was Hegel who compared truth to the fruit of a plant already latent in the form of the bud.<sup>78</sup> Taking Adorno's criticism seriously might entail that Benjamin's relentless focus upon the immediate be castigated for fetishising immediacy; on the other hand one might just as convincingly applaud it for responding (in a manner not too distant from that of Hegel himself) to the question 'With what must the science begin?'. The relentless return to the immediate would in this sense amount to a continual beginning, a perpetually incipient method.<sup>79</sup>

To say that there is a methodological primacy afforded to the immediate in Benjamin's thinking is to tell only part of the story though, since the concern of his monadology is always with what lies concealed behind this immediacy, what it *expresses*. Because his philosophy typically takes a fragmentary form does not

---

<sup>76</sup> GS 5, p. 577 (N2a, 4); 'Konvolut 'N'', p. 50.

<sup>77</sup> GS 3, p. 275.

<sup>78</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, op. cit., p. 2.

<sup>79</sup> Paraphrasing Hegel, Adorno admits 'just as...there is nothing immediate between heaven and earth which is not mediated, so too there can be nothing mediated without the concept of mediation involving a moment of the immediate.' [Adorno, 'The Handle, the Pot, and Early Experience' in *Notes to Literature*, vol. 2, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholson, (New York: Columbia U. P., 1992), p. 219].

undermine its systematic intent. This important distinction becomes (perhaps consciously) obscured in Adorno's characterisation of Benjamin's as a 'philosophy of fragmentation'. There is more of Adorno's own philosophical project in this portrait than Benjamin's: a wish to use the fragment in his own resuscitation of denigrated particularity whilst distancing himself from its surrealist connotations. Benjamin's own concerns are different, they represent a critique of philosophical method couched in methodological terms: questioning the collusions involved in inductive and deductive approaches within epistemology, aesthetics and the philosophy of history, it seeks not to render philosophy surrealistic but to rework and revitalise the metaphysical element in philosophy. Noting (as the present chapter has attempted to do) the extent to which Leibnizian metaphysics organises these methodological observations should serve as a rejoinder to those who conceive Benjamin's thinking as breaking with philosophy altogether.<sup>80</sup> On the contrary it is possible to set his reflections within a tradition which from Plato's time onwards has understood the central philosophical problem to be how to pass from particular phenomena to the realm of truth. That Benjamin's critique of existing method seeks only to consolidate method may be seen either as its strength or its weakness; a potentially more injurious criticism (which, strangely, Adorno never proposed) would have been to question the very status of 'method' and 'methodology' themselves, to question the very attempt to place method before philosophical practice.

· The theological structure of Leibnizian metaphysics is another question which must be asked of any defence of Benjamin's appropriation of monadology, since with the theory of the monad necessarily comes the divine standpoint, the only position from which the totality of monads can be comprehended. For Leibniz this difference between the standpoint of the monad and the comprehended totality of monads is in turn a theological chasm between creature and Creator. Each monad can represent universality in only a more or less 'confused' manner; only for God is knowledge of the world 'distinct'.<sup>81</sup> If Benjamin is to be consistent in his adoption of monadology

---

<sup>80</sup> Pierre Missac's contention that Benjamin's use of the term 'monad' is merely metaphorical is closely linked to his declaration against philosophical readings of Benjamin. See his *Walter Benjamin's Passages*, op. cit., p. 110 & 24.

<sup>81</sup> Leibniz, 'Monadology' § 37; 'Principles of Nature and of Grace' § 13, *Philosophical Writings*, op. cit., pp. 185 & 201.



then he must also assent to the implications of this for the philosophy of history: any speculation upon history *from within* is unavoidably partial and indistinct. Historical knowledge in the present, whether in the form of critical historiography or political consciousness, can hope for only a partial and confused comprehension of the past. That Benjamin does concede this circumscription of knowledge is evinced in a provocative and cryptic passage where he suggests that only in 'the messianic world...is universal history possible'.<sup>82</sup> In this statement is contained a recognition of the necessary counterfactuality of any universal-historical claims in the present. Put another way, in the here and now history totalises only *only* proleptically and (hence) contradictorily. Universal-historical claims (Benjamin's included) amount to wagers upon their own future redemption.

Whilst the objections discussed above to Benjamin philosophical method and his theory of memory can be categorised in terms of *critique* (thus the Hegelian and Marxian inspiration for Adorno's engagement) there is another way in which both a theory of memory and a philosophy of historical knowledge can be critically examined, namely by subjecting them to a genealogy. Before it is possible to determine what can be rescued from Benjamin's thought both in terms of a philosophy of memory and of history it is necessary to address such a genealogical criticism of his project, and it is this which forms the focus of the next chapter. However, as will become clear, a genealogy of Benjamin's privilege of memory becomes complicated by the fact that Benjamin himself utilises many of the techniques of genealogy himself, and was familiar with its most eminent practitioners.

---

<sup>82</sup> GS 1, p. 1238.

## Melancholy Memory

### Introduction

Benjamin's 'oblique' relation to 'the manifest tradition of philosophy' (Adorno) appears most clearly in the way he appropriates isolated elements from the tradition for his thinking of memory. In that theory of memory one can find not only consciously avowed lineages but also less well-acknowledged (yet equally significant) affinities with previous philosophers. Nietzsche's views on encumbered memory represent one example of such a constellation, as Irving Wohlfarth has noted.<sup>1</sup> Likewise with Kierkegaard's views on forgetting, as Max Pensky observes.<sup>2</sup> Equally, Freud's reflections on 'mourning and melancholia', whilst seemingly unknown to Benjamin, show important similarities to Benjamin's own reflections on melancholy, as Christine Buci-Glucksmann implies in juxtaposing the terminology of each.<sup>3</sup> But whilst such affinities are often noted, the philosophical stakes involved are rarely recognised. That in developing his theory of memory, Benjamin's relation to the philosophical tradition was always *selective* may reveal something of his own ambivalence towards the manner in which that tradition dealt with the problem of memory, indeed the difficulties which it presents for his own attempt to revalue and prioritise memory. That Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Freud are cited above is not

---

<sup>1</sup> Irving Wohlfarth, 'Resentment Begins at Home: Nietzsche, Benjamin, and the University' in Gary Smith (ed.), *On Walter Benjamin* (Cambridge, MA & London: MIT Press, 1988), p. 228.

<sup>2</sup> Max Pensky, *Melancholy Dialectics: Walter Benjamin & the Play of Mourning* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), p. 164.

<sup>3</sup> Christine Buci-Glucksmann, *Baroque Reason: The Aesthetics of Modernity* (London: Sage, 1993), p. 155-6.



incidental, because as philosophical approaches to memory theirs can each be described as 'genealogies', or to use a less precise but more suggestive term, 'diagnoses' of memory. The genealogy of memory one finds in these three thinkers, taken together with the privilege they accord to forgetting, presents searching questions for Benjamin's own defence of memory.

This chapter sets out to look at Benjamin's relation to the ideas of memory proposed in, respectively, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Freud, always with the following question in mind - could Benjamin have had anything other than an ambivalent or troubled relationship to a genealogy of memory? This is brought most sharply into relief at the point where the diagnostic resources of these three thinkers are directed at a particular form of consciousness which, suppressing the importance of forgetting, becomes weighed down with reminiscences of the past, paralysed by retrospection, and whose scope for activity in the present is correspondingly diminished. Each termed this phenomenon 'melancholy'. Benjamin himself will make use of this diagnosis but not without encountering difficulties in attempting to distinguish his own understanding of memory from that reactive and debilitating form of recollection.



'...that recollection is a searching for an image in a corporeal substrate, is proved by the fact that the same persons, when despite the most strenuous applications of thought, have been unable to recollect, feel discomfort, which even though they abandon the effort at recollection, persists in them none the less; and especially persons of melancholic temperament. For these are most powerfully moved by images.'

Aristotle, *Of Memory and Reminiscence*

### 'The Unhappiest One': Kierkegaard

In a letter of 30th April 1913 written whilst at University in Freiburg, Benjamin lists the books which presently engage him. 'My reading: Kant, *Groundwork to a Metaphysics of Morals*, Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*. Gottfried Keller, *Das Sinngedicht*. But no normal person can endure a colossal and exclusive association with these writings for an entire week. Whenever a few pages of Kant had tired me out, I fled to Kierkegaard....[*Either/Or*] confronted me with question after question that I had always divined but never articulated to myself, and excited (even) me more than any other book.'<sup>4</sup>

There is clear evidence that Kierkegaard's thinking exerted considerable influence upon Benjamin: he was familiar not only with *Either/Or* but also with *Fear and Trembling, Repetition, and Stages on Life's Way*;<sup>5</sup> He read and reviewed Wiesengrund's book *The Construction of the Aesthetic* which treated Kierkegaard in the terms of his own *Trauerspiel* study;<sup>6</sup> Kierkegaard himself is invoked in the book

---

<sup>4</sup> *Briefe*, p. 47; *Correspondence*, p. 20 (amended). *Either/Or*, Benjamin continues, 'is the ultimatum: aesthetics or ethical life [*Ästhetentum oder Sittlichkeit?*]' (*ibid.*)

<sup>5</sup> GS 5, p. 1303.

<sup>6</sup> GS 3, p. 382.



on German *Trauerspiel*, hardly surprising given that the book was written in the period just after the enthusiastic letter quoted above. Over and above biographical links such as this, one can see similarities in the importance each ascribes to the categories of repetition, recollection and melancholy, and in the manner in which these categories are understood. Crucially, in Kierkegaard's philosophy they are understood as *modern* problematics, as phenomena intimately bound up with modernity: 'People have now been talking about the frivolity of this age; I believe it is time to talk a little about its melancholy....Or is not melancholy the defect of our age? Is it not this which echoes with frivolous laughter, is it not melancholy which has deprived us of courage to command, of courage to obey, of power to act, of the confidence necessary to hope?'<sup>7</sup> Just such a diagnostic use of the categories of melancholy, recollection and repetition is reaffirmed in Benjamin's thinking: they allow the definition of a peculiarly modern form of experience. Where such categories appear in Kierkegaard and Benjamin they are understood by both to span the divide between a philosophy which applied itself to personal and psychological phenomena and philosophical reflection upon society and history.

It is in his account of a peculiarly modern form of melancholy which he terms *Andenken*, that Benjamin's thinking converges upon that of Kierkegaard most markedly. Benjamin's 1930s studies of Baudelaire, in particular 'Central Park' and 'Konvolut 'J'' of the *Passagen-Werk*, incorporate a diagnosis of Baudelaire's melancholy 'brooding' and seek to explore his views of nature, memory, and time with the same critical apparatus that had been applied to the Baroque mourning-play. Yet, as Benjamin notes, 'melancholy bears in the nineteenth century a different character to that which it bore in the seventeenth. The key figure of the early allegory is the corpse. The key figure of the later allegory is the 'souvenir' (*Andenken*).'<sup>8</sup> That despite the differences between the two periods they can still be compared is due to the fact that the kind of sadness identifiable in the work of modern writers such as Baudelaire or Proust is, like the Baroque aesthetic, less a reaction to the loss of some particular object than the expression of an historical and spiritual crisis. The

---

<sup>7</sup> Soren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or* vol. 2, trans. Howard V. Hong & Edna V. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987) p. 23-4.

<sup>8</sup> GS 1, p. 689; 'Central Park', p. 54-55.

melancholy Benjamin finds in modern literature is not so much a symptom as a world-view, and as such closer to the cosmological sense which the concept had for antiquity, or the religious sense it had in the Renaissance, than to the individualised pathology with which psychology and later psychoanalysis dealt. By using the same term and concept he employed in exploring the Baroque aesthetic, by reviving his analysis of the forms of memory and the experience of time typical of that period and applying them to modernity, Benjamin wished to show that in the nineteenth century the melancholy spirit returns in response to an historical and social crisis as pervasive as that of the seventeenth.

What Benjamin sees as the distinctive allegory of modern melancholy, *Andenken*, is both a type of memory and its objectified form, the souvenir or memento; it is 'the schema of the transformation of the commodity into the collector's object.'<sup>9</sup> Grasping the past in the form of mementoes can only confirm the loss of that experience which it attempts to preserve; it makes of the past a series of 'lived' moments to be gathered, collected, displayed.<sup>10</sup> Memory as *Andenken* is both introspective and ostentatious, emptying the outside world to stock up the inner; to the same extent that worldly life is denigrated the interior begins to resemble the cluttered baroque stage. 'The *souvenir* [*das Andenken*] is the complement of 'experiences' [*des 'Erlebnisses'*]. In it is distilled the increasing self-alienation of the man who inventories his past as dead possessions. In the nineteenth century allegory evacuated the surrounding world in order to settle in the inner world. Whereas the relic derives from the corpse, the souvenir derives from deceased experience [*Erfahrung*] which calls itself, euphemistically, 'lived' [*Erlebnis*].'<sup>11</sup> If Dürer's *Melencholia I* provides an image of baroque sadness, then the treasure-lined bourgeois interior is its modern counterpart. However, alongside this hypertrophied and alienated character of *Andenken* exists what is for Benjamin a more laudable aspect - the investment of 'things' with the ability to retrieve the past; *Andenken* displays a redemptive as well as an infernal moment. Benjamin attempted to clarify this dual character of the 'thing' in response to

---

<sup>9</sup> GS 1, p. 689; 'Central Park', p. 55

<sup>10</sup> Cf. GS 4, p. 145; 'One Way Street' in *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, op. cit., p. 101-2: '...souvenirs [*Andenken*]: chains and picture-postcards, oil paintings, knives and little marble figures. The city sights are not seen but bought.'

<sup>11</sup> GS 1, p. 681; 'Central Park', p. 49 (amended).



questioning from Adorno: agreeing with Adorno that insofar as it invested things with traces of the past, this form of memory might be turned to critical use, he denied that the past concealed in the thing is simply the labour expended in its production, urging instead that reification belies something more primordial - traces of the messianic world itself: 'the tree or the bush which are invested are not made by men.'<sup>12</sup> The continuity between modern and Baroque melancholy appears here as the redemptive moment concealed behind hypertrophied and fixated memory.

In his commentary on the meaning of melancholy in Benjamin's work, Max Pensky suggests that this antipathy towards the hoarding of the past represented by *Andenken* is inspired by Kierkegaardian or Nietzschean 'active forgetting'. Whilst plausible, this interpretation needs to be qualified since it homogenises the *oeuvre* of both Nietzsche and Kierkegaard and overlooks Benjamin's selective relation to each thinker. Benjamin's view is in fact closer to Nietzsche's essay 'On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life'<sup>13</sup> with its attempt to cultivate a critical memory and history (witness his quote from this essay in the 'Theses') than to the 'active forgetting' introduced in *The Genealogy* and set against memory *per se*.<sup>14</sup> In this latter work memory figures as the medium in which morality was registered upon the body; as such, it is ascribed purely repressive qualities. Equally, and for similar reasons, Benjamin's relationship to Kierkegaard is less straightforward than Pensky's comments would suggest: Kierkegaard's concept of 'melancholy', like Nietzsche's genealogies of memory or *ressentiment*, threatens to implicate rather than augment Benjamin's retrospective thinking. This may explain why he felt that *Either/Or* 'confronted [him] with question after question', that Kierkegaard's 'psychological analyses...are as devastating as Nietzsche's.'<sup>15</sup> In fact Benjamin's critique of mnemonic inwardness was probably inspired more by Weber than by the Nietzsche upon whom Weber in turn draws - Weber's idea that a devaluation (*Entwertung*) of the outer world coincides with a hypertrophy of the inner is repeated almost word for

---

<sup>12</sup> GS 1, p. 1134.

<sup>13</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, 'On the uses and disadvantages of history for life' in *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

<sup>14</sup> Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Francis Golffing (New York: Doubleday, 1956), pp. 189-194.

<sup>15</sup> *Briefe*, p. 47; *Correspondence*, p. 20.

word at various points in the Baudelaire study. Equally, the touchstone of this idea may be religious rather than philosophical: one can detect in Benjamin's opposition to *Andenken* and the personalised manner in which it rescues the past what is at bottom a basic tenet of Judaism - the necessary publicity of redemption.

The melancholy of the poet, writer or dramatist is for Benjamin never simply a psychological idiosyncrasy or mental aberration; instead, as was already argued in the *Trauerspiel* study, the artist is a stage on which the movement of fallen history is played out. Melancholy in both its baroque and modern forms appears as the subjective expression of world-historical mourning (*Trauer*).<sup>16</sup> Thus Baudelaire's sorrow (*Leiden*) is said to be 'age-old' (*uralt*);<sup>17</sup> similarly, Kästner's 'nihilism' is but 'the latest of two millenia of metamorphoses of melancholy.'<sup>18</sup> Yet there is also something historically specific about the sadness expressed in these latter writers: within a Marxian framework Benjamin traces it to the deterioration of experience and tradition attendant upon the rise of modern conditions of production. That the melancholy found in the subjects of Benjamin's criticism is understood to be more than simply psychological, that it in fact tells us something about modernity itself, becomes clear when Benjamin invokes Kierkegaard's discourse of melancholy in the Baudelaire Konvolut.<sup>19</sup> Benjamin quotes several passages from an essay in *Either/Or* entitled 'The Unhappiest One' (in his translation '*Der Unglücklichste*'), highlighting both the similarities and differences between his own and Kierkegaard's views on the interrelation of time and memory. At this point it is helpful to examine Kierkegaard's essay in order to make clear what is at stake in the Benjamin's references to it.

The essay in question begins as a commentary on Hegel's 'unhappy consciousness' but soon develops into a search not for the meaning of unhappiness but for its superlative form - 'who is the unhappiest one'? The inwardly disrupted consciousness described by Hegel is unhappy, according to Kierkegaard, because he is 'absent' to himself, but in one of two possible senses: he may find his essential reality, his fulfilment, in either past or future time. The former is a 'recollecting', the latter a

---

<sup>16</sup> Pensky, *Melancholy Dialectics*, op. cit., p. 94.

<sup>17</sup> GS 1, p. 658; 'Central Park', p. 32.

<sup>18</sup> GS 3, p. 283; 'Left-Wing Melancholy (On Erich Kästner's new book of poems)', *Screen* 15, 2 (Summer 1974), p. 31.

<sup>19</sup> GS 5, p. 431 (G5,1).



'hoping' individuality. Kierkegaard urges that those who recollect are more properly 'unhappy', since hope pertains to the future, to possibility and action, whereas memory orients itself towards a past which cannot be altered.

