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## Walter Benjamin and the Angel of History

Walter Benjamin wondered what illumination and what redemption might come out of the ruins of the secular. But at the end of his life, he did not turn to the poets for answers. In the "Theses on the Philosophy of History," written after his release from the internment camp in France and just before his suicide, Benjamin wrote perhaps his most poignant allegory about the "angel of history." In the final moment of allegory, Benjamin had written in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama (OGTD)*, the death's head turns into an angel's countenance (232). But it is the distressed face of an angel he contemplates here.

He prefaces his description of the angel of history with an excerpt from a poem that his friend Gershom Scholem had written as a birthday present for Benjamin in 1921, entitled "Greetings from Angelus." The poem was about a Paul Klee painting, *Angelus Novus*, that Benjamin had purchased. Scholem reports that "Benjamin always considered the picture his most important possession" (*Jews and Judaism in Crisis [JJC]* 219). The excerpt from Scholem's poem which Benjamin used as an epigraph

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for the "Theses" reads: "My wing is ready for flight, / I would like to turn back. / If I stayed timeless time / I would have little luck." Benjamin then writes:

A Klee painting named "Angelus Novus" shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (*Illuminations* 257–58)

The image of angels appears throughout Benjamin's work. In the early 1920s he had plans to found his own journal and intended to call it *Angelus Novus*. In the 1931 essay on Kraus, Benjamin also refers to Klee's *New Angel*, "who preferred to free men by taking from them, rather than make them happy by giving to them," as an image for Karl Kraus's mission of purifying language and society through destructive critique. The Kraus essay concludes with the image of the new angel:

Perhaps one of those who, according to the Talmud, are at each moment created anew in countless throngs, and who, once they have raised their voices before God, cease and pass into nothingness. Lamenting, chastising, rejoicing? No matter—on this evanescent voice the ephemeral work of Kraus is modeled. Angelus—that is the messenger of the old engravings. (*Reflections* 273)

Benjamin's knowledge of these talmudic angels came from Scholem, with whom he had conversed about Jewish angelology (*Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship* [SF] 100–101). But the angel is also the final allegorical emblem that concentrates within itself all the ruins of Benjamin's life. Scholem writes that Klee's painting literally served Benjamin "as a picture for meditation and as a memento of a spiritual vocation" (JJC 210). The gaze of the angel seems to encompass horror, blessing, melancholy, and hope; its eyes are both averted and staring; the drawing itself is at once childlike and fragmentary, enigmatic and emblematic. The angel's shape, Geoffrey Hartman notes, is like Torah scrolls unraveling (*Criticism* 79).

In Hebrew, the word for angel (*malach*) literally means "messenger"; yet this messenger's tidings are unclear and his power is limited. He is

an angel being exiled and is impotent to halt his flight, caught between hope and catastrophe. In the Karl Kraus essay, Benjamin had associated Klee's angel with the evanescence of the beings described in the Talmud; their song of praise, their truth, was one of the moment—a full present but a transient one. The voices raised in lament, hope, horror, chastisement were those of beings living in a precarious instant and soon to vanish into nothing, yet also to be followed by the instantaneous creation of another angelic horde.

This transience is reminiscent of the dialectic of happiness Benjamin had described in his essay on Proust, the moment of bliss which, however, is evanescent and disappears—countered by the repetition of the experience which had dissolved into the past, the “yet again.” In the “Theological-Political Fragment,” the eternal transience of nature was a force of both downfall and redemption—the profane counterpart of a messianic redemption, the messianic kingdom which will transfigure and consummate nature. Until that ever-delayed occurrence, however, the profane search for happiness and a political nihilism points back/forward toward the messianic. There is an apocalyptic disjunctive link—not one of linear causality—from profane to messianic.

Just as the profane connects with the messianic by a seemingly backward move, a move in the opposite direction, similarly Benjamin's angel of history in the “Theses” is blown backward into the future, fixing his gaze on the past as a catastrophe, not a chain of events, and gazing in pain as ruins and wreckage are piled at his feet. But this angel does not sing praises or hymns; he is impotent. He would like to stay, resurrect the dead, heal, redeem, but he cannot. The storm from paradise is pushing him in the opposite direction, back into the future. Paradise here is the source of a “storm,” not a peaceful idyll. The storm is a violent force which catches the angel and propels him against his will. This storm also seems to represent the destructive aspects of a revolution, whose purification alone can bring any “progress” to the ruins of history. Scholem misreads by completely depoliticizing the text; he claims it propounds a cyclic conception of history rather than disjunctive allegory: “Paradise is at once the origin and the primal past of man as well as the utopian image of the future of his redemption—a conception of the historical process that is really cyclical rather than dialectical” (JJC 232).