If for example an individual becomes absorbed in antiquity or in the Middle Ages or in any other time, but in such a way that it had a decisive reality for him, or he became absorbed in his own childhood or youth in the way that this had had decisive reality for him, then, strictly speaking, he would not be an unhappy individuality. But if I were to imagine a person who had had no childhood himself, since this age had passed him by without any real meaning, but who now, for example, by becoming a teacher of children, discovered all the beauty in childhood and now wanted to recollect his own childhood, always stared back at it, he would certainly be a very appropriate example....He is continually recollecting that for which he should hope, because he has already encompassed the future in thought, has already experienced it in thought, and he recollects what he has experienced instead of hoping for it. Thus what he is hoping for lies behind him; what he recollects lies ahead of him. His life is not backwards but is turned the wrong way in two directions....He cannot grow old, for he has never been young; he cannot become young, for he has already grown old; in a sense he cannot die, for indeed he has not lived; in a sense he cannot live, for indeed he is already dead. He cannot love, for love is always present tense, and he has no present time, no future, no past, and yet he has a sympathetic nature, and he hates the world only because he loves it; he has no passion, not because he lacks it, but because at the same moment he has the opposite passion; he does not have time for anything, not because his time is filled with something

else, but because he has no time at all; he is powerless, not because he lacks energy, but because his energy makes him powerless.<sup>20</sup>

It is not only a fixation upon the past which defines melancholy for Kierkegaard, but the ambivalence or reversal of affect it involves. The unhappiest one 'hates the world only because he loves it.' This powerful description of melancholy captures the paradoxical and destructive manner in which the will operates here with regard to time. It is precisely the melancholic's backward-directed energy which deprives him of the strength to act in the present or to confront the future. The difficulty such a description of melancholy presents for Benjamin is that while it may serve as a fitting characterisation of Baudelaire, it equally poses serious questions of his own critical practice with its placement of 'hope in the past'.<sup>21</sup> Traces of the ambivalence which defines this superlative unhappiness can be found not only in Benjamin's picture of the melancholy worldview but also in the destructive principle which he sets against it. There is a sense in which Benjamin himself must denigrate the present in placing the hope for critical activity in a radical engagement with the past. That this sensed proximity to his own thinking may have motivated Benjamin's interest in the subject of melancholy was something not lost on others. When Adorno recounts a 'melancholy [*schwermütig*] observation' on Benjamin's part, that he "revered youth,"<sup>22</sup> he appears to do so with the Kierkegaardian unhappy consciousness in mind. Benjamin's own admission that Eduard Fuch's 'materialist's melancholy' ('*Schwermut*,' and later '*Traurigkeit*') touched a specific chord in him<sup>23</sup> would lend credence to such a characterisation. Benjamin's continual fascination with thinkers and writers he will categorise as melancholic is often accompanied by a clearly strenuous attempt to gain critical purchase on his subject matter. His diagnosis of melancholy, whether in the baroque mourning-play or in modern writers as disparate

---

<sup>20</sup> Kierkegaard, *Either/Or* Part. 1, trans. Howard V. Hong & Edna V. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987) p. 224-6.

<sup>21</sup> GS 1, p. 695; *Illuminations*, p. 255. Cf. Peter Szondi, 'Hope in the Past: On Walter Benjamin' in *On Textual Understanding and Other Essays* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), pp. 145-161.

<sup>22</sup> Adorno, '*Benjamin der Briefschreiber*' in *Gesammelte Schriften*, op. cit., vol. 4, p. 587; 'Benjamin the Letter Writer' in *Correspondence*, p. xx.

<sup>23</sup> *Briefe*, p. 725; *Correspondence*, p. 535.



as Baudelaire, Blanqui, or Proust, can be seen to involve (just as it did for Kierkegaard) a certain ironic self-diagnosis. Criticisms of these thinkers are thus mixed with admiration for, and appropriations of many of their ideas. But the melancholy which in turn fascinates Benjamin is not so much this *psychological* category as the more *cosmological* idea familiar to the classical and neo-Platonist traditions. Something of this sense of the term is retained in Kierkegaard for whom the concept is never simply a personal idiosyncrasy but registers something collective, something historical. 'The Unhappiest One' is therefore not 'one' at all but represents a character-type, shorthand for an identifiable philosophical and historical worldview, a structure of experience and a mode in which that experience is comprehended. It was in this form that Kierkegaard took up the notion of the unhappy consciousness from Hegel, and it is in the same form that melancholy is employed in Benjamin's critical reflections on Baudelaire or Proust.<sup>24</sup> In Benjamin's hands 'melancholy' refers to a specific form of experience defined by its relation to time, to tradition and action. This becomes explicit in his presentation of *Trauerspiel* as a concept of history as much as an aesthetic category where historical time is drawn into the mournful outlook of the baroque aesthetic itself; but equally in the Baudelaire study where melancholy characterises the poet's relation to 'the modern' in its transience.

Is it just coincidental that Benjamin invokes Kierkegaard's 'Unhappiest One' to diagnose Baudelaire's relation to modernity, to that 'brooding' which 'stands under the sign of memory [*Erinnerung*]'?<sup>25</sup> Or might one detect in Benjamin's references to this unhappy consciousness the same 'complex,' 'troubled' and 'ambiguous' attitude<sup>26</sup> which has been identified in his study of Baroque mournfulness? If Benjamin implicates himself in thus characterising Baudelaire then elsewhere he shows his divergence from Kierkegaard's alignment of unhappiness and recollection. His exchange with Horkheimer (discussed previously) shows him implicitly engaging with the Kierkegaardian dualism of melancholy versus hope and setting forth his own view of memory in contradistinction to both. The Benjamin/Horkheimer exchange

---

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Gillian Rose 'Walter Benjamin - Out of the Sources of Modern Judaism' in *Judaism and Modernity*, op. cit., p. 181.

<sup>25</sup> GS 5, p. 466 (J79a, 1).

<sup>26</sup> Max Pensky, *Melancholy Dialectics*, p. 140.

allows insight into the philosophical prejudice upon which Kierkegaard's opposition rests. Benjamin's mobilisation of *Eingedenken* (remembrance) against the assumption of the completeness of the past stakes itself on the belief that memories (especially those of an involuntary character) confirm not time's completeness but the contrary. In remembering, one is reminded that certain possibilities from the past remain unrealised; memory reveals at once the past's incompleteness and its capacity for completion (the possibility of the perfection of an action or event). There is thus a continuing latency inherent in the past, a capacity which memory brings to light. Remembrance uncovers and activates this afterlife (*Nachleben*) of the past, unsettling what was hitherto thought to be over and done with. Remembrance carries with it the notable capacity to render complete or incomplete the past as such. In revealing unfulfilled moments of the past remembrance makes the ostensibly complete into something incomplete: 'the kind of happiness that could arouse envy in us exists only in the air we have breathed, among people we could have talked to...'<sup>27</sup> At the same time only our re-remembering or reconstructing the past has the potential to change its character, to make the incomplete or unfulfilled - happiness - into something complete. Remembrance, for Benjamin, delineates a structure of experience which is messianic in character, it shows that 'our image of happiness is indissolubly bound up with the image of redemption'.<sup>28</sup> In this light Kierkegaard's description of the melancholy of recollection appears one-sided - recollection is for him the act of a consciousness whose reality lies in the past, one who is 'absent to himself': 'recollection is above all the distinctive element of the unhappy ones, which is natural, because past time has the notable characteristic that it is past; future time, that it is to come.'<sup>29</sup> If the past were unchangeable as Kierkegaard assumes, then recollection would indeed be a melancholy and debilitating exercise. But Benjamin turns the tables on Kierkegaard, insisting that only in such a melancholy memory lies the hope which would actualise what has hitherto remained wishful possibility. Remembrance cuts across the existential opposition Kierkegaard has developed between (retrospective) melancholy and (futural) affirmation because in remembrance any sadness at the still-

---

<sup>27</sup> GS 1, p. 693; 'Theses' in *Illuminations*, p. 254.

<sup>28</sup> GS 1, p. 693; 'Theses' in *Illuminations*, p. 254.

<sup>29</sup> Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, part. 1, op. cit., p. 223.



remaining unrealisation is tempered by hope at the still-obtaining possibility. Benjamin's account of memory allows of *both* melancholy and affirmation.

Just as Benjamin questions the denigration of recollection in Kierkegaard, so he equally offers a response to the affirmative 'repetition' which Kierkegaard sets against it, typified in the attempts of the narrator of *Repetition* to repeat in every (even the most minute) detail a journey he had previously made to Berlin (that the project proves impossible is not deemed sufficient evidence of its futility). For Benjamin, a certain novelty is the precondition of any experience worthy of name; repetition denotes a 'mythical' form of events, and by implication, an impoverished experience of time. For Benjamin what is to be affirmed as an antidote to the more debilitating forms of recollection is not repetition but novelty. Yet he is aware (like Kierkegaard) *that* novelty can itself be produced *repetitively*;<sup>30</sup> this is why he distinguishes between a novelty devoid of memory and tradition and 'the truly new' which represents a moment of 'interference' in a temporal or experiential series,<sup>31</sup> but which itself requires a retrospective (redemptive) stance towards the past. The idea of a redemptive remembrance shows up the weaknesses of Kierkegaard's existential dualism, highlighting the impoverished experience upon which it rests. Kierkegaard's distribution of experience along a temporal axis with only two significant possibilities - repetition backwards (recollection) and repetition forwards (repetition proper, affirmation) - recapitulates that deterioration of experience whose inauthenticity it would overcome. Benjaminian remembrance, by contrast, looks for novelty not in the future but in the past, and by recalling not the same but the new, eschews Kierkegaard's version of melancholy. To the Kierkegaardian opposition of recollection (repetition backwards) and repetition (repetition forwards) Benjaminian 'remembrance' represents a third which mediates the two, allowing the past to be affirmed in a way which is not simply pathological and debilitating, whilst differing from 'repetition forwards', typically a repetition of the same. The new which

---

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Kierkegaard, *Repetition*, trans. Howard V. Hong & Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), p. 132: 'He alone is truly happy who is not deluded into thinking that...repetition should be [of] something new, for then one grows weary of it.'

<sup>31</sup> GS 5, p. 593 (N9a,7).

remembrance affirms differs from the spurious novelty correctly questioned by Kierkegaard by virtue of being a transformation of something past.

That Benjamin offers a dialectical alternative to Kierkegaard's opposition of repetition backwards (recollection) and repetition forwards (affirmation) is clear in an autobiographical note from 1933 where he reflects upon Paul Klee's painting *Angelus Novus*, seeing in it the same 'dialectic of happiness [*Dialektik des Glücks*]', a complex of 'hymnic' and 'elegiac' motives which he had ascribed to Proust in the essay of 1929.<sup>32</sup> Benjamin writes of Klee's angel: 'He wants happiness: the conflict in which lies the ecstasy of the unique, "once only" new, as yet unlived with that bliss of the "once more," the having again, the lived. That is why he can hope for the new on no way except on the way of the return home [*Heimkehr*].'<sup>33</sup> What is at stake in the alternatives of recollection or repetition is here, as it is for Kierkegaard, 'happiness', and yet Benjamin seeks to dialectically entwine what Kierkegaard could only offer as an existential choice, by urging that it is only in transformative recollection, in the redemptive repetition-backwards of a lived past, that it is to be found. Benjamin goes further in questioning whether this is ever a simple matter of choice, of a resolve or 'courage' to repeat forwards; that *Either/Or* 'demands heroism'<sup>34</sup> is for Benjamin the work's significant flaw. In offering an existential choice Kierkegaard's account leaves out this dialectic of happiness, the contradictory mix of recollection and affirmation, repetition and novelty in experience. This dialectic provides an alternative not only to Kierkegaard's pathologising of recollection, but also to his spurious (and for Benjamin equally pathological) alternative - affirming the repetition of a past without searching for novelty. The value of this idea of affirmation as a solution to pathological memory is not exhausted by these critical points, however, and it is significant that it recurs in Nietzsche's writings, which in many respects further the diagnosis of melancholy formulated by Kierkegaard. Whilst it seems possible to defend Benjamin against Kierkegaard's denigration of memory, Nietzsche deepens the

---

<sup>32</sup> GS 2, p. 313; 'The Image of Proust' in *Illuminations*, p. 204 (amended).

<sup>33</sup> GS 6, p. 523; 'Agesilaus Santander' (second version) cited in Gershom Scholem, 'Walter Benjamin and his Angel', in Gary Smith (ed.), *On Walter Benjamin*, op. cit., p. 71.

<sup>34</sup> *Briefe*, p. 47; *Correspondence*, p. 20.



problem Benjamin faces of defending a form of memory which is liberatory rather than simply reactive.

### ‘Time’s Desire’: Nietzsche

If, as Scholem suggests, Nietzsche is one thinker with whom Benjamin never fully came to terms,<sup>35</sup> it is surely because he puts forward what must be the most persuasive rejoinder to any desire to redeem the past. This is clear in a passage from *Zarathustra* (singled out by both Irving Wohlfarth and Rebecca Comay<sup>36</sup>) where the theological doctrine of redemption is redefined ironically as a release *from* the wish to change what is past.

To redeem the past and to transform every ‘It was’ into an ‘I wanted it thus!’ - that alone do I call redemption [*Erlösung*]!...

‘It was’: that is the name of the will’s gnashing of teeth and most secret melancholy [*Trübsal*]. Powerless against that which has been done, the will is an angry spectator of all things past.

That the will cannot work backwards; that it cannot break time and time’s desire - that is the will’s most lonely melancholy....

This, yes, this alone is *revenge* itself: the will’s antipathy [*des Willens Widerwille*] towards time and time’s ‘It was’....

All ‘It was’ is a fragment, a riddle, a dreadful chance - until the creative will says to it: ‘But I willed it thus!’...

But has it ever spoken thus?<sup>37</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup> Irving Wohlfarth, ‘Resentment Begins at Home’, in Gary Smith (ed.), *On Walter Benjamin*, op. cit., p. 227.

<sup>36</sup> Rebecca Comay, ‘Redeeming Revenge: Nietzsche, Benjamin, Heidegger, and the Politics of Memory’ in Clayton Koelb (ed.), *Nietzsche as Postmodernist: essays pro and contra*, (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990)

<sup>37</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Also Sprach Zarathustra* in *Werke*, ed. Karl Schlehta (Munich: Hanser, 1955), vol. II, p. 394-5; *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961) p. 161-3 (amended).

Seen in terms of this ironic 'redemption' Benjamin's own use of the concept can only appear negative. Seeking to negate 'time and time's desire' the efforts of the materialist historian would seem to nurture only a self-destructive will. Powerless against what has been done (and here the image of Klee's 'New Angel' in the Ninth Thesis comes to mind) he would be an angry spectator of all things past. Nietzsche's affirmative notion of redemption seeks to deliver the will from such a debilitating absorption in what is past, to release creativity from a condition in which it is turned against itself, consuming itself in reminiscence. If the wish to transform the past, to will backwards, typifies a 'melancholy' antipathy towards time then Benjamin's notion of redemption comes uncomfortably close to what is targeted in Zarathustra's speech.

But Benjamin's view of memory is more dialectical than this would suggest. To say that he displays an "ill will" toward time and its transiency<sup>38</sup> is to tell only half the story. In fact his thinking traces a difficult path between a sanguine refusal of the 'it was' and a sober awareness of how difficult is the task of halting time. However difficult, the task is never as futile as Nietzsche implies, since it is aided as well as circumscribed by the reality of transience, of whose force both he and Benjamin are very much aware. 'The destructive character' Benjamin writes in the essay of the same name, 'is always blithely at work. It is nature that dictates his tempo, indirectly at least, for he must forestall her. Otherwise she will take over the destruction herself.'<sup>39</sup> Contrast this, though, with the meaning of destruction in the 'Theologico-Political Fragment': '...the rhythm of this eternally transient worldly existence...is happiness [*Glück*]....To strive after such passing...is the task of world politics, whose method must be called nihilism....For in happiness all that is earthly seeks its downfall [*Untergang*], and only in good fortune [*Glück*] is its downfall destined to find it....For nature is Messianic by reason of its eternal and total passing away'.<sup>40</sup> The instantiation of happiness here *necessitates* nihilism, understood as exacerbating, not resisting, the destructive effect of transience. The transience of 'the earthly' becomes not simply (as it was for the Baroque) a cause for mourning, but yields the means for its own

---

<sup>38</sup> Rebecca Comay, 'Redeeming Revenge', op. cit., p. 24.

<sup>39</sup> GS 4, p. 397; 'The Destructive Character', *One-Way Street & Other Writings*, p. 157.

<sup>40</sup> GS 2, p. 204; 'Theologico-Political Fragment', *One-Way Street & Other Writings*, p. 156.



overcoming: destruction is a prelude to transcendence. Benjamin's formulation comes very close to Nietzsche's ironic redemption, a fact he seems to recognise in his choice of terms: *Untergang* is Nietzsche's 'down-going', Zarathustra's descent into the world to teach the hard lesson that man must 'go under' before any 'going over' (*Übergang*) is possible.

It is as a clarification of his own avowed 'nihilism'<sup>41</sup> that Benjamin's exchange with Horkheimer over the completeness or incompleteness of the past can be understood. This is not immediately apparent though, if we assume (with one commentator) that Horkheimer's position, in which 'materialism' dictates that the past be construed as closed, shows a more nihilist attitude than Benjamin's 'theological' view of the continuing actuality of the past.<sup>42</sup> Such an interpretation overlooks the element of nihilism in Benjamin's refusal of the past's 'closed' (*geschlossen*) character (Nietzsche's *es war* or 'it was'). Similarly complicated is the question of who is the more materialist in this debate - even Benjamin's ostensibly theological argument is, as was shown previously, grounded in an insight into the periodic 'rearrangement' of the past, an idea one also finds in Nietzsche.<sup>43</sup> But what is clear is that the difference between the 'destruction' which both Benjamin and Nietzsche invoke lies in the fact that whereas the former is staked upon the incomplete and open nature of the past, and correspondingly seeks to rescue and redeem past events, the latter - and here lies one of the 'affinities' Benjamin notes between Kierkegaard and Nietzsche - rests on a view of the past as irrecoverable, as unalterable, and sees a melancholy antipathy towards time in those who wish it otherwise.

Benjamin's thinking takes on a nihilist aspect insofar as it identifies not only the barbarism of tradition but what might be called the ambivalence of destruction, the manner in which any critical response to that barbarism must itself make use of the destructive qualities of time, tradition and memory. Benjamin's use of the term

---

<sup>41</sup> *Briefe*, p. 355; *Correspondence*, p. 248.

<sup>42</sup> Helmut Peukert, *Science, Action, and Fundamental Theology: Toward a Theology of Communicative Action*, op. cit., p. 206-10.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), p. 104: '*Historia abcondita*.- Every great human being exerts a retroactive force: for his sake, all of history is placed in the balance again and a thousand secrets of the past crawl out of their hiding places - into his sunshine. There is no way of telling what may yet become part of history. Perhaps the past is still essentially undiscovered! So many retroactive forces are still needed!'

'destruction' encapsulates at its most intense his ambivalent relationship to what is transient, since transience not only gives rise to the mutability of the present; it also threatens to occlude the past. Destruction does not simply suppress, but must make use of, transience, a point which is overlooked in one Nietzschean criticism of Benjamin.<sup>44</sup> Seeing his relation to transience in these ambivalent terms may go some way to accounting for the dual character, by turns melancholy and sanguine, of his writings. As Freud once noted, insight into the fact that all things pass away often engenders two emotions, the one an 'aching despondency', the other a 'rebellion against the fact asserted.'<sup>45</sup> Time and again in Benjamin one finds this enormously productive yet finally unresolved tension between despondency and rebellion.

Just as remembrance cuts across Kierkegaard's diagnostic dualism (*either melancholy or hope*) so it seems it would fail to fit neatly onto Nietzsche's distinction between active and reactive will, between affirmation of time's 'it was' and a resentful negation of the past. In its destructive aspect, remembrance both negates the past and, in the same movement, affirms it. In negating the apparent objectivity of history, the dominant tradition which is handed-on or transmitted as historical truth, remembrance in fact *affirms* what was hitherto concealed in that act of barbarism, what had been suppressed in the past. For the Nietzsche of *Zarathustra* the redemption of the past can only involve accepting that the past cannot be altered. For Benjamin this would amount to no redemption at all. Consequently, there are elements of Nietzsche's own self-perfecting nihilism<sup>46</sup> which remain simply incompatible with Benjamin's belief in a redemptive remembrance. A note from the *Nachlass* entitled 'The Perfect Nihilist' encapsulates this problem. Nietzsche writes: 'The nihilist's eye...is unfaithful to his memories: it allows them to drop, lose their leaves; it does not guard them against that corpse-like pallor that weakness pours out over what is distant and gone. And what he does not do for himself, he also does not do for the whole past of mankind: he lets it drop.'<sup>47</sup> The difference between the two thinkers is clear: those

---

<sup>44</sup> Rebecca Comay, 'Redeeming Revenge', *op. cit.*, p. 24.

<sup>45</sup> Freud, 'On Transience' in *Art & Literature* trans. James Strachey (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), p. 287.

<sup>46</sup> Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann & R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1968), pp. 3-4.

<sup>47</sup> Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, *op. cit.*, p. 17.



destructive powers of transience which Nietzsche wishes to enlist for a self-perfecting nihilism are just those which Benjamin ascribes to memory. Nietzsche may on occasion admit to the retroactive alteration of the past, but rarely does he acknowledge that it is memory which accomplishes this redemption. Had he done so the unqualified disparagement memory receives in the *Nachlass* and in *The Genealogy* might have resembled the more nuanced reflections of 'On the Use and Disadvantages of History for Life' where a liberating, critical memory is set against its cumbersome counterpart.

Given such deep differences (and given Nietzsche's own equivocations) it is hardly surprising that Nietzschean ideas enter Benjamin's theologically-guided thought in discordant and disruptive fashion. His antipathy to what he viewed as an 'heroic' politics,<sup>48</sup> along with the complicities he saw in the doctrine of eternal recurrence,<sup>49</sup> together highlight the limits of his debt to Nietzsche. Similarly, the vagaries of Benjamin's messianism could never extend as far as rejecting the eschatology which Nietzsche showed to be part and parcel of the nihilist and melancholic devaluation of the world. It is at this point, as will become clear later, that Benjamin is most susceptible to a Nietzschean genealogy.

### **'The Economics of Pain': Freud**

A significant feature of Benjamin's work on the German mourning-play, and indeed of his writings in general, is that for one who wrote so frequently on the topic of melancholy there exist no references to Freud's essay 'Mourning and Melancholia'. Whilst the failure to mention Freud's essay in the *Trauerspiel* book can be attributed to the fact that it would not have been readily available until 1924 (by which time the *Trauerspiel* book was essentially complete), this still does not account for subsequent oversights. The term one finds repeatedly in Benjamin's writings, *Melancholie*, is also Freud's, although he rarely uses it in its clinical sense; as commentators have noted, his frequent references to melancholy owe more to the ancient and medieval theory of

---

<sup>48</sup> GS 5, p. 175.

<sup>49</sup> GS 1, p. 1234.

the humors than to Freudian psychoanalysis,<sup>50</sup> even when the phenomenon is identified in specifically modern contexts. This apparent oversight of psychoanalytic writings on melancholy is curious because in other places he draws so heavily on Freudian concepts (whether it is the theory of shock formulated by Freud in his study of traumatic neuroses, or the dialectic of repetition and recollection in therapeutic treatment). Given the prominent role which psychoanalysis was to take in the *Passagen-Werk*, a work itself conceived as a parallel to the *Trauerspiel* book, this lacuna seems all the more difficult to explain.

Like both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, Freud deals with melancholy in a way which seems to anticipate Benjamin in close respects. All of these thinkers understand melancholy to be a particular pathological form of memory, one distinguishable from normal unhindered memory by its characteristic blocked or fixated attitude to the past. Each in turn sees it as constituting a mode of experience in its own right, one paralysed by (often wishful) retrospection. In this fixation the capacity for action oriented towards the present and future is correspondingly diminished or stifled. Melancholy is for each primarily an experience of time, and each brings to bear a temporal framework in diagnosing and criticising melancholy. For each, the temporal facets of experience are seen as the key to melancholy's identification, diagnosis, and remedy.

Just as Benjamin distinguishes between tragedy, *Trauerspiel* and his own critique of *Trauerspiel* in terms of the conceptions of time attendant upon each, so Freud distinguishes between mourning and melancholia in temporal terms. Whilst the work of mourning is defined by the possibility of its termination in the liberation and revitalisation of the ego, melancholia is defined as an interminable display of grief, a gradual process of debilitation, an 'open wound...emptying the ego until it is totally impoverished'.<sup>51</sup> With the work of mourning, a finite period of time characterises the

---

<sup>50</sup> Susan Sontag, Introduction to Walter Benjamin, *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, p. 8; Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971) p. 64; Rainer Nägele, *Theatre, Theory, Speculation: Walter Benjamin and the scenes of modernity*, op. cit., p. 221, n. 2.

<sup>51</sup> Freud, 'Trauer und Melancholie' in *Studienausgabe vol. III: Psychologie des Unbewußten* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1975), p. 199; 'Mourning and Melancholia', in *Pelican Freud Library, vol. II: On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), p. 262.



gradual dissociation of libidinal energy from the cathexis which bound it to the love-object: 'each single one of the memories [*Erinnerungen*] and expectations in which the libido is bound to the object is brought up and hypercatheted, and detachment of the libido is accomplished in respect of it.'<sup>52</sup> The melancholic, by contrast, is less able to consciously 'abreact', to call up and work through painful memories, and thereby to release the emotional affect bound up in them; memories come upon the melancholic involuntarily; he is, 'suffering from reminiscences',<sup>53</sup> 'clinging to the object through the medium of a hallucinatory wishful psychosis'.<sup>54</sup> One particular case history finds Freud specifying further the time-dimension of these two phenomena: whereas 'a normal period of mourning would last from one to two years, a pathological one like this would last indefinitely.'<sup>55</sup>

Freud traces these distinguishing temporal characteristics of mourning and melancholia to divergent configurations of what he calls 'the economics of pain', that is different amounts of excitation and different paths taken by libidinal energy as it moves through the psyche. The manner in which emotional energy is accumulated and expended differs in mourning from that in melancholia - a 'normal' movement of energy will tend towards the conditions compatible with a minimisation of painful stimuli (thus a painful cathexis will be given up and the energy reinvested elsewhere); so it is that with the work of mourning complete the ego becomes 'free and uninhibited again'. But melancholia, by contrast, is prodigal: any labour undertaken is matched by an equally protracted and debilitating consumption, the patient's self-regard is severely diminished, sometimes with serious somatic effects, and indeed 'what is psychologically very remarkable...an overcoming of the instinct which compels every living thing to cling to life.'<sup>56</sup> This remorseless dejection is all the more

---

<sup>52</sup> Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', op. cit., p. 253.

<sup>53</sup> This phrase from Freud and Breuer's *Studies on Hysteria* is adopted as the title of an essay by Michael Newman which seeks to situate Benjamin's idea of redemptive memory in terms of what it calls 'the aporetic relation of mourning and melancholia'. ['Suffering From Reminiscences', in Francis Barker, Peter Hulme & Margaret Iverson (eds.), *Postmodernism and the Re-Reading of Modernity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992)].

<sup>54</sup> Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', op. cit., p. 253.

<sup>55</sup> Freud, 'Notes Upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis ['The Rat Man']' in *Pelican Freud Library Volume Nine: Case Histories II* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979) p. 66.

<sup>56</sup> Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', op. cit., p. 254.

mystifying because of its apparent lack of an object: 'one cannot see clearly what it is that has been lost, and it is all the more reasonable to suppose that the patient cannot consciously perceive what he has lost either....We cannot see what it is that is absorbing him so entirely.'<sup>57</sup>

How then can the melancholic depletion of the ego be explained? Freud knows that whatever is happening to diminish the ego so thoroughly must in some way be analogous to the process of mourning and yet, unlike mourning, not dependent upon some real loss. His response is to suggest that in melancholia a splitting of the ego has occurred, a process whereby one element is separated and set up as a critical or judging authority - the censoring agency known as *conscience*: melancholia, involves a hypertrophy of conscience. Now this splitting and the subsequent hypertrophy of the censoring superego is itself, argues Freud, the result of the ego's internalisation of a real relation to an other. 'So we find the key to the clinical picture: we perceive that the self-reproaches are reproaches against a loved object which have been shifted away from it on to the patient's own ego.'<sup>58</sup> It is this *ambivalence* of the melancholic ego toward the lost object - perhaps a hidden *satisfaction* at the object's death or disappearance - that blocks the normal process of mourning.

Freud's definition of melancholy in terms of ambivalence closely resembles insights of Kierkegaard - the transformation of love into hate, passion into passivity, life into living death. It similarly evokes Nietzsche's formulation of melancholy as a will turned against itself, a counter- or ill-will (*Widerwille*). For Freud these contradictory emotions displayed by the melancholy ego stem from the fact that it continues to censure the object for its own dependency. Only by working-through these ambivalent emotions can the ego come to terms with its own part in the malevolence it ascribes to the object, and, by gradually liberating its cathexis, dissipate that anger. For Benjamin too the impotence of the melancholic is a spur to anger, to 'spleen' in its original sense: 'For someone who is past experiencing there is no consolation. Yet it is this very inability to experience that constitutes the essence of

---

<sup>57</sup> Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', p. 254.

<sup>58</sup> Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', p. 257.



rage....The outbreaks of rage are timed to the ticking of the seconds to which the melancholy man is slave.’<sup>59</sup>

Freud, again mirroring Kierkegaard, sees as superfluous any concrete object-loss to melancholy’s pathogenesis - it may just as well be ‘the loss of some abstraction...such as one’s country, liberty, an ideal, and so on.’<sup>60</sup> For Benjamin it is just these abstractions which produce the most interesting and compelling forms of melancholy, ‘for feelings, however vague they may seem when perceived by the self, respond like a motorial reaction to an objective structure of the world.’<sup>61</sup> That melancholy reacts to some objective character of the world is clear in both Benjamin’s survey of the baroque - *Trauerspiele* ‘are not so much plays that cause mourning, as plays through which mournfulness finds satisfaction: plays for the mournful’<sup>62</sup> and modern melancholy - ‘the ‘souvenir’ is the schema of the transformation of the commodity into a collector’s object.’<sup>63</sup> Whereas the baroque conceived the ‘objective structure of the world’ theologically as an unredeemed, creaturely realm, modernism (whose prototype was Baudelaire) pointed towards its source in a deterioration of tradition and an increasing commodification of life.

Melancholy is for Freud, as it was for Kierkegaard, a form of repetition-backwards, a burdened and fixated relation to the past. But Freud differs from Kierkegaard in refusing to equate all recollection with melancholia. On the contrary he believes that pathological memory may be alleviated only by a further act of recollection in which each memory that connects the ego to the lost object is called to mind and gradually de-cathected. This is one crucial assumption which Benjamin shares with Freud since he too wishes to substitute for the encumbered melancholy memory a retroactive remembrance of the past. It is not forgetting or repetition but paradoxically *remembrance* which overcomes the pathology of memory. Like Freud,

---

<sup>59</sup> GS 2, p. 642; *Charles Baudelaire*, p. 143 (amended).

<sup>60</sup> Freud, ‘Mourning and Melancholia’, op. cit., p. 252. Cf. Kierkegaard, *Either/Or* Part. 1, op. cit., p. 189.

<sup>61</sup> GS 1, p. 318; *Origin*, p. 139 (amended); cf. Adorno, *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), p. 60: ‘Melancholy is not accidental; rather, inwardness becomes melancholic through the specific struggle with historical *realien*’.

<sup>62</sup> GS 1, p. 298; *Origin*, p. 119.

<sup>63</sup> GS 1, p. 689; ‘Central Park’, op. cit., p. 55.

Benjamin does not see repetition as a viable alternative to melancholy since repetition itself denotes an incomplete act of recollection, another form of fixation. For Benjamin, Kierkegaard's hopeful repetition ignores the transformation of the past necessary to free a fixation, and as such risks repeating the past's mistakes even as it would free itself from them. If Kierkegaard draws attention to a pathological moment in recollection, Benjamin (following Freud) highlights an equally pathological element in repetition. The difficult path between these two dangers is that traced by the concept of remembrance.

Of each of the three thinkers discussed, Benjamin shares most with Freud because where Kierkegaard sees recollection as melancholic and Nietzsche denies its redemptive power, Freud recognises that memory is the only means for overcoming melancholy. Not by dispensing with memory, or engaging in 'active forgetting', but only through cultivating a different type of remembering can the melancholy fixation upon the past be transcended. Freudian memory has this dual character rarely seen in Kierkegaard or Nietzsche. Yet it also has the benefit of acknowledging the resistance which militates against any coming to terms with past. Recognition of the transformative power of memory is always tempered by recognition of its weakness, the resistance it faces in the form of fixation or the compulsion to repeat. This simultaneously powerful yet endangered memory becomes in turn one of the defining characteristics of Benjamin's own concept of remembrance.

## **Melancholy History**

That for Benjamin the phenomenon of melancholy refers just as much to a particular outlook upon history as it does to a psychological state is significant in the light of Freud's own temporal definitions of mourning and melancholia. A comparison of Benjamin and Freud shows up the flaws in the common criticism that Benjamin's thinking of history recapitulates the melancholy historical outlook to which he



professes opposition.<sup>64</sup> Such a criticism needs to be qualified by recognition of the fact that (as Freud shows) melancholia is potentially infinite whilst mourning is defined by the possibility of its termination. In terms of this distinction, Benjamin's invocation of eschatology against baroque sadness comes closer to mourning than to (potentially interminable) melancholy. Had Freud studied the Baroque aesthetic he might well have pointed out that there is no *Trauerarbeit* in *Trauerspiel*; no work, only the unending play of sadness. The infinity of the Baroque view of history would be the most eloquent expression of its melancholy. One can only speculate as to a Freudian view of this world-historical sadness since it is never employed by Benjamin. However, Benjamin does note that melancholy is sustained by 'the consciousness of time running empty',<sup>65</sup> that melancholy coincides with the experience of empty homogeneous time. If it is an empty unfulfilled time which lies at the basis of the melancholy outlook on history, then it would indeed correspond to the endless history projected in *Trauerspiel*, 'the supposed infinity of a world without hope',<sup>66</sup> a view of history repeated in modern conceptions of progress. By implication, the act of remembrance which Benjamin sets against this empty homogeneous time carries with it a different temporality, a time capable of fulfilment - messianic time. Clearly there is more of the work of mourning than melancholia in operation in the concept of remembrance. But whilst he may be defended against charges of recapitulating a melancholic view of history, the possibility remains that his is still an '*aberrated mourning*, not the sadness of true mourning and lamentation',<sup>67</sup> that the eschatology which would break with melancholy rests on the same traumatised historical vision. In these terms messianic hope and melancholic hopelessness would be two sides of the same coin, each revealing an interruption in the labour of coming to terms with the past.

---

<sup>64</sup> See for instance Scholem, 'Walter Benjamin and His Angel' in Gary Smith (ed.), *On Walter Benjamin*, op. cit., p. 85.

<sup>65</sup> GS 1, p. 1141.

<sup>66</sup> GS 1, p. 406; *Origin*, p. 232.

<sup>67</sup> Gillian Rose, 'Walter Benjamin: Out of the Sources of Modern Judaism' in *Judaism and Modernity: Philosophical Essays*, op. cit., p. 187. The italicised phrase comes from Laurence A. Rickels, *Aberrations of Mourning: Writing on German Crypts*. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988).

Such a criticism is compelling. It is undeniable that the eschatology which is contrasted with melancholy fatalism shares important features with that very view of history. The conclusion of the *Trauerspiel* study, as Pensky notes, 'is not unambiguously critical'<sup>68</sup> of the Baroque. This troubled attitude towards allegory and the melancholy to which it corresponds reappears in Benjamin's writings on modernity. 'The allegorical mode of apprehension,' he writes, 'always arises from a devalued appearance-world. The specific devaluation [*Entwertung*] of the appearance-world represented by the commodity is the foundation of the allegorical intention for Baudelaire.'<sup>69</sup> For Benjamin it is bourgeois society which excels at this emptying-out of the world, realising materially what the Baroque could construe only theologically, as God-forsakenness: 'the devaluation [*Entwertung*] of the world of things in allegory is outdone within the world of things itself by the commodity.'<sup>70</sup>

But as Weber argued (and here the influence of Nietzsche is evident), eschatology equally denigrates worldly existence: the doctrine of Last Judgement 'has tended to progress step by step towards an ever-increasing devaluation [*Entwertung*] of the world.'<sup>71</sup> To the melancholy devaluation of the mundane, eschatology responds not with an affirmation but with a heightened devaluation. This ambivalent character of the critique of melancholy reveals its implication in that which it would overcome. Benjamin appears to acknowledge this nihilistic character of his redemptive criticism when, referring to a letter from Overbeck to Nietzsche, he describes Christianity as a religion of 'unconditional, eschatologically grounded world-negation [*Weltverneinung*]',<sup>72</sup> just the characteristic of Christianity identified and exploited in the *Trauerspiel* study. Here the two senses of 'world-negation' - the one, renunciation,

---

<sup>68</sup> Max Pensky, *Melancholy Dialectics*, p. 149.

<sup>69</sup> GS 1, p. 1151 cited Pensky, p. 166.

<sup>70</sup> GS 1, p. 660; 'Central Park', p. 34.

<sup>71</sup> Weber, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie I* (Tübingen: Sibeck, 1920), p. 567; 'Religious Rejections of the World and their Directions' in *From Max Weber*, ed. & trans. H. H. Gerth & C. Wright Mills (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 353. Cf. Nietzsche: 'Even the 'Last Judgement' is still the sweet consolation of revenge - the revolution, such as the Socialist too anticipates, only conceived of as somewhat more distant...Even the 'Beyond' - why a Beyond if not as a means of befouling the Here-and-Now?...' [Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990), p. 97].