In some fragments written in 1933 on the island of Ibiza after he had fled Nazi Germany, Benjamin had also written of the new angel, calling it “Agesilaus Santander.” Scholem decodes this name as an anagram of *Der Angelus Satanas*, “The Angel Satan,” who represents a combination

of angelic and satanic elements. Another part of Benjamin's vision of this angel was taken from a Jewish tradition he had discussed with Scholem, a tradition "about the personal angel of each human being who represents the latter's secret self, and whose name nevertheless remains hidden from him" (JJC 213). Benjamin writes in "Agesilaus Santander" that his own personal angel was interrupted in his moment of praise to God and "made me pay for having disturbed him at his work" (205). In the second version of the piece, Benjamin, with all the poignancy of the exile refugee, writes that the angel "resembles all from which I have had to part: persons and above all things. In the things I no longer have, he resides. He makes them transparent, and behind all of them there appears to me the one for whom they are intended" (207). Fixing his glance on Benjamin, the angel tries to

pull him along with himself on that way into the future from which he came. . . . He wants happiness: the conflict in which lies the ecstasy of the unique, new, as yet un-lived with that bliss of the "once more," the having again, the lived. This is why he can hope for the new on no way except on the way of the return home, when he takes a new human being along with him. (207-208)

Yet this is a happiness without fulfillment; it is a conflict, a dialectic without resolution, a constant oscillation between a moment that cannot last and a repetition in search of home. The "yet again," the repetition, seeks to grasp the evanescent moment of the "not yet" and the unique.

The angel wants happiness, yet the very definition of happiness prevents him from attaining it. Repetition seeks to hold fast an original moment which by definition cannot be held fast but is evanescent; and the evanescent seeks to repeat itself but cannot. The future moments are lost as they dissolve into an unredeemed past, and the past consists of empty repetitive unfulfilled moments—the anguish of modernity. The only way into the past is via the utopian future, and the only way into the future is via the past. The storm which pushes the angel of history toward the future keeps him from fulfilling his desires. He is not allowed to stay. Yet the story blows from paradise, paradise as origin, as the realm from which humanity has been expelled yet to which it desires to return. But this origin as *ursprung* is also new world as well, entirely other—both political revolution and theological redemption.

Perhaps here, too, the line of the profane nevertheless is connected to the messianic. The angel of history is stuck, his wings are immobilized, he can't close them to halt his flight. The future to which he is driven is undefined, and the angel's back is toward it. Yet the story of "progress,"

the destructiveness of linear empty time, pushes the angel even as it inhibits him. The forces of destruction and catastrophe somehow both contain within themselves and propel movement toward the future redemption.

Scholem stressed that in Jewish messianic thinking, catastrophe and redemption are intertwined. A famous talmudic legend relates that on the day the Temple was destroyed—the saddest day in Jewish history, and the catastrophe that began the long exile—the Messiah was born. The forces of the redemption come not only from a transcendent intercession but from the very depths of the catastrophe itself, from the ruins (JJC 245). Geoffrey Hartman notes in his commentary on the “angel of history” that “catastrophe, instead of remaining fixed in the past, and hope, instead of being an eschatological or future-directed principle, reverse places. Catastrophe becomes proleptic. . . . it ruins time and blocks, even as it propels, the angel. As for hope, that is located mysteriously *in the past*, a defeated potentiality of retroactive force. . . .” This chiasma of hope and catastrophe saves hope from being unmasked only as catastrophe: as an illusion or unsatisfied movement of desire that wrecks everything. The foundation of hope becomes remembrance, which confirms the function, even the duty, of the historian and critic (*Criticism* 77–78).

### The Hunchback of Theology

In any case, this angel is both Marxist and talmudic. Benjamin has secularized the Jewish apocalyptic even as he has theologized historical materialism. The moment of writing the “Theses” was bitter: there was the aftermath of the Hitler-Stalin pact, the betrayal of the revolution, a Europe in ruins, and Benjamin himself “frozen in flight.” The “Theses” open not with an angel but with a hunchback:

The story is told of an automaton constructed in such a way that it could play a winning game of chess, answering each move of an opponent with a countermove. A puppet in Turkish attire and with a hookah in its mouth sat before a chessboard placed on a large table. A system of mirrors created the illusion that this table was transparent from all sides. Actually, a little hunchback who was an expert chess player sat inside