<sup>72</sup> GS 4, p. 228. This phrase is cited in Bernd Witte, *Walter Benjamin: An Intellectual Biography*, op. cit., p. 173.



devaluation, sublimation, the other, destruction, transcendence, precipitation - stand in uneasy relation. Because just this world-negating eschatology (both in its Christian and its Judaic manifestations) constantly informs Benjamin's thinking, his relationship to the object of his criticism - the melancholy devaluation of the world - is always closer and more complex than first appears. Like the melancholic world-view, eschatology sees no aspect of life which is not itself tarnished by the thing-like quality of the world. The remedy shares much with the symptom. In his *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), Robert Burton depicted a utopia which might deliver the world of its melancholy condition; to the melancholic, only such an other-worldly politics appears sufficient.

It is here that Benjamin differs most fundamentally from the genealogies of melancholy undertaken by Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Freud, because his relation to melancholy is always more equivocal than the undiluted criticisms one finds in the latter. Benjamin's is not a genealogy but a *dialectic* of melancholy, one which seeks not to counter melancholy with repetition or affirmation but to turn melancholy against itself, to utilise its heightened powers of absorption and contemplation, the fascination found in melancholy subjectivity with the reified and unredeemed 'thing', turning these powers to redemptive ends, to rescuing the thing, or, as it is in its capitalist manifestation, the commodity. If this involves a negation of the world then paradoxically it also expresses faithfulness to it:

Fidelity is completely appropriate only to the relationship of man to the world of things. The latter knows no higher law, and fidelity knows no object to which it might belong more exclusively than the world of things. And indeed this world is calling it; and every faithful vow or memory surrounds itself with the fragments of the world of things as its very own, not-too-demanding objects. Clumsily, indeed justifiably, fidelity expresses, in its own way, a truth for the sake of which it does, of course, betray the world. Melancholy betrays the world for the sake

of knowledge. But in its tenacious self-absorption it embraces dead objects in its contemplation, in order to rescue them.<sup>73</sup>

In 'the spirit of melancholy' Benjamin's criticism too descends into the depths of the fallen world, cultivating, like the baroque outlook, a fidelity to the creaturely, but one which, unlike the baroque, seeks ultimately to redeem it. His thought at large retains something of this betrayal of the world in the cause of knowledge, in its relentless fascination with the reified relic or the souvenir, searching for what each contains and conceals, what each remembers. This assumption that it is only by working with the destruction of tradition that tradition's nihilism can be transcended eloquently expresses Benjamin's own self-perficient nihilism. His redemptive criticism becomes a means for turning devaluation (*Entwertung*) against itself, clearing a space for a more fundamental renewal, a revaluation. Eschatological devaluation of the world thereby conceals a more deep-seated fidelity to it. But in this assumption the dangerous affinity between melancholy and the destructive critique of melancholy is further underlined.<sup>74</sup>

The orientation of criticism towards a redemptive remembrance of the past struggles with a melancholy which threatens to overpower it. Klee's New Angel 'wants happiness' but is being blown away from the place where it is to be found. The question is not whether the melancholy moment can be excised from this project but whether it need always serve 'pathological', that is, regressive, ends. There may be a necessary melancholy in destruction as much as there is destruction in melancholy. Here Benjamin must ultimately diverge from Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Freud and defend an element of that melancholy which each denigrated.

---

<sup>73</sup> GS 1, p. 333-4; *Origin*, p. 156-7 (amended).

<sup>74</sup> Pensky argues that Benjamin's appropriation of surrealist ideas in his works of the 1930s enabled him to overcome this dilemma and to pursue a 'postmelancholy criticism': in surrealism 'hypertrophied memory' is 'released from the model of the self-reflecting subject and dispersed in the energized field of objects'; 'mournfulness is turned into (black) humour' [*Melancholy Dialectics*, op. cit., p. 192, 186]. But if one sees melancholy more or less definitively surmounted in Benjamin's later work the problem remains of explaining the theses 'On the Concept of History' in which each of the problems discussed above concerning the melancholy of remembrance recur in accentuated form. The replacement here of the isolated subject of memory not with a 'field of objects' but with a collective subject, ('the revolutionary classes at the moment of their action') serves not so much to overcome the problem of melancholy as to raise its stakes.



Like the criticisms levelled against Benjamin by Adorno, those of the genealogists of memory are cogent and compelling, but in the last instance do not invalidate the concept of remembrance, nor the view of history to which it gives rise. There is much in this concept which can be defended. It may be this concept's resilience which explains its influence in subsequent appropriations of Benjamin's thinking, and its recurrence in contemporary criticism. It is to the legacy of the concept of remembrance that this thesis turns now in conclusion. As will become clear, it is a particular rendition of Benjamin's philosophy of memory that has shaped its reception by contemporary readers: frequently remembrance has been construed *ethically* as a theory of how justice can be rendered to past generations. This particular interpretation has had a significant effect on how Benjamin's thought as a whole has been received. The discussion thus far provides the necessary resources to evaluate this interpretation both in its fidelity to Benjamin's intention and in terms of its own merits and weaknesses.

## VI

### Beyond Commemoration

#### Introduction

When critics have recognised the important role played by the concept of remembrance within Benjamin's philosophy or noted its ramifications for any thinking of history and time, the particular way in which that concept has been construed has been crucial. Indeed the specific interpretation of this aspect of Benjamin's work has played a significant part in determining the legacy of Benjamin's work as a whole. The view that remembrance denotes an ethical act, an event of commemoration, has become a popular assumption amongst contemporary readers, and whilst this has renewed interest in Benjamin, the circumscription of the diverse lineages, meanings and applications of the concept has been considerable. This final chapter sets out to critically examine this fate of Benjamin's philosophy of memory in *an ethics of commemoration*, to question in particular the way in which his concept of *Eingedenken* has been invoked in attempts to found a philosophical ethics in memory of the Holocaust. In recent debates within theology, social theory and philosophy, remembrance of the Holocaust is frequently seen as a means of doing justice to the genocide itself. Moral reflection on the atrocities of Nazism is now frequently expressed in terms of founding a new form of remembrance or commemoration. Here memory becomes a categorical imperative, an unconditional demand, a 'basic category of practical critical reason' (Metz). Significantly for the present discussion, it has often been Benjamin whose name has been invoked as an antecedent for such moral philosophy after the Holocaust. The following discussion is devoted to showing



how Benjamin's thinking of memory and history have been expressed in ethical terms by thinkers such as Habermas, Metz and Peukert and subsequently incorporated into a model of Holocaust remembrance. The detailed examination of Benjamin's philosophy of memory given thus far provides a unique vantage point from which to assess this ethical legacy of his thinking.

The first section of this chapter looks at Metz's notion of 'dangerous memory' and the role Metz's interpretation of Benjamin plays in its exposition. The second section examines similar themes in works by Christian Lenhardt and Helmut Peukert, their development of a notion of 'anamnestic solidarity'. The third part goes on to explore the way 'Benjaminian' ideas of solidarity in remembrance and critical historiography have been taken up by Habermas in his political writings and in his reflections upon the Holocaust. Throughout, the strengths and weaknesses of each of these readings of Benjamin are highlighted. The chapter concludes by reflecting on the limits of any ethics of commemoration and the questions Benjamin himself poses of any attempt to found such an ethics in his name.



*'As though it were the task of every age to have to be just  
towards everything that has ever existed!'*

Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*

### **Dangerous Memory: Metz**

The political theology which Johann Baptist Metz has developed over recent years in the form of an engagement with elements of liberation theology and critical theory is of interest to any examination of the legacy of Benjamin's theory of remembrance because of the importance of Metz's interpretation of Benjamin to the exposition and development of his central category of 'dangerous memory'. In Metz political theology carries a different meaning than that it had for Schmitt (who in turn influenced Benjamin) where it named a genealogy of political concepts understood as secularised theological categories. Here it derives from the more normative assumption that theology cannot subsist in abstraction from questions of 'public life, justice and freedom, in other words, political problems'.<sup>1</sup> Political theology 'is not simply a theory of the subsequent application of the Christian message, but a theory of the truth of that message with a practical and critical intention for the modern world.'<sup>2</sup> However, Metz's view is that the historical distance between the present and biblical times means that the question of how that message is to be articulated becomes a problem of remembering a tradition which has become all but extinguished. Memory becomes, of necessity, 'the fundamental expression of Christian faith'; Significantly though, this memory of Christ's suffering and resurrection has an essentially critical,

---

<sup>1</sup> Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, op. cit., p. 88.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 89.



'dangerous' quality when applied to the historical present.<sup>3</sup> 'In faith, [Christians] remember the testament of Christ's love, in which the kingdom of God appeared among men by initially establishing that kingdom between men, by Jesus' confession of himself as one who was on the side of the oppressed and rejected and by his proclamation of the coming kingdom of God as the liberating power of unconditional love.'<sup>4</sup> This dangerous memory differs from 'romantic or restorative' views of the past in that 'it is conscious of the deadly conflict between God's promises and a history that is dominated by man's alienated desires and interests....It is characterized by...the persistence, the impatience and the patience that are required by the Christian memory as the imitation of Christ.'<sup>5</sup> In its projection of Christ's own resurrection into future human salvation memory becomes not retrospective but anticipative; not (as Kierkegaard has it) opposed to hope, but becoming instead hope's 'eschatological expression', a 'repetitive memory forwards'.<sup>6</sup> Yet this dangerous, hopeful memory is equally endangered: the extent of its destruction 'is a typical measure of totalitarian rule'. Totalitarianism is for Metz the attempted erasure of past suffering and past aspirations to which Christianity responds with 'anamnetic [*sic*] solidarity' or a solidarity with history's oppressed. Solidarity in memory works against the apparent continuity of triumph and conquest which defines history as commonly conceived, it 'shocks us out of ever becoming prematurely reconciled to the facts' of historical continuity, by setting 'the non-sense of history against the probing optimism of the victor'.<sup>7</sup> The idea of historical continuity, together with notion of 'evolution in history' both rest, Metz argues, upon an uncritical view of time.

Man's understanding of reality, which guides his scientific and technical control of nature and from which the cult of the makeable draws its strength, is marked by the idea of time as a continuous process which is empty and evolving towards infinity and within which

---

<sup>3</sup> In Metz's formulation there are clear echoes of Kierkegaard's 'there is no weapon as dangerous as the art of being able to recollect' [*Either/Or* vol. 1, op. cit., p. 293].

<sup>4</sup> Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, op. cit., p. 90.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 204.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 184, 188.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 110, 113, 130.

everything is enclosed without grace. This understanding of reality excludes all expectation and therefore produces that fatalism that eats away at man's soul. Man therefore is already resigned even before society has been able to introduce him successfully to this resignation as a form of practical rationality.<sup>8</sup>

Dangerous memory differs from the assumption of temporal homogeneity implicit in such an idea of history by virtue of its 'narrative structure': alluding to Benjamin, Metz cites the essay 'The Storyteller' in which memory, tradition and experience are shown to be intimately linked: for Benjamin narration, whether in the form of stories or tradition, is understood as the means by which experience is transmitted. For Metz, interpreting these themes theologically, narrative is the necessary means of communicating and passing-on the experience of faith; narrative is 'dangerous' insofar as it reverses the destruction of that passing-on; faith is thus capable of being 'translated into dangerously liberating stories'.<sup>9</sup> Again Benjamin appears in the background when Metz weighs up competing views of history within the philosophical tradition and reveals his sympathy for hermeneutics in its privileging of history-as-memory over history-as-science.

This use of Benjamin's ideas reveals a confusion in Metz's notion of dangerous memory. For Benjamin, what is overlooked in making a positive science of historiography is indeed the mnemonic aspect of history, but by returning to this original vocation of history Benjamin sought to draw attention to the discontinuous structure of historical time. That history has a continuous structure only as appearance, as illusion, is dispelled by recognition of the heterogeneous temporality of memory. But it is precisely *continuity* to which Metz appeals when he describes the 'narrative structure' of dangerous memory. Despite recognising Benjamin's critique of temporal homogeneity he fails to see the implication of narrative (his 'dangerously liberating stories') in that critique. This error may well be due to the fact that instead of drawing upon the 'Theses' and the exchange with Horkheimer in which *Eingedenken* takes

---

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 170.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 212.



priority he focuses on the essay 'The Storyteller' in which *Erinnerung* is the privileged form of memory, that mnemonic medium which passes a happening on from generation to generation.<sup>10</sup> *Erinnerung* is 'dangerous' only in so far as refers to what has been lost in the deterioration of tradition; the critical quality of *Eingedenken* by contrast lies in its more subtle relation to that destruction of tradition. Where *Erinnerung* provides a seamless link in tradition's chain, *Eingedenken* has the capacity to disrupt that continuity. Metz's allusions to 'The Storyteller' are in fact self-defeating because that essay announces precisely the end of narrative, something which, with the development of the 'secular productive forces of history',<sup>11</sup> proves irreversible. Indeed Benjamin does not even think it desirable to resuscitate a form of experience transmitted solely by narrative. This is one reason why *Erinnerung* is for the most part supplanted in his development of a critical mode of engagement with tradition. That *Eingedenken* and not *Erinnerung* is for Benjamin the truly 'dangerous' form of memory reveals not only an inconsistent but a potentially conservative dimension to Metz's political theology. The point at which his reading of Benjamin proves less than compelling is also the point at which his own speculations on theology seem weakest. (It is here that Peukert, upon whom Metz in turn draws, proves to be the better reader).

Metz's 'memorative soteriology' misinterprets Benjamin's idea of redemptive memory in several ways. Firstly it literalises Benjamin's view of the redemptive capacities of remembrance and in the process fails to see the complex interweaving of theological and secular ideas which yield its meaning. To construe memory solely in soteriological terms (that is, as a doctrine of divine salvation) is to overlook its secular currency, something Benjamin was always keen to stress. Secondly, even in theological terms Benjamin's Judaism is not easily translated into Metz's Christian framework, with its assumption that memory exhibits a speculative tension between 'the already' (Christ's resurrection) and the 'not yet' (human salvation).<sup>12</sup> Even an interpretation seemingly more faithful to Benjamin's Judaism, one which sees the function of remembrance as illuminating the gap between a pre-lapsarian past and its

---

<sup>10</sup> GS 2, p. 453; 'The Storyteller' in *Illuminations*, p. 98.

<sup>11</sup> GS 2, p. 442; 'The Storyteller' in *Illuminations*, p. 87.

<sup>12</sup> Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, op. cit., p. 200.

future re-establishment<sup>13</sup> is limited and misleading if it ignores memory's equally historical and political function. In Benjamin's writings the critical or 'dangerous' role which memory is able to play is better understood in just this secular sense, that it brings to light still-unfulfilled historical demands and desires. Remembrance does not long for a pre-historical *arkhe* but merely keeps alive a promise latent within historical struggles themselves. Metz's assumption that Benjamin privileges *Erinnerung* as dangerous memory is complicit in a common view of his critical project as a sort of historical nostalgia. It serves to render memory conservative rather than destructive by seeking to revive a pre-modern form of faith and reverse the process of secularisation. It ignores Benjamin's more complex analysis of the forms of memory characteristic of modernity. Thirdly, Metz describes memory as 'a basic category of practical critical reason' but without exploring further the implied link to Kantian philosophy: presumably this definition entails that here a cognitive (theoretical) faculty has ethical (practical) import. Yet other elements of Kantian practical reason can be seen at work here. The idea of solidarity takes on the qualities both of a duty and of a postulate of moral action; to this extent Metz's Christian reflections evoke Cohen's Kantianism in their assumption that it is through fellow-feeling that one may aspire to the Kingdom of Ends, this understood (theologically) as God's kingdom. It is in the sense of a task of solidarity that memory becomes practical or ethical in Metz's hands. This in turn is one important feature which Metz's appropriation of Benjamin shares with those of Lenhardt and Peukert.

### **Solidarity in Remembrance: Lenhardt and Peukert**

Christian Lenhardt's essay 'Anamnestic Solidarity: The Proletariat and its *Manes*' is conceived as a contribution to 'the Marxian philosophy of history'. It proposes 'an immanent critique of the concept of solidarity, as it has emerged in Marxist thought, assimilating and systematizing a handful of sporadic remarks by Walter Benjamin and

---

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Irving Wohlfarth, 'On The Messianic Structure of Walter Benjamin's Last Reflections', op. cit., pp. 148-212.



Max Horkheimer.’<sup>14</sup> Claiming ‘no truck with theology’ it seeks instead a ‘spiritualist revision’ of the way in which Marxism has understood the notion of solidarity. Drawing upon terms used by Alfred Schutz, Lenhardt proposes a typology with which to express historically the relation between freedom and unfreedom within the Marxian paradigm: he distinguishes between the generation of enslaved predecessors (*Vorwelt*), enslaved contemporaries (*Mitwelt*) and emancipated successors (*Nachwelt*). It is typically assumed, argues Lenhardt, that Marx privileged the latter two categories as respectively the agents and beneficiaries of social revolution and that, by implication, the first generation is relegated to status of ‘dead wood in the evolution of mankind’. It is this assumption, the imbalance of indebtedness between future and past generations which Lenhardt is keen to redress. He argues that the debt of gratitude owed by the *Nachwelt* generation to both the *Vor-* and *Mitwelt* places it an ‘unenviable’ position, ‘for what can it do practically and existentially, to equalize the burden of injustice borne by its predecessors?’<sup>15</sup> According to Lenhardt it is here that Benjamin comes into his own, because he ‘addresses the fundamental problem of the relationship between generational types’ through the concept of remembrance: ‘he sensed that what he called remembrance (*Eingedenken*) and redemption were cornerstones of a materialistic depth-structure which had yet to be unearthed and shown to exist.’<sup>16</sup> Remembrance is singled out because it provides an outlook with which both present and future generations can do justice to the struggles of their deceased ancestors, just that outlook Lenhardt finds lacking in Marxian orthodoxy. The concept achieves several things: it overcomes the ‘instrumental’ or ‘one-dimensional’ relationship between past, present and future generations typical of Marxism as commonly conceived; it recognises the need for solidarity not only amongst the living but between the living and the dead; it acknowledges that historical consciousness is both ‘rational-reconstructive’ and at the same time ‘emotionally and sympathetically committed’; it highlights a hitherto under-explored link between Marxism and religious thought;<sup>17</sup> the historiography to which it gives rise benefits

---

<sup>14</sup> Lenhardt, ‘Anamnestic Solidarity: The Proletariat and its *Manes*’, *Telos*, 25 (Fall 1975), p. 133.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 133.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 137.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 153.

from having 'a sense of good-and-evil which informs the materialist plot and colors the redemptive telling of the story'.<sup>18</sup> Indeed the power of remembrance is nothing less than 'the power of the historical being called man'; it becomes 'imperative, especially for Marxists and especially under materialist auspices, to reflect upon [its] power'.<sup>19</sup>

Digressing into an anthropology of ancestor worship, Lenhardt outlines a 'Marxian religion' in which reverence for the proletariat's '*manes*' (the souls or spirit of the dead) would be seen as a necessary precondition of the happiness of future liberated generations. Minus this anamnestic homage 'the felicity of the lucky successors will have an admixture of displeasure owing to the exclusion of the ancestors from the feast of their grand-children.'<sup>20</sup> The notion of anamnestic solidarity is attributed not only to Benjamin's invocation of Marx in the 'Theses' but to Marx himself via a biographical link (as Lenhardt admits, a tenuous one) with Hegel's writings on ancestor worship in the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*. Admitting that his argument may run counter to the letter of Marx ('let the dead bury the dead' urges *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*), Lenhardt goes on to suggest that implicit in the labour theory of value is an 'ethical theory of inheritance', a view of the indebtedness of those who employ means of production to those whose labour-power is congealed or expended in it. Lenhardt echoes a point made critically by Adorno in discussion with Benjamin, that the reification of the commodity is a forgetting of the human element in it,<sup>21</sup> but here the argument is given a spiritual and ethical meaning not present in Adorno's formulation.

Lenhardt's arguments (together with ideas drawn from Metz) are subsequently developed by Helmut Peukert, who concurs that Benjamin's idea of 'remembrance' is a crucial yet neglected concept of critical theory. Peukert's reflections on anamnestic solidarity form part of a wider project to question the putative incommensurability of Habermas' universal pragmatics with fundamental theology, whilst at the same time pointing to the limiting cases which circumscribe universal pragmatics itself.

---

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 142.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 141.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 144.

<sup>21</sup> GS 1, p. 1134.



Referring both to Metz's notion of 'dangerous memory' and the debate between Benjamin and Horkheimer over the finished or unfinished nature of the past ('one of the most theologically significant controversies of this century',<sup>22</sup>) Peukert argues that the postulates of interaction found in the Habermasian theory of communication - 'unconditional equality, reciprocity, and solidarity' are not fulfilled in the case of our relation to past generations. Mobilising Lenhardt's tripartite typology he suggests that the freedom projected in the idea of communicative action may be contingent or parasitic upon forgetting the suffering of past generations, precisely those whose struggles realise that freedom.

The question of the possibility of historical freedom in the framework of a theory of communicative action is made even more acute in the attempt to exist in universal solidarity, when solidarity is extended to those who have been destroyed or annihilated as victims of historical processes. Can we simply exclude the question of a reality to which communicative action in solidarity is directed? Precisely at this point, does not the theory of communicative action pose the question of the reality that is the subject matter of theology, the question of a reality witnessed for the other in the face of his death by acting in solidarity with him?<sup>23</sup>

Several points can be made concerning Lenhardt's and Peukert's understanding of Benjaminian 'remembrance' and how it impinges upon their ethics of solidarity. Firstly, the meaning of the redemption which remembrance enacts is for both Lenhardt and Peukert the redemption of 'mankind', a category which includes 'both living and dead' with the result that despite the concern expressed by each to give secular currency to their reflections, they rest upon theological presuppositions. Benjamin's own concepts of redemption (*Rettung, Erlösung*) are always less literal, less confined to their religious meaning, than both Lenhardt and Peukert imply, because materialism

---

<sup>22</sup> Helmut Peukert, *Science, Action, and Fundamental Theology*, op. cit., p. 206.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 214.

always qualified the theology found in these late writings (and particularly in the debate with Horkheimer upon which Peukert draws). That Benjamin thought of redemption as the critical practise of a 'materialist historian' shows that caution is needed before any theological retranslation of the concept is attempted. It is not insignificant that Benjamin's response to Horkheimer warns against the use of 'immediately theological' concepts in the writing of history: he indicates that an exclusively theological reading of the 'Theses' is as misplaced as an exclusively Marxian interpretation. Secondly, in transposing Benjamin's reflections on history into the framework of moral philosophy, both Lenhardt and Peukert have neglected the stakes involved in Benjamin's own choice of language and style: the 'Theses' are a rich interweaving of forms and techniques which nowhere exhibit the didactic or hortative tone often attributed to them. Thirdly, the terms of this reception remain undertheorised, especially in relation to Benjamin's own terminology: whilst Lenhardt recognises that the notion of solidarity with past generations is complicated by Benjamin's own critique of Diltheyan 'empathy',<sup>24</sup> Peukert does not see the significance of this conflict of allegiance for any attempt to empathise with the past, with the result that he often elides solidarity and empathy. The problem he then faces is how to derive the universal character of solidarity whilst retaining Benjamin's conflictual view of history. The concept of empathy could be made servicable for universal pragmatics (even Peukert's qualified version of that philosophical outlook) only by rendering it conflict-free. For Benjamin, empathy with the past is conflict-ridden because the historical object is itself conflict-ridden; historical struggles entail a struggle for how history is understood. Empathy is, as Peukert's comments recognise, to be wrested away from apologetics, but not in favour of an unspecified universality.

Peukert believes that the 'aporia' left by the limiting case of solidarity with past generations, is to be remedied by fundamental theology, by faith in the salvation of the dead, a faith in turn inspired by the resurrection of Christ. Here he comes close to Metz for whom memory involves a projected universalisation of Christ's own resurrection. Agreeing with Horkheimer's characterisation of Benjamin's view of the

---

<sup>24</sup> Lenhardt, 'Anamnestic Solidarity', op. cit., p. 141.



unfinished nature of the past ('ultimately you are making a theological statement') and differing from Horkheimer only in his enthusiasm for this characterisation, Peukert has failed to understand both the interplay of theology and materialism in Benjamin's side of the debate, and the subsequent qualification he makes by means of the concept of remembrance: 'in remembrance we have an experience which forbids us to conceive of history as fundamentally atheological, just as little as we are allowed to attempt to write it in terms of immediately theological concepts.'<sup>25</sup> Peukert writes history with the aid of just those immediately theological concepts terms forbidden by Benjamin. The oversight is significant in that Peukert's theological rendition of Benjamin performs the argumentative labour in his critique of the postulate of universal solidarity, and in his wider argument that Habermas' universal pragmatics requires fundamental theology if it is to be consistent.

### **Memory as Self-Reassurance and as Suspicion: Habermas**

Habermas himself has responded to Peukert both implicitly and explicitly, addressing his criticisms of the aporia of solidarity and taking on board his formulations concerning memory. The call for anamnestic solidarity has become a recurring theme in Habermas' own recent work, and has been incorporated into his revisions and restatement of the theory of communicative reason. That he takes the idea of anamnestic solidarity seriously is confirmed when in one such restatement, he sets out (citing Peukert and Lenhardt) a possible 'skeptical' criticism of his discourse ethics, and in so doing clarifies his relation to Benjamin.

Discourse ethics does not see fit to resort to an objective teleology, least of all to a countervailing force that tries to negate dialectically the irreversible succession of historical events - as was the case, for instance, with the redeeming judgment of the Christian God on the last day. But how can we live up to the principle of discourse ethics, which

---

<sup>25</sup> GS 5, p. 589 (N8,1); 'Konvolut 'N'', p. 61 (amended).

postulates the consent of *all*, if we cannot make restitution for the injustice and pain suffered by previous generations or if we cannot at least promise an equivalent to the day of judgment and its power of redemption? Is it not obscene for present-day beneficiaries of past injustices to expect the posthumous consent of slain and degraded victims to norms that appear justified to us in light of our own expectations regarding the future?<sup>26</sup>

The objection is left unanswered, but Habermas' formulation of it is instructive. Here discourse ethics names itself (citing Horkheimer) 'a materialist theory of society', an antidote to 'the utopian character of Kant's idea of the perfect constitution'. Yet this qualified religion within the limits of reason is paradoxically more theological and less materialist than Benjamin's reflections towards which it alludes; it is curious that Habermas gives credence to Peukert's theological rewriting of his essentially humanist model of communicative action. The result is that, despite the alleged materialism of Habermas' position here, the 'all' who are to be restituted are redeemed (even if only in the form of a postulate) in a purely theological way, one which, moreover, is at odds with Benjamin's more dialectically nuanced 'redemption'. For the latter it is the *thought* (the 'image') of past suffering which is to inspire political action in the present, not the actual redemption of the dead, least of all their postulated 'consent'. This is the meaning of the '*weak* Messianic power' ascribed to remembrance.<sup>27</sup> When Habermas concurs with Horkheimer's view of the closed (here the 'irreversible') character of the past and declares against faith in last judgment, he (like Horkheimer) takes Benjamin's formulations in an exclusively theological way (despite noting the 'weak' character of redemption), and thus overlooks Benjamin's subsequent elaboration of redemption as a power of remembrance (*Eingedenken*), the contention that it is remembrance which makes the ostensibly complete into something unfinished and vice versa. Habermas seeks to contrast his own 'materialism' with Benjamin's theology but in the last instance it is theology which

---

<sup>26</sup> Habermas, 'Morality and Ethical life' in *Moral Consciousness and Human Action*, trans. Christian Lenhardt & Shierry Weber Nicholson (Cambridge: Polity, 1990), p. 210.

<sup>27</sup> GS 1, p. 694; 'Theses' in *Illuminations*, p. 254.



holds sway over this attempt to extend the compass of discourse ethics, because it is never questioned how the dead might, through our empathy or solidarity, participate in a community of interlocutors. Benjamin's idea of remembrance has a different meaning: it sets out an attitude towards history and an historiography which would keep alive a sense of what is at stake in the actions and suffering of past generations; it sees the concerns of those ancestors as present dangers. This is the only sense in which 'justice' is done to the dead; it is, as Benjamin acknowledged, a 'weak' eschatology.

In apparently conceding to Peukert, Habermas reveals a wish to retain in his discourse ethics something of what was meant by eschatology, a belief that its ethical character may be rescued in secular form as anamnestic solidarity. Divine judgement and justice can be brought within the sphere of practical reason when understood as the action of solidarity upon past suffering; past generations are thereby included within the community of discursive actors. Yet the fact that his universalism is thereby extended beyond the compass of the secular to include the dead militates against what otherwise presents itself as an Enlightenment-humanist and critical project - the theory of communicative action.

The idea of anamnestic solidarity is developed further in Habermas' political writings, and here the influence of Benjamin becomes even more marked. In an essay first published in *Die Zeit* entitled '*Vom öffentlichen Gebrauch der Historie* [On the Public Use of History]' and as part of a critical survey of the German *Historikerstreit* or 'historians' dispute', a set of debates over revisionism in accounts of Germany's Nazi past, Habermas draws upon Benjamin and the discourse of 'anamnestic solidarity' in order to set out what he sees as the responsibility both of historians and of his own nation in thinking about the Holocaust. Benjamin is enlisted for Habermas' foray into these debates because he is seen to have anticipated the political ends to which historiography is used in the *Historikerstreit*. According to Habermas, Benjamin in his late work 'was thinking of the public use made of history by national movements and nation states in the nineteenth century - the kind of historical writing with a broad influence that could serve as the medium for the self-reassurance of a

nation, a people becoming conscious of its own identity.'<sup>28</sup> For Habermas, Benjamin's insight proves prophetic because contemporary 'neo-conservative' thought (of which historical revisionism is one extreme) recommends precisely that 'empathy with the victor' shown up in the 'Theses'.<sup>29</sup> Habermas takes from Benjamin an insight into the dual character of a historiography which can serve both as a self-reassuring and legitimising narrative with which nation-states may dignify their actions or as a 'suspicious' form of remembrance which would attempt to do justice to those whose suffering is concealed in those same narratives. To counter historical revisionism and its attendant complicities means mobilising the second characteristic of historiography against the former.

There is the obligation incumbent upon us in Germany - even if no one else were to feel it any longer - to keep alive, without distortion and not only in an intellectual form, the memory of the sufferings of those who were murdered by German hands. It is especially these dead who have a claim to the weak anamnestic power of a solidarity that the later generations can continue to practice only in the medium of a remembrance that is repeatedly renewed, often desperate, and continually on one's mind.<sup>30</sup>

Clearly this 'Benjaminian legacy', as Habermas describes it, is focused through the lens of the 'anamnestic solidarity' debate and incorporates many of its philosophical assumptions. The title of the essay conjures up Kant's call for a 'public use of reason' from his 'What is Enlightenment?';<sup>31</sup> similarly reminiscent of Kant, the phrase 'incumbent obligation' suggests that Habermas, like Metz, has understood memory in terms of practical reason, as an injunction whose force is independent of its actual observation.

---

<sup>28</sup> Jürgen Habermas, 'Historical Consciousness and Post-Traditional Identity' in *The New Conservatism*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholson (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989), p. 252-3.

<sup>29</sup> Habermas, 'Neo-Conservative Cultural Criticism' in *ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>30</sup> Habermas, 'On the Public Use of History' in *ibid.*, p. 233.

<sup>31</sup> Kant, 'What is Enlightenment?' in *On History*, *op. cit.*, p. 5.



For Habermas there is a sense in which the ethical continuity between generations implies not just that solidarity can bridge an historical divide (or a divide between this world and the next) but that moral responsibility is incurred by the living with respect to the crimes of their ancestors. Replaying Karl Jaspers' question (posed in the immediate aftermath to the war) as to what collective responsibility was borne by Germans who had not resisted Nazism, Habermas contends that responsibility extends even to those who were not yet born at the time, that a moral liability is incurred by successive generations. This liability stems from the common 'form of life' which the living share with their immediate ancestors, a continuity of historical identity reflected in the fact that Germany itself claims historical continuity as a state and nation whilst distancing itself from its wartime atrocities. For Habermas Germany's post-war generation were born into many of the same political and intellectual traditions which characterised its Nazi period. 'There is the simple fact that subsequent generations also grew up within a form of life [*Lebensform*] in which *that* was possible. Our own life is linked to the context of life in which Auschwitz was possible not by contingent circumstances but intrinsically.'<sup>32</sup> According to Habermas the difficulty faced by post-war Germans is that disavowing these traditions and the barbarism which taints them would mean disavowing their own identity. However, he admits that the question of ascribing guilt has changed from a time when Jaspers could indict both the perpetrators and those who failed to act against the regime. Although a form of life is shared between generations, for the post-war generation moral responsibility is correspondingly lessened: 'for those born later, only a sort of intersubjective liability arises',<sup>33</sup> and yet such a moral debt remains and cannot be renounced. In so far as it can ever be discharged, this could only be by taking up a solidaristic and suspicious memory of Germany's past: 'Is there any way to bear the liability for the context in which such crimes originated, a context with which one's own existence is historically interwoven, other than through remembrance, practiced in solidarity, of what cannot be made good, other than through a reflexive, scrutinizing attitude towards one's own identity-forming traditions.'<sup>34</sup>

---

<sup>32</sup> Habermas, 'On the Public Use of History' in *The New Conservatism*, op. cit., p. 232-3.

<sup>33</sup> Habermas, 'Historical Consciousness and Post-Traditional Identity' in *ibid.*, p. 262.

<sup>34</sup> Habermas, 'On the Public Use of History' in *ibid.*, p. 236.

The most problematic element of Habermas' 'Benjaminian' reflections - this idea of inherited liability - is also the most undertheorised, perhaps because it aims to give *de jure* status to a *de facto* sense of guilt or bad conscience which permeates German collective identity in the post war period, when that phenomenon might be better served and understood by a genealogy, an approach undertaken by Adorno in an essay to which Habermas refers.<sup>35</sup> As Adorno pointed out, the persistence of guilt has not coincided with greater comprehension of possible complicities between German society past and present. With Habermas' approach comes the danger of exacerbating that guilt to the point where it could actually hinder an understanding of why Nazism and the Holocaust were possible. The image of past suffering which Benjamin thought capable of engendering and informing present political action would then risk fostering only conscience-stricken anxiety, a melancholy<sup>36</sup> (Habermas' own term) fixation upon an irreparable past. It is not only certain political uses of history that can issue in conservative outcomes but also the substitution of a political by a moral use of the memory of past sufferings.

### *Eingedenken* and Vigilance

For many contemporary commentators and in many of the most significant appropriations of the concept, *Eingedenken* is often assumed to have the character of an injunction or commandment to remember. It translates the Judaic commandment *Zakhor* (Handelman), or it provides a deontological account of historical justice (Lenhardt), or it extends the compass of discourse ethics (Peukert, Habermas). But the multifarious ways in which Benjamin has been shown to employ the idea of redemptive memory should now reveal the one-sided nature of these exclusively religious or ethical readings. Such readings are misguided because the imperative nature of the injunction attributed to Benjamin is belied by the always-threatened

---

<sup>35</sup> Adorno, 'What Does Coming to Terms With Past Mean?' in Geoffrey Hartman (ed.), *Bitburg in Moral and Political Perspective* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), pp. 114-129.

<sup>36</sup> Habermas, 'Historical Consciousness and Post-Traditional Identity' in *The New Conservatism*, p. 263.



nature of the remembrance with which he deals. The ethics of commemoration that has been proposed in Benjamin's name is misguided in its attempt to make of remembrance a categorical imperative or an infinite and inexhaustible task. In this light Metz's comments on the 'eschatological' aspect of dangerous memory, the sort of memory he finds in Benjamin, prove more faithful than the interpretations of Lenhardt or Habermas, even if in the last instance Metz describes memory as a basic category of practical reason. The Kantian heritage of each of these appropriations is visible not only explicitly (as in Metz) but implicitly in Lenhardt whose notion of 'anamnestic solidarity' names a subjunctive demand to act as if commemorating the dead. Lenhardt's criticism of 'instrumental' 'amnesic means-end thinking'<sup>37</sup> only underlines the deontological structure of the ethics that is being propounded in Benjamin's name. Similarly, Peukert's and Habermas' rewriting of eschatology as the inclusion of the dead within the discursive community works (more or less critically) with the postulate of a just God, what for Kant was a necessary requirement of this-worldly justice. The mistake common to each of these interpretations is this - the role of remembrance in Benjamin's late work is misunderstood when taken normatively rather than descriptively, as ethics rather than philosophy of history.

For Benjamin it is never a question of a *commandment* to remember, even if this does seem to be the implication of the last of his 'Theses'. Any suggestion that in his hands remembrance becomes prescriptive needs to be qualified by recognition of the overwhelmingly descriptive nature of his use of *Eingedenken*. Thus his numerous references to days of remembrance (*Tage des Eingedenkens*) always denote an event which has both a religious role - the holy day as a time of prayer and retrospection - and political significance - a testament to the wresting of disposable time from labour time. Here Benjamin is engaging in an anthropology of socially-lived time, not a series of prescriptions. However, once days of remembrance become construed as days of commemoration, it is only a short step to the ethical interpretations seen above. In this translation the *political* role of days of remembrance in history is inevitably downplayed.

---

<sup>37</sup> Lenhardt, op. cit., p. 147, 148.

That *Eingedenken* does not take the form of an endless task also highlights the problems inherent in rendering it as an act of 'vigilance', another common thread within contemporary readings. This version of a Benjaminian theory of the Holocaust (in fact indebted more to Blanchot<sup>38</sup>) sees remembrance as an act of mourning but one which, unlike its Freudian form, eschews 'closure' or 'finality': it is instead a 'continual opening' without 'moment of completion';<sup>39</sup> a 'patient' act of 'vigilance'.<sup>40</sup> However, 'vigilance' - originally the period of wakeful anticipation on the eve of a festival or holy day - has connotations which make its use in the present context infelicitous. There is a sense in which, in rejecting the element of work essential to the process of mourning, it also neglects the cognitive moment of that mourning, the hope of comprehending that which is mourned, a process Adorno called 'coming to terms' (*Aufarbeitung*) with the past, an exercise in which the element of work (*Arbeit*) is, as it was for Freud, paramount.<sup>41</sup> The danger is that a vigilant memory will merely replicate in all but name the economics and temporality of melancholy. And indeed the invocation of vigilance has typically gone hand in hand with a denial that the Holocaust as an event is capable of being cognised or comprehended; an important way of doing justice to the event is found in the relinquishment of any search for an explanation which might bring it (in philosophical terms) within the sphere of conceptuality or representation, or (in historical terms) within a framework of continuity or causality. But when expressed in Benjamin's name<sup>42</sup> this privilege of ethics over cognition commits a significant distortion: remembrance is for him always

---

<sup>38</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), esp. p. 51: 'In the work of mourning, it is not grief that works: grief keeps watch.'

<sup>39</sup> Andrew Benjamin, 'Shoah, Remembrance and the Abeyance of Fate: Walter Benjamin's 'Fate and Character' in Laura Marcus & Lynda Nead (eds.), *The Actuality of Walter Benjamin*, op. cit., pp. 106 & 110.

<sup>40</sup> Amis Fioretos, 'Contraction (Benjamin, Reading, History)', *Modern Language Notes*, vol. 110, no. 3 (April 1995), p. 549, n. 15; cf. Rebecca Comay, 'Benjamin's Endgame' in Andrew Benjamin & Peter Osborne (eds.), *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy: Destruction and Experience*, op. cit., p. 266.

<sup>41</sup> Adorno defines his term thus: 'Essentially, it is a question of the way in which the past is called up and made present: whether one stops at sheer reproach, or whether one endures the horror through a certain strength that comprehends even the incomprehensible.' ['What Does Coming to Terms With Past Mean?' in Geoffrey Hartman (ed.), *Bitburg in Moral and Political Perspective*, op. cit., p. 126].

<sup>42</sup> See for example Jacques Derrida, 'Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority'' in Drucilla Cornell & David Gray Carlson (eds.), *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, op. cit., pp. 61-2.



just as much a question of historical *knowledge* - it is the medium through which one comes to know the past - as it is a means of doing justice to past suffering, something which is made clear in the very passage (the twelfth of the 'Theses') upon which those exclusively ethical readings often draw.<sup>43</sup> Admittedly, Benjamin himself at one point compares *Eingedenken* to 'awakening',<sup>44</sup> but it would be misleading to equate this with vigilance, since vigilance implies by contrast the insomnia which Nietzsche saw as inimical to a truly critical historiography; it connotes hypertrophied rumination, not the sudden moment of recognition, the 'presence of mind' (*Geistesgegenwart*), which Benjamin equated with historical insight. There is a sense in which (paradoxically) this presence of mind which allows historical knowledge can emerge only from a lowering of attention, the abandonment of an all-too-wakeful consciousness. Critical historiography is to be understood as 'an image taken from the involuntary memory [*unwillkürlich Eingedenken*]'.<sup>45</sup>

Another conceptual point is raised by a particular translation of Benjaminian 'remembrance'. The discourse of 'anamnestic solidarity' in Metz, Lenhardt and Peukert is actually a misnomer when expressed in Benjamin's name, since as has already been shown, the model of memory as *anamnesis* is one with which Benjamin had no truck: it is already criticised in the prologue to the *Trauerspiel* book where it is seen at work in the Platonic derivation against which Benjamin sets his own 'eccentric induction' (Adorno); *anamnesis* carries with it none of the transformative capacities Benjamin will ascribe to remembrance; it denotes memory as repetitive, not redemptive. *Eingedenken*, the term to which the debate on anamnestic solidarity alludes (Metz's confusion of *Erinnerung* and *Eingedenken* notwithstanding), is not a memory of forms inscribed in the cosmos, nor of a *vie antérieure*, but inheres in tradition and history as the means by which each may be handed-on or, alternatively, placed in critical question.

It is undeniable that there are places in these late works (for instance in the *Passagen-Werk*, and the 'Theses' and its drafts) where support might be found for the reading given by Metz, Lenhardt and Peukert. Benjamin writes of the danger which

---

<sup>43</sup> GS 1, p. 700; 'Theses' in *Illuminations*, p. 260.

<sup>44</sup> GS 5, p. 1058.

<sup>45</sup> GS 1, p. 1243.

affects 'both the content of tradition and its receivers...Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins'.<sup>46</sup> The particular 'enemy' alluded to in this metaphorical Final Conflict is Nazism with its 'infernal' rewriting of history, a series of revisions against which 'redemptive' criticism battles: it is not the dead but the memory of the dead kept by the living which a Nazi victory would erase. Yet if one takes the passage literally and supposes that the living owe a debt of gratitude to previous generations then the questions arises, as Axel Honneth has noted, 'how this moral debt can ever be settled, given that the victims to be atoned belong, irretrievably, to the realm of the dead.'<sup>47</sup> Replaying Horkheimer's criticism of the unfinished past, Honneth points out that this would require belief in Last Judgement and with it 'a transcendent deity'. Honneth proposes a less literal and more consistently materialistic interpretation in which 'the act of redeeming' has instead a 'symbolic character': 'a 'Messianic power' falls to us today to the extent that we represent [*vergegenwärtigen*] the historical process in such a manner that its losers again appear as interacting partners in our present experiences and thereby become members of the moral community'.<sup>48</sup> Yet despite this attempt to rescue the idea of redemption by rendering it symbolic, it still remains unclear how the dead might become 'interacting partners' in a moral community, and doubts must remain as to the 'moral community' into which they are to be enrolled, that this abstraction might itself by sleight of hand mend the conflicts which Benjamin saw still operative in history, and whether, more fundamentally, his reflections have again been saved from theology by placing them within just that Kantian ethical framework against which he so strongly protested.<sup>49</sup>

---

<sup>46</sup> GS 1, p. 695; 'Theses' in *Illuminations*, p. 255 (amended).

<sup>47</sup> Axel Honneth, 'A Communicative Disclosure of the Past: On the Relation Between Anthropology and Philosophy of History in Walter Benjamin' in Laura Marcus & Lynda Nead (eds.), *The Actuality of Walter Benjamin*, op. cit., p. 91.

<sup>48</sup> Honneth, op. cit., p. 92.

<sup>49</sup> It may be countered with some plausibility that the strength of this opposition belies a certain proximity between Benjamin and the Kantian ethical view of history. On this score it is interesting to note comments of Dilthey summing up Lotze's (broadly Kantian) philosophy of history bearing in mind Benjamin's own interest in, and considerable sympathy for, Lotze: Lotze 'applies the method by which Kant justified belief in God and immortality to the systematic structure of history and thus tries to demonstrate participation of the deceased in the progress of history as a *condition* of that systematic



The element of truth in Honneth's interpretation is that for Benjamin remembrance of the dead serves no purpose if it is not undertaken in order to clarify the stakes in present struggles. It is in this sense that one must read apparently eschatological statements such as the following from the *Passagen-Werk*: 'Those who are alive at any given time see themselves in the midday [*Mittag*] of history. They are obliged to prepare a banquet for the past. The historian is the herald who invites those who are departed to the table.'<sup>50</sup> The meaning of this statement is subsequently elucidated in the drafts of the 'Theses': 'The task of history is not only to give the oppressed access to tradition, but also to create it'.<sup>51</sup> The historiographical task is to disturb the sedimented tradition of the oppressed releasing its effect for present historical understanding and present political action. Conversely, the past must be understood as still at stake in present struggles such that whilst their success would have a redemptive effect upon past suffering, their failure would seal its futility: as Benjamin wrote in his exchange with Horkheimer, 'the war or the trial are not the entry into a dispute, but rather the decision concerning it.'<sup>52</sup>

Further evidence for the view that commemoration is the subject matter of the 'Theses' might be gleaned from a passage where Benjamin suggests that 'it is more difficult to honour the memory of the nameless than that of the famous, the celebrated'.<sup>53</sup> But much turns on how the word 'honour' (*ehren*) is construed here. The 'nameless' are the subject of a concealed or suppressed past which can be retrieved or reactivated only by a destructive historiographical or political

---

structure. "No education of humanity is thinkable unless its results will someday be the common property of those who have been left behind at various points of this earthly career; no development of an idea has meaning unless it will be manifest to everyone at the end what he previously suffered unknowingly as the bearer of this development."....[T]his elegiac conception of a contemplative share of the dead in that which we struggle through here - reminiscent of the old pictures showing angels' heads gazing down from the clouds of heaven on the martyrs and the suffering they still had to bear - seems to us too much when we are soberly critical but as too little when we are dreaming, because we can possess the result of the development of mankind only in lived experience and not in idle musing.' [Wilhelm Dilthey citing Lotze's *Mikrokosmos* in his *Introduction to the Human Sciences: An Attempt to Lay a Foundation for the Study of Society and History*, trans. Ramon J. Betanzos (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1988), p. 138].

<sup>50</sup> GS 5, p. 603 [N15, 2]; 'Konvolut 'N'' in Smith (ed.), p. 74.

<sup>51</sup> GS 1, p. 1246.

<sup>52</sup> GS 2, p. 1338.

<sup>53</sup> GS 1, p. 1241.

intervention. Honouring the nameless is thus a task and a capacity shared by materialist historiography and revolutionary action. If this amounts to 'commemoration' then it is indeed one of the projects of Benjamin's later work, but equally, in his hands the term is shorn of its eulogistic and contemplative meaning. That 'commemoration' appears appropriate may be due to a certain naivety on Benjamin's part in his belief that 'days of remembrance' represent one contemporary remnant of a critical or 'destructive' encounter with the past.<sup>54</sup> Days of remembrance typically serve less to foster a critical consciousness, one which recognises the conflictual structure of past history, than the opposite - a temporary suspension of political antagonisms. It is this collective spirit of thanksgiving which is perhaps more appropriately termed 'commemoration'. It may be the consequent lack of dialectic in Benjamin's anthropology of remembrance which leaves him susceptible to the latent conservatism of the ethics proposed in his name; to use Habermas' distinction, memory as suspicion has been inadequately differentiated from memory as self-reassurance.

### The Limits of Commemoration

Any injunction or commandment or obligation to remember is compromised by the fact that memory itself will not be commanded. This is so because it is always accompanied by, threatened by, forgetting. It is a point which Nietzsche makes forcefully in his essay 'On the Use and Disadvantages of History for Life', and it is something which Freud and indeed the very project of psychoanalysis verified. It is no coincidence that Benjamin quotes from Nietzsche's essay in his final work. In the same tradition of thinking, Adorno urged that to preserve a memory artificially, to attempt to place the past at the service of voluntary memory is paradoxically to jeopardise that which is to be preserved. The argument is made in one of the most Benjaminian passages of *Minima Moralia* where Adorno reflects upon Jean Paul's idea that memories are the only inalienable possessions.

---

<sup>54</sup> GS 1, pp. 701-2; 'Theses' in *Illuminations*, pp. 261-2.



Precisely where they become controllable and objectified, where the subject believes himself entirely sure of them, memories [*Erinnerungen*] fade like delicate wallpapers in bright sunlight. But where, protected by forgetting, they keep their strength, they are endangered like all that is alive. This is why Bergson's and Proust's conception, intended to combat reification, that the present, immediacy [*Unmittelbarkeit*], is constituted only through the mediation of memory [*Gedächtnis*], has not only a redeeming but also an infernal aspect. Just as no earlier experience is real that has not been loosed by involuntary remembrance [*unwillkürliches Eingedenken*] from the deathly fixity of its isolated existence, so conversely, no memory [*Erinnerung*] is guaranteed, existent in itself, indifferent to the future of him who harbours it; nothing past is proof, through its translation into mere imagination, against the curse of the empirical present. The most blissful memory [*Erinnerung*] of a person can be revoked by later experience.<sup>55</sup>

'It is foolish and sentimental,' concludes Adorno, 'to try to keep the past untainted by the present's turbid flood.' Nothing that has happened is safe from this 'curse of the empirical present'. This is true not only of the most blissful memories to which Adorno refers, but also the most painful and traumatic. Adorno's argument can be seen to confirm a quality which Benjamin found not only in memory but in history as well. The historical ramifications of this point can be shown by means of an example. In 1993 discussions began over whether the camps at Auschwitz should be restored to their original design as testament to the horrors which occurred there or whether they should be left to erode or disintegrate with the passing of time. At stake is the implication of that 'half-life' or tendency towards degradation inherent in memories, a transience which in this case mirrors the weathering to which human constructions are

---

<sup>55</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben, Gesammelte Schriften*, op. cit., vol. 4, p. 187-8; *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, op. cit., p. 166 (amended).

subject - the destructive work of nature. Should this destruction be halted so that the memory of the events might itself be better preserved? Is there not a travesty in letting a site of genocide such as Auschwitz slowly disappear? On the other hand, is there not a travesty in rebuilding its murderous architecture, in reconstructing a gas chamber, in making Birkenau look, in the words of one commentator, 'as good as new'?<sup>56</sup> Other issues conspired to make this a contentious debate. The fact that some rebuilding work had already taken place by Russians and Poles between 1945 and 1946 had been used by Holocaust deniers such as David Irving to exploit ambiguity over the original architecture of the camp. Something of the infernal aspect of historical interpretation is revealed here. With such revisionism in mind, Jean-Claude Pressac, an author of books rebutting Irving and his sympathisers, called for the gas chambers and crematoria to be rebuilt so as to show irrefutably the precise mechanism of mass death. Taking a different line, and coming closer to Adorno and to Benjamin, the scholar of Holocaust literature James Young suggested that to search for an undisturbed authenticity in the ruins is misguided. With full knowledge of the irony of his words he urged that Auschwitz be allowed to 'age gracefully'.<sup>57</sup>

What can be learned from this example is that those who have used Benjamin's concept of remembrance to develop a Holocaust ethics have obscured or effaced an important element of his own thinking of memory. What is eclipsed is the extent to which Benjamin's reflections upon memory share (in admittedly qualified form) a Kierkegaardian, Nietzschean and Freudian antipathy to encumbered memory. The point is significant in that 'the ethical imperative of remembering the "Shoah"' (Saul Friedländer's phrase)<sup>58</sup> which is proposed as a means of doing justice to the genocide, resembles just such an encumbered memory. It denotes memory as hypertrophied conscience, a memory which, in its perpetuity, resembles the temporality of melancholy. For Benjamin, such an unconditional memory must always conflict with the unavoidable physiological tendency towards forgetting. It is not simply that such an unconditional vigilance *should not* be recommended, it *cannot*. All means by

---

<sup>56</sup> David Cesarini, 'Preserving a Death Camp', *The Guardian*, 29.11.93, p. 5

<sup>57</sup> James Young cited in David Cesarini, op. cit., p. 5

<sup>58</sup> Saul Friedländer, 'Trauma, Memory, and Transference' in Geoffrey Hartman (ed.), *Holocaust Remembrance: The Shapes of Memory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), p. 258.



which the past would be preserved inviolate risk hypostasising memory in the form of mnemotechnics. To attempt such a preservation today assumes the continued presence of the type of tradition-bound memory which is itself to be created by that act of monumentalisation. The wish to monumentalise memory, to make it into an act of perpetual vigilance has something pre- or anti-modern about it. There is thus a sense in which no monument can be 'modern'.<sup>59</sup> The monument (like the act of vigilance to which it corresponds) seeks to secure tradition against destruction; it does so by reifying memory in the form of a static, ossified object. To recognise that with modernity the basis for such a secure and static memory no longer obtains means to recognise the need for a different way of thinking commemoration, a way other than monumentalisation. Where memory has itself become fleeting and transient, where it flares up only in the moment where it threatens to disappear irretrievably,<sup>60</sup> a monument risks serving only as an illusory reassurance that the past is safe from danger. Again, the conservative dimension of the ethics of vigilance becomes clear.

What Young's considered proposal shares with the ideas of memory in Adorno and Benjamin is the insight that commemoration needs to be theorised in terms other than the imperative, that commemoration need not involve monumentalisation, vigilance or moral injunctions in order to do justice to 'the image of enslaved ancestors',<sup>61</sup> and that memory cannot eschew the necessity of a certain forgetting if it too is to endure. In Young's reflections on the idea of the memorial one finds a greater awareness of the interrelation of tradition and memory (and a more faithfully Benjaminian approach to these phenomena) than in the entire ethics of anamnestic solidarity.<sup>62</sup>

---

<sup>59</sup> Lewis Mumford cited in James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), p. 4.

<sup>60</sup> GS 1, p. 1247.

<sup>61</sup> GS 1, p. 700; 'Theses' in *Illuminations*, p. 260.

<sup>62</sup> Exploring the limits of Holocaust commemoration, Young has written of attempts at a 'self-destructive memorial' which would question the efficacy of monumentalisation and its reification of memory, instead throwing questions of memory and remembrance back upon the spectator. [*The Texture of Memory*, op. cit., Ch. 1]. Jane Kramer, like Young, refers in particular to the sculptor Jochen Gerz 'who built a memorial in Hamburg, using columns that sank, little by little, into the ground, and materials that disappeared - materials that acknowledged the tragic fact that commemoration, like memory, is fragile and ephemeral, and in no way adequate to the "history" of what happened.' ['The Politics of Memory', *The New Yorker*, 14th August 1995, p. 62-3].

The Holocaust, as Habermas' 'Benjaminian' reflections correctly show, gives rise to a conflict of memory - memory as self-reassurance (and it is in just such terms that revisionism can be understood) or as suspicion, a suspicion which would remain aware of the historiographical anamorphosis by which those who might have testified to the events were themselves to be erased from memory. The Holocaust, as the producer of the testamentary film *Shoah* Claude Lanzmann noted, can be seen as 'a crime to forget the name', or as Primo Levi, put it, '...the victor is the master even of truth and can manipulate it as he pleases'.<sup>63</sup> Yet there is another form of self-reassuring memory (this time opposed to the comparative method typical of revisionist historiography) which is perhaps even more pervasive today, one which sees the event of the Holocaust as a singular aberration which could never be repeated. Writing in 1940, and very possibly with some presentiment of the impending genocide, Benjamin already warned against the sort of complacency to which such a view of Fascism gives rise. His inversion of Aristotle's alignment of philosophy and wonder is designed to dislodge us from just such false comforts. 'The current wonder [*Staunen*] that the things we are experiencing are 'still' possible in the twentieth century is *not* philosophical. This wonder is not the beginning of knowledge - unless it is the knowledge that the view of history which gives rise to it is untenable.'<sup>64</sup> A philosophical approach to history begins not so much in naive horror at, as in hardened familiarity with, catastrophe. Not that this in turn normalizes the event in the same way as revisionist comparisons with other genocides. An historiography which did justice to the dual character of memory would of necessity walk a difficult path which recognised the exceptional status of the Holocaust whilst remaining aware of the still-obtaining conditions for Fascism's recrudescence: holding to both insights may be essential to any updating of what Benjamin called 'a theory of history from which Fascism can become visible'.<sup>65</sup>

The revisionism which emerged in accounts of the Holocaust consisted in historians, nationalists and conservatives seeking a *usable* past in order to portray the

---

<sup>63</sup> Primo Levi, 'The Memory of the Offence' in *The Drowning and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (London: Abacus, 1989) p. 7.

<sup>64</sup> GS 1, p. 697; 'Theses' in *Illuminations*, p. 257 (amended).

<sup>65</sup> GS 1, p. 1244.



present in a specific ideological light. Yet the usability or revisability of the past is something which Benjamin himself thought a defining and ineliminable quality of the historical object. The incompleteness of history implies not only a redemptive but also an infernal quality to past time. It is not as if there is some unusable past which could be set against the possibility of historical revision. As Habermas has convincingly argued there is a sense in which past history cannot be anything other than public because its meaning is always at stake in social disputes and conflicts. The meaning of this necessary 'publicity' of history must be clarified however, since, contra Habermas, the field upon which the reconstitution of the past occurs is not limited to an ostensibly democratic space of communication. Just as present conflicts play out divergent interpretations of the past, so our understanding of the past has political ramifications, something which Charles Maier has highlighted in the *Historikerstreit*: 'historical interpretations must simultaneously be *political* interpretations in that they support some beliefs about how power works and dismiss others. But they need not be *politicized* interpretations; they need not be weapons forged for a current ideological contest. For leading adversaries in the contemporary West German debate, however, they have become politicized. They are stakes in a struggle.'<sup>66</sup>

As the example of the *Historikerstreit* shows, Benjamin's thinking, taken retrospectively, can give us insights into the role of the Holocaust in history, and it is no coincidence that he is invoked in discussion of the complicities risked in writing about the genocide.<sup>67</sup> But as this chapter has sought to make clear, there are ways in

---

<sup>66</sup> Charles S. Maier, *The Unmasterable Past: History, Holocaust, and German National Identity* (Cambridge, MA & London: Harvard U. P., 1988), p. 32.

<sup>67</sup> From a very different standpoint, Benjamin has been invoked in discussion of the Holocaust, not this time as someone who, anticipating the genocide, provides means for critical reflection upon it, but as someone who was himself implicated in anti-Semitism. Jeffrey Mehlman's contentious interpretation of a series of narratives written by Benjamin between 1929 and 1933 employs psychoanalytic and deconstructive modes of reading to show that against his explicit intention Benjamin displayed an uncritical naivety in the face of the rise of Fascism, and that indeed some his texts from this period exhibit important features of a 'Jewish self-hatred' complicit with discourses of anti-semitism. [Jeffrey Mehlman, *Walter Benjamin for Children: An Essay on His Radio Years* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1993)] The way in which Benjamin is here brought to testify for the Holocaust as complicitous accessory, links Mehlman's argument closely, both in terms of textual approach and political agenda, to Jacques Derrida's speculations on a possible Benjaminian account of the Holocaust. [See his 'Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority'', op. cit., esp. pp. 57-63]. Whilst these retrospective interpretations lead beyond the bounds of the present chapter's focus upon remembrance and commemoration, it is important to note that this logic of 'contamination' by

which the particular legacy and retrospective interpretations of Benjamin found in contemporary thought have involved considerable distortions and misunderstandings of his philosophy of memory, often detracting from its philosophical and political radicality. Recurring misapprehensions have been found in each of the discourses of 'dangerous memory', 'anamnestic solidarity', Shoah 'commemoration' and mnemonic 'vigilance' proposed in Benjamin's name. Each of these renditions of Benjamin's concept of remembrance have been found wanting. There are - as should be clear from the criticisms offered above - more helpful (and more faithful) ways of showing the topicality and relevance of Benjamin's thinking, and a critique of what have today become the predominant interpretations can serve to open the way (if only negatively) to such a re-presentation of Benjamin's work, something which, it should also be clear, is an important and urgent task.

---

which Fascism is said to infect even its most staunch enemies is a strongly anti-Benjaminian logic, one which paradoxically *disallows* evaluation of similarities and differences between political positions, of the complicity of political ideas professedly opposed to Nazism. It is a theory of history from which Fascism becomes - paradoxically - invisible.



## Conclusion

In a letter from May 1940, written just a few months before his death, Benjamin reveals in the form of an anecdote the genealogy of his philosophy of experience. In the process he confirms the intimate relation between experience and memory.

There is no reason to make a secret of the fact that I trace the roots of my 'theory of experience' to a childhood memory. My parents naturally took walks with us wherever we spent our summer. There were either two or three of us children. The one I have in mind is my brother. After we had visited one of the obligatory tourist attractions around Freudenschaft, Wengen, or Schreiberhau, my brother used to say, "Now we can say that we've been there." This statement made an unforgettable impression on me.<sup>1</sup>

It is not difficult to see why his brother's statement made such a unforgettable impression upon the young Benjamin. The type of experience it describes is one lived solely for the purposes of voluntary memory, an experience undertaken for the sole intent that it could later be recalled at will. Here events are experienced not as ends in themselves but always with a view to their future recollection. In such an experience the present is lived as a future past. In fact the present is not experienced at all. Here an atrophied mode of experience appears as an impoverished form of memory, an impoverished form of memory gives rise to an atrophied mode of experience.

Benjamin's anecdote tells us something of the internal relation he assumed between memory and experience, and the importance of memory to his critical engagement with modernity. In diagnosing modernity's destruction of experience his

---

<sup>1</sup> *Briefe*, p. 848; *Correspondence*, p. 629.

development of a taxonomy of memory allows him to pinpoint the deterioration in the subject's experience of time, history and tradition. It is memory which expresses the forms of that atrophy of experience and it is memory which is capable of articulating a critical response to it. One particular term in Benjamin's taxonomy of memory exhibits the privileged capacity to respond to this process, not by means of a conservative return to an earlier mode of experience but by making use of modernity's own destructive tendencies. This form of memory is able to effect a 'redemptive' encounter with the past, exposing both the abstraction to which experience succumbs under modernity, and the misguided conceptions of time and history to which this process gives rise. The power to effect this critical or redemptive encounter with the past is 'remembrance' (*Eingedenken*) and its ability to open a seemingly closed or concluded past and uncover the illusions attending the historical object leads it to assume a key role in Benjamin's thinking.

The Copernican Revolution in the historical mode of viewing is this: one used to consider the 'past' [*Gewesene*] as the fixed point, and saw the present as attempting to lead knowledge gropingly toward this firm ground. Now the relationship is to be reversed, and the past becomes the dialectical turning, the dawning of awakened consciousness.<sup>2</sup>

Benjamin calls this the 'Copernican Revolution of remembering [*Eingedenken*]'<sup>3</sup> indicating the radical alteration it represents to the way the relation between past and present is normally conceived. What was a paradigmatic change in scientific thinking and, when used as a metaphor by Kant, a destructive transformation of the philosophical tradition, here names the revolutionary implications of recognising the present as the locus of the past's constitution and reconstitution, what happens when the meaning of past events is taken as a responsibility of the present. Remembrance plays the pivotal role in this about-turn, placing historical knowledge in the hands of the apprehending subject rather than in the historical object purified of its subjective

---

<sup>2</sup> GS 5, p. 1057 (h°, 2).

<sup>3</sup> GS 5, p. 1058 (h°, 4).



moment. However, the subject of historical knowledge is not thereby to be construed (as the Copernican metaphor might suggest) as an isolated individual but is by contrast intrinsically plural and social. The radical leap into the past which remembrance enacts can be found not just in the procedure of historiography but equally in collective observations of calendar time or in political insurgence.

Benjamin's exchange with Horkheimer, discussed in Chapter One, highlights not only the vital role played by memory in articulating the historical past, but also the very distinctive picture of history which emerges when this mnemonic character of history is taken into consideration, when history is understood in its 'original vocation' as 'remembrance'. For Benjamin this means recognising the ability of remembrance to confer a sense of completeness and incompleteness upon the past, but also the fact that historical time is defined not by the chain of causal sequence but by the ecstatic structure of the instant. The element of memory which is transformative rather than repetitive, and which points towards 'moments' and 'discontinuities', is Benjamin's touchstone in his critique of homogeneous time, and it is often the distinctive temporality of remembrance which is invoked when he is questioning the supposed linearity of time or the continuity of history. The exchange with Horkheimer makes comprehensible Benjamin's subsequent methodological formulations concerning his own critical practise, in works such as 'Konvolut 'N'' and the theses 'On the Concept of History'. What it shares with these works is the idea that remembrance makes it possible to effect in historico-philosophical or historiographical terms the opening or fulfilment of the past stored up in the theological idea of redemption, to enact a destruction of the past or, equally, to construct the past in a new way. Insight into the 'affection' by which the past is constituted and continually reinterpreted provides the foundation of a 'redemptive' critical practise. Remembrance can make use of this constitutive relation in the cause of a critical transformation of received history. The exchange with Horkheimer over the complete or incomplete, closed or open character of the past, sets out not only the fundamentals of Benjamin's critical historiography but also makes clear the central role played by remembrance in this radical encounter with history.

Chapter Two explored the implications of this posited link between history and remembrance and looked at its role in Benjamin's development of an historiographical method. The intimate link he finds between remembrance and history allows him to express an historiographical practice and a theory of history in terms of the dual quality (by turns, destructive and constructive) of remembrance. The discussion went on to highlight the presence within this historiographical method of elements of Enlightenment philosophy of history, here retrieved and reinterpreted in a critical way. Against a common misconception of Benjamin's project it was argued that he actually wishes to *retain* the epistemological goals of the philosophy of history, seeking only to rid this approach of its 'apologetic' tendency. This is to be achieved by rewriting universal history as *monadology*. Such a revision does not relinquish the universal aspirations of this approach to history but merely alters the way in which universals are to be apprehended. Monadology captures the latent 'fore-' and 'after-history' contained within particular instants of historical time, so that a constructive procedure may then draw out the whole represented in each historical event. Universal history becomes in Benjamin's hands not an epic vista upon the past, subsuming events under a predefined schema, but precisely the opposite - a micrological analysis of particular historical phenomena which looks for the trace of the universal expressed therein. Drawing further resources from universal history (although again radically reinterpreted), Benjamin defends the methodological principle of progress, grounding it not in the continuity of a temporal sequence but in its moments of interruption. Progress properly understood institutes a radical 'new' that breaks with the homogeneous continuum in which existing concepts of progress occur.

Chapter Three showed how this engagement with Enlightenment philosophy of history develops in the particular case of Benjamin's critique of Kant and neo-Kantianism. Again it was monadology which was seen to inform these criticisms and to ground an alternative concept of history: the monad's 'intensive infinitude' was employed against the merely postulated infinite of the Kantian view of history. A monadological view of history allows an alternative to the bad infinity of history germinal in Kant and brought out in neo-Kantianism. Benjamin finds a paradigm for the monadological view of history in *Heilsgeschichte* or redemptive history, and it is



eschatology which informs his criticisms of the unbounded history of Kantian and neo-Kantian thought. But Benjamin's own proximity to neo-Kantianism meant that this critique would always be ambivalent. This emerged in his appropriation of Lukács' criticism of Kant. Here Benjamin fails to follow through the Hegelian source for his critique of the 'bad infinite' and the abstractly quantitative series upon which that bad infinity rests, and as a result bases his objections to it on the idea of transcendence rather than the (more dialectical) transition.

Chapter Four looked in more detail at the monadological method and emphasised how Benjamin's preoccupation with the fragment is not intended as an alternative or an antidote to an engagement with the totality, but is meant as a response to a problem of induction in a situation of *objective illusion*. Adorno's reproach against the idea of the monad, that it is itself historically and socially produced, was shown to have already been conceded by Benjamin, and turned to critical ends. Benjamin's contention that historical materialism and dialectics are theories of the monad rewrites Marx's idea that capitalist society typically appears in its most 'elemental' form, namely as an immense collection of commodities. He admits, following Marx, that the self-sufficiency of this elemental substance may be illusory or fetishistic, but it is nonetheless 'real' in its historical specificity. What Adorno criticised as a fetishism of immediacy therefore turns out to be a consistently Marxian intent to begin methodologically with the abstractions which commodity-producing society itself creates. The monadological focus upon the most elemental stakes itself on the belief that such simple substance contains, in however partial form, the social totality. From the most simple social and historical phenomena, the social relations constituting them can be induced. But for Benjamin the traditional Marxian approach is complicated by the second nature to which both social and historical illusions have succumbed; any reconstruction of the whole now requires not so much an induction from isolated phenomena as their radical and shocking juxtaposition. Whilst Adorno worries about the 'surrealist' complexion this gives to Benjamin's philosophy, he recognises in it a laudable attempt to rescue induction by another name. Rather than undermining this project, Adorno's criticisms actually sophisticate and redeem the idea of monadology.

As the third and fourth chapters moved from memory to history, so the fifth moved from history back to memory, discussing another series of objections to Benjamin's project, a set of criticisms directed not only at the procedure of his engagement with the history, but at the very desire to orient critical energies towards a redemption of the past. This chapter sought to question the very project of cultivating memory as critique. The problem such a cultivation of memory encounters is one of the consciousness or subjectivity involved in this engagement with the past. It emerges most clearly in the extreme case where a wish to transform the past comes to compromise action oriented towards the present and the future. This problem is expressed eloquently in the genealogical and sceptical criticisms of memory one finds in Nietzsche, Kierkegaard and Freud. Each portrays a pathological extreme of retrospection where the will becomes fixated and paralysed. Benjamin himself draws upon this diagnosis in his commentary on Baudelaire, but only by blurring the distinction between Baudelairean melancholy and his own 'redemptive' critique of it. Might his own project be implicated in the very criticisms he levels at Baudelaire's melancholy memory, a memory burdened by the weight of the past? Might the necessity of a certain forgetting have been surreptitiously dropped from Benjamin's 'problem of memory (and of forgetting)', with serious consequences? Might historiography be better served not so much by a melancholy dissatisfaction with the past but by an affirmation of it, one which relinquishes the will to redemption. To answer this question involved examining Benjamin's own relation, explicit and implicit to these sceptical criticisms of memory. However, any genealogical or sceptical critique of Benjamin's project soon becomes complicated by virtue of his familiarity with, and employment of, those very criticisms. More than this, he can be seen to turn many of these criticisms against their proponents, drawing attention to the weaknesses in those alternatives contrasted with memory, whether in the form of active forgetting, affirmation or repetition.

This discussion of the melancholy extreme courted by remembrance clarified what it means to 'bear in mind' (*eingedenk*), and shows that whilst the past which fills the mind in mindfulness risks weighing it down and disabling it, mindfulness need not necessarily issue in a melancholy outcome. It is just this lesson of Benjamin's own



genealogical studies, his (often explicit) incorporation of many of the criticisms aimed at hypertrophied memory by Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Freud, which is neglected in the attempt to derive an ethics from his concept of remembrance, whether in the name of 'dangerous memory', 'anamnestic solidarity' or 'vigilance'. Whilst these translations of remembrance have recognised the importance of Benjamin's concept they have done so at the cost of diluting its critical aims. The legacy of remembrance was examined in the final chapter by way of an assessment of these various ethical and theological renditions. In each case the problems to which they gave rise were found to be closely linked to repeated misapprehensions of Benjamin's thought. The idea of 'dangerous memory' attempts conservatively to halt the decline of tradition, a process characteristic of modernity; it seeks to secure faith against secularisation via the sort of narrative memory which has long since disappeared. It would fend-off, rather than (as 'remembrance') work with, processes of secularisation. The discourse of anamnestic solidarity culminates in a 'Marxian religion' which overlooks Benjamin's more complex interweaving of theological and secular motifs. Habermas' use of anamnestic solidarity attempts to ethically ground the burden of guilt borne by present generations with respect to the crimes of their ancestors. Incorporated into the universal structure of discourse ethics, it writes-out the conflicts which cut across present remembrance of past suffering. A similar privilege of ethics was found in the idea of 'vigilance', but this time it coincided with a refusal to comprehend the past, overlooking Benjamin's employment of *Eingedenken* as part of a theory of historical knowledge. Each of these versions of the concept of remembrance failed to appreciate its complexity.

A critical assessment of these interpretations and appropriations serves to clarify the meaning of remembrance and to elucidate the more general themes of Benjamin's thinking. It confirms an argument which has run throughout this thesis, that the role played by the concept of remembrance in Benjamin's 'theory of the knowledge of history' and in his corresponding rescue of Enlightenment universal history, is a crucial one. At the same time this thesis has attempted to determine what is valid and what is problematic both in this concept of remembrance and in the theory of historical knowledge which it informs, by subjecting both to the most cogent

criticisms which can be levelled at them. What emerges is not only the importance of this concept for an understanding of Benjamin's philosophy but the philosophical pertinence and strengths of this concept *per se*, above and beyond the context in which it appears. Whilst the preceding discussion has kept as much as possible to the context of Benjamin's own philosophy, it has also sought to show along the way the more general relevance of his concept of remembrance. Any philosophical analysis of memory could do worse than to draw upon the resources he provides.

The topicality of this concept is clear from the various appropriations examined in the final chapter. But it is also clear that the source of its appeal for contemporary philosophy and theology has often been the source of its misapprehension, and the element in remembrance which is intended as a way of doing justice to past generations has provided material for a resurgent ethics and a revitalised soteriology. The fact that this concept never appears in Benjamin's works in the form of an ethical imperative gives the lie to these interpretations; alongside the power remembrance exhibits in redeeming the past, there is equal emphasis on its fragility and the endangered historical situation in which it arises. Certainly remarkable powers are ascribed to *Eingedenken*: it is 'a muscle strong enough to contract the whole of historical time.'<sup>4</sup> Yet it is also 'the straw at which the drowning man clutches',<sup>5</sup> a description which underlines the perilous context of its invocation. The enormous strength required to call up and transform the past stands alongside the fragility of memory itself in a situation of general historical erasure. There is a sense in which this investment of memory may serve to provide little more than consolation in desperate times; Benjamin himself defines consolation as 'a way of making unhappened what has happened'.<sup>6</sup> Something of this desperation of remembrance is revealed in one particular vision he provides of Proustian memory, interpreting it as the sort of presence of mind which arises in the face of death, where the involuntary reminiscence grants insight into the individual's past, but only where that life is at its most vulnerable: 'it is in fact the most important images, those developed in the darkroom of the lived moment, which it enables us to see....And that 'entire life'

---

<sup>4</sup> GS 5, p. 600 (N13a, 1); 'Konvolut 'N'', op. cit., p. 71.

<sup>5</sup> GS 1, pp. 1243, 1244.

<sup>6</sup> GS 6, p. 609.



['*ganze Leben*'] which, as we often hear, passes before the eyes of the dying or the person in danger of dying, is composed precisely of these tiny images.'<sup>7</sup> Here, micrologically and monadologically, reminiscence conjures up an entire life in the form of fleetingly lucid pictures, particular lived moments returned finally to the subject at the point of extreme need. Yet this 'entire life' is also a 'complete life', and only now, when it may be too late, do all the images fall into place.

In 1940 Benjamin notes that it is 'the war and its corresponding constellation' which have led him to 'the problem of memory (and of forgetting)'. But already in 1931 he talks of a 'war weariness', euphemistically referring to his own destructive state of mind.<sup>8</sup> It may be no coincidence that it is from this time on, in a situation of recurrent danger, that he begins to develop the concept of remembrance. Where history and life-history coincide the measure of each can be found in memory, an insight whose force may be clearest at the point where the boundaries of both are most keenly felt.

The true measure of life is memory. Looking back it traverses the whole of life like lightning. As fast as one can turn back a few pages, it has travelled from the next village to the place where the traveller took the decision to set out. Those for whom life has become transformed into writing...can only read the writing backwards. That is the only way in which they confront themselves, and only thus - by fleeing from the present - can they understand life.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> GS 2, p. 1064.

<sup>8</sup> GS 6, p. 423; On this see Bernd Witte, *Walter Benjamin*, op. cit., p. 132.

<sup>9</sup> GS 6, p. 529-30; 'Conversations with Brecht', *Aesthetics & Politics*, op. cit., 91

## Bibliography

- Theodor Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970-)
- Theodor Adorno, *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989)
- Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 1974)
- Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (London: Routledge, 1973)
- Theodor Adorno, *Notes to Literature*, vol. 1, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholson, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991)
- Theodor Adorno, *Notes to Literature*, vol. 2, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992)
- Theodor Adorno, *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (London: Neville Spearman, 1967)
- Theodor Adorno & Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (London: Verso, 1979)
- Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History: Essays on the Destruction of Experience*, trans. Liz Heron (London: Verso, 1993)
- Robert Alter, *Necessary Angels: Tradition and Modernity in Kafka, Benjamin, and Scholem* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1991)
- Carlo Antoni, *From History to Sociology: The Transition in German Historical Thinking*, trans. Hayden V. White (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1976)
- Hannah Arendt, 'The Concept of History' in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993).
- Aristotle, 'On Memory', *The Complete Works of Aristotle, vol.1*, ed. Johnathon Barnes (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984)
- Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961)
- Ronald Beiner, 'Walter Benjamin's Philosophy of History', *Political Theory*, 12 (August 1984): 423-34.



- Andrew Benjamin (ed.), *The Problems of Modernity: Adorno and Benjamin* (London: Routledge, 1989)
- Andrew Benjamin & Peter Osborne (eds.), *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy: Destruction and Experience* (London: Routledge, 1993)
- Walter Benjamin, *Briefe* (2 vols.) ed. Gershom Scholem & T. W. Adorno (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1966); trans. *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin 1910-1940*, Manfred R. Jacobson & Evelyn M. Jacobson (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1994); abridged as *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem 1932-1940*, trans. Gary Smith & Andre Lefevere (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992)
- Walter Benjamin, 'Central Park', trans. Lloyd Spencer, *New German Critique* 34 (Winter 1985), pp. 34-58.
- Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet In The Era Of High Capitalism*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Verso, 1973)
- Walter Benjamin, 'Doctrine of the Similar', trans. Knut Tarnowski, *New German Critique* 17 (Spring 1979), pp. 65-69.
- Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* (7 vols.), ed. Rolf Tiedemann & Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974-85)
- Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968)
- Walter Benjamin, 'Left-Wing Melancholy (On Erich Kästner's new book of poems)', *Screen* 15, 2 (Summer 1974), pp. 28-32.
- Walter Benjamin, *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott & Kingsley Shorter (London: Verso, 1979)
- Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: Verso, 1977)
- Walter Benjamin, 'Theories of German Fascism: On the Collection of Essays *War and Warrior*, edited by Ernst Junger', *New German Critique* 17 (Spring 1979), pp. 120-128.
- Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. Nancy Margaret Paul & W. Scott Palmer (New York: Zone, 1991)
- Eduard Bernstein, *Evolutionary Socialism: A Criticism and Affirmation*, trans. Edith C. Harvey (New York: Schocken, 1961)
- Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 1986)

- Ernst Bloch, *Heritage of Our Times*, trans. Neville & Steven Plaice (Cambridge: Polity, 1991)
- Ernst Bloch & Michael Landmann, 'Talking with Ernst Bloch: Korcula, 1968', *Telos* 25 (Fall 1975) pp. 165-185
- Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimation of the Modern Age*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge, MA & London: MIT Press, 1983)
- Christine Buci-Glucksmann, *Baroque Reason: The Aesthetics of Modernity* (London: Sage, 1993)
- Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA & London: MIT Press, 1989)
- Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin and the Frankfurt Institute* (Hassocks: Harvester, 1977)
- Susan Buck-Morss, 'Walter Benjamin - Revolutionary Writer', *New Left Review* 128 & 129 (1981)
- Malcolm Bull, 'The End', *London Review of Books*, 11th March 1993, pp. 22-23
- Rudolf Bultmann, *History and Eschatology* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1957)
- Peter Bürger, 'Walter Benjamin's 'Redemptive Critique': Some Preliminary Reflections on the Project of a Critical Hermeneutics' in *The Decline of Modernism*, trans. Nicholas Walker (Cambridge: Polity, 1992)
- David Cesarini, 'Preserving a Death Camp', *The Guardian*, 29th November 1993, pp. 4-5.
- Hermann Cohen, *Reason and Hope: Selections from the Jewish Writings of Hermann Cohen*, trans. Eva Jospe (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1971)
- Hermann Cohen, *Religion of Reason Out of the Sources of Judaism*, trans. Simon Kaplan (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1972)
- Margaret Cohen, *Profane Illumination: Walter Benjamin and the Paris of Surrealist Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1993)
- Rebecca Comay, 'Redeeming Revenge: Nietzsche, Benjamin, Heidegger, and the Politics of Memory' in Clayton Koelb (ed.), *Nietzsche as Postmodernist: essays pro and contra* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990)
- Gilles Deleuze, *Proust and Signs*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Braziller, 1972)



- Jacques Derrida, 'Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority'' in Drucilla Cornell & David Gray Carlson (eds.), *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 3-67
- Jacques Derrida, 'Interpretations at War: Kant, the Jew, the German', *New Literary History* 22 (1) Winter 1991, pp. 39-95
- Jacques Derrida, *Memoires for Paul de Man*, trans. Cecile Lindsay, Johnathon Culler & Eduardo Cadava (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990)
- Jacques Derrida, *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today's Europe* trans. Pascale-Anne Brault & Michael B. Naas (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992)
- Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, The Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge, 1994)
- Wilhelm Dilthey, 'Drafts for a Critique of Historical Reason' in H. P. Rickman (ed.), *Wilhelm Dilthey: Selected Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976)
- Wilhelm Dilthey, *Introduction to the Human Sciences: An Attempt to Lay a Foundation for the Study of Society and History*, trans. Ramon J. Betanzos (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1988)
- Terry Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin, or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism* (London: Verso, 1981)
- Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Pantheon, 1954)
- Shoshana Felman & Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York & London: Routledge, 1992)
- Amis Fioretos, 'Contraction (Benjamin, Reading, History)', *Modern Language Notes*, vol. 110, no. 3 (April 1995), pp. 540-565.
- Sigmund Freud, 'Analysis Terminable and Interminable' in *The Standard Edition of Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* vol. 23 (London: Hogarth, 1964) ed. J. Strachey, pp. 216-53.
- Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. James Strachey (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991)
- Sigmund Freud, 'Notes Upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis ['The Rat Man']' in *Case Histories II* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979)
- Sigmund Freud, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, trans, Alan Tyson, ed. James Strachey (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975)
- Sigmund Freud, 'Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through (Further Recommendations on the Technique of Psychoanalysis II)' in *The Standard Edition of Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* vol. 12, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1958), pp. 144-156.

- Sigmund Freud, 'On Transience' in *Art & Literature*, trans. James Strachey (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985)
- Sigmund Freud, 'Trauer und Melancholie' in *Studienausgabe vol. III: Psychologie des Unbewußten* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1975); trans. 'Mourning and Melancholia' in *On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis*, James Strachey (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984)
- Saul Friedlander (ed.), *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution"* (Cambridge MA & London: Harvard University Press, 1992)
- David Frisby, *Fragments of Modernity: Theories of Modernity in the Work of Simmel, Kracauer and Benjamin* (Cambridge: Polity, 1985)
- Suzanne Gearhart, 'The Identities of Tragedy: Nietzsche, Benjamin, Freud' in *The Interrupted Dialectic: Philosophy, Psychoanalysis, and Their Tragic Other* (Baltimore & London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), pp. 17-37.
- Jürgen Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Human Action*, trans. Christian Lenhardt & Shierry Weber Nicholson (Cambridge: Polity, 1990)
- Jürgen Habermas, *The New Conservatism*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholson (Cambridge: Polity, 1989)
- Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge: Polity, 1987)
- Susan Handelman, *Fragments of Redemption: Jewish thought and Literary Theory in Benjamin, Scholem, and Levinas* (Bloomington: Indiana U. P., 1991)
- Geoffrey Hartman (ed.), *Bitburg in Moral and Political Perspective* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990)
- Geoffrey Hartman (ed.), *Holocaust Remembrance: The Shapes of Memory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994)
- Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, trans. E. S. Haldane & Frances H. Simson (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1955)
- G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977)
- G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History* (New York: Dover, 1956)
- G. W. F. Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik in Werke* ed. Marheineke et al. (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1833), vol. 4; trans. *Science of Logic*, A.V. Miller (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1969)



- Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1962)
- Martin Heidegger, *The Concept of Time*, trans. William McNeill (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992)
- Martin Heidegger, 'The Concept of Time in the Science of History', trans. Harry S. Taylor & Hans W. Uffelman, *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 9 (1) (January 1978)
- Denis Hollier (ed.), *The College of Sociology 1937-39*, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988)
- Max Horkheimer, 'Traditional and Critical Theory' in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell et al (New York: Herder & Herder, 1972)
- Carol Jacobs, *The Dissimulating Harmony: The Image of Interpretation in Nietzsche, Rilke, Artaud, & Benjamin* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978)
- Fredric Jameson, 'Walter Benjamin; or Nostalgia' in *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), pp. 60-83.
- Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality: the Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas* (Cambridge: Polity, 1984)
- Martin Jay, 'Reflections on Marcuse's Theory of Remembrance' in Robert Pippin, Andrew Feenberg & Charles P. Webel (eds.). *Marcuse: Critical Theory and the Promise of Utopia* (London: Macmillan, 1988) pp. 29-46
- Michael Jennings, *Dialectical Images: Walter Benjamin's Theory of Literary Criticism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987)
- Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952)
- Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. L. W. Beck (New York: Macmillan, 1993)
- Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (London: Macmillan, 1978)
- Immanuel Kant, *On History* ed. L. W. Beck (Indianapolis & New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1963)
- Immanuel Kant, *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der blossen Vernunft, Werke* ed. Königlich Preußischen Akademie der Wissenschaften (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1968), vol. VI; trans. *Religion Within the Bounds of Reason Alone*, Theodore M. Greene & Hoyt H. Hudson (New York & Evanston: Harper & Row, 1960)

- Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or* Part 1, trans. Howard V. Hong & Edna H. Hong (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1987)
- Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or* Part 2, trans. Howard V. Hong & Edna V. Hong (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1987)
- Søren Kierkegaard, *Repetition: An Essay in Experimental Psychology* trans. Walter Lowrie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1942)
- Jane Kramer, 'The Politics of Memory', *The New Yorker*, 14th August 1995, pp. 48-65.
- David Farrell Krell, *Of Memory, Reminiscence and Writing: On the Verge* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990)
- Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, 'Introduction to Walter Benjamin's *The Concept of Art Criticism in German Romanticism*', *Studies in Romanticism* vol. 31, no. 4 (Winter 1992)
- Jacques Le Goff, *History and Memory*, trans. Steven Rendell & Elizabeth Claman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992)
- Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *The Monadology*, trans. Robert Latta (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1898)
- Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Die Philosophische Schriften von G. W. Leibniz*, ed. C. I. Gerhard (Berlin: Olms, 1965), vol. II
- Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Philosophical Writings*, ed. G. H. R. Parkinson, trans. Mary Morris & G. H. R. Parkinson (London: Dent, 1973)
- Christian Lenhardt, 'Anamnestic Solidarity: The Proletariat and its *Manes*', *Telos*, 25 (Fall 1975), 133-54
- Primo Levi, *The Drowning and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (London: Abacus, 1989)
- Hermann Lotze, *Microcosmos: An Essay Concerning Man and His Relation to the World* (2 volumes), trans. Elizabeth Hamilton & E. E. Constance Jones (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1885)
- Hermann Lotze, *System of Philosophy, vol. 2, Metaphysic*, trans. Bernard Bosanquet (Oxford: Clarendon, 1884)
- Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History: Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949).
- Michael Löwy, *Redemption and Utopia: Jewish Libertarian Thought in Central Europe: A Study in Elective Affinity*, trans. Hope Heaney (London: Athlone, 1992)



- Ned Lukacher, *Primal Scenes: Literature, Philosophy, Psychoanalysis* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1986)
- Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Merlin, 1971)
- Eugene Lunn, *Marxism & Modernism: An Historical Study of Lukacs, Brecht, Benjamin, Adorno* (London: Verso, 1985)
- Charles S. Maier, *The Unmasterable Past: History, Holocaust, and German National Identity* (Cambridge, MA & London: Harvard U. P., 1988)
- Laura Marcus & Lynda Nead (eds.), *The Actuality of Walter Benjamin*, Special Issue of *New Formations*, 20 (Summer 1993)
- Reinhard Markner & Thomas Weber (ed.), *Literatur über Walter Benjamin: Kommentierte Bibliography 1983-1992* (Hamburg: Argument, 1993)
- Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, vol. I*, trans. Ben Fowkes (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976)
- Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1973)
- John McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993)
- Jeffrey Mehlman, *Walter Benjamin for Children: An Essay on His Radio Years* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1993)
- Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology*, trans. David Smith (London: Burns & Oates, 1980)
- Pierre Missac, *Walter Benjamin's Passages*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholzen (Cambridge, MA & London: MIT Press, 1995)
- Rainer Nägele, *Theatre, Theory, Speculation: Walter Benjamin and the Scenes of Modernity* (Baltimore & London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991)
- Michael Newman, 'Suffering From Reminiscences' in Francis Barker *et al* (eds.), *Postmodernism and the Re-reading of Modernity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), pp. 84-114.
- Lutz Niethammer, *Posthistoire: Has History Come to an End?*, trans. Patrick Camiller (London: Verso, 1992)

- Friedrich Nietzsche, *Also Sprach Zarathustra in Werke*, ed. Karl Schlechta (Munich: Hanser, 1955), vol. II; trans. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, R. J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961)
- Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974)
- Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Francis Golffing (New York: Doubleday, 1956)
- Friedrich Nietzsche, 'On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life' in *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983)
- Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann & R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1968)
- Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990)
- Pierre Nora, 'Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*', *Representations* 26 (Spring 1989)
- Peter Osborne, 'The Politics of Time', *Radical Philosophy* 68 (Autumn 1994)
- Peter Osborne, *The Politics of Time: Modernity and Avant-Garde* (London: Verso, 1995)
- Max Pensky, *Melancholy Dialectics: Walter Benjamin & the Play of Mourning* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993)
- Helmut Peukert, *Science, Action, and Fundamental Theology: Toward a Theology of Communicative Action*, trans. James Bohman (Cambridge, MA & London: MIT Press, 1986)
- Plato, *Meno*, trans. W. K. C. Guthrie (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987)
- Plato, *The Symposium*, trans. W. Hamilton (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1951)
- Georges Poulet, *Proustian Space*, trans. Elliott Coleman (Baltimore & London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977)
- Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff & Terence Kilmartin, revised by D. J. Enright (6 vols.) (London: Chatto & Windus, 1992)
- Anson Rabinbach, 'Betwen Enlightenment and Apocalypse: Benjamin, Bloch and Modern Jewish Messianism', *New German Critique* 34 (Winter 1985)
- Leopold von Ranke, *The Secret of World History: Selected Writings on the Art and Science of History*, ed. Roger Wines (New York: Fordham University Press, 1981)



- Laurence A. Rickels, *Aberrations of Mourning: Writing on German Crypts* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988)
- Julian Roberts, *Walter Benjamin* (London: Macmillan, 1982)
- Gillian Rose, *The Melancholy Science: An Introduction to the Thought of Theodor. W. Adorno* (London: Macmillan, 1978)
- Gillian Rose, *Judaism and Modernity: Philosophical Essays* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1993)
- Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, trans. William W. Hallo (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970)
- Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Cambridge, MA & London: MIT Press, 1988)
- Gershom Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality* (New York: Schocken, 1971)
- Gershom Scholem, 'Walter Benjamin' in *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis: Selected Essays* ed. J. Dannhauser (New York: Schocken, 1976), pp. 172-198
- Gary Smith (ed.), *On Walter Benjamin* (Cambridge, MA & London: MIT Press, 1988)
- Gary Smith (ed.), *Benjamin: Philosophy, Aesthetics, History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989)
- Georges Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, trans. T. E. Hulme & J. Roth (New York: Collier, 1961)
- George Steiner, 'The Remembrancer: Rescuing Walter Benjamin from his Acolytes', *Times Literary Supplement*, October 8, 1993
- Peter Szondi, 'Hope in the Past: On Walter Benjamin' in *On Textual Understanding and Other Essays* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), pp. 145-161.
- Max Weber, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie I* (Tubingen: Sibeck, 1920); trans. *From Max Weber*, H. H. Gerth & C. Wright Mills (London: Routledge, 1991)
- Thomas E. Willey, *Back to Kant: The Revival of Kantianism in German Social and Historical Thought, 1860-1914* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1978)
- Bernd Witte, *Walter Benjamin: An Intellectual Biography*, trans. J. Rolleston (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991)

Irving Wohlfarth, 'Walter Benjamin's *Image of Interpretation*', *New German Critique* 17 (Spring 1979), pp. 70-98.

Irving Wohlfarth, 'On The Messianic Structure of Walter Benjamin's Last Reflections', *Glyph* 3 (1978), pp. 148-212.

Richard Wolin, *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982)

Frances Yates, *The Art of Memory* (London: Pimlico, 1992)

Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle & London: University of Washington Press, 1982)

James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993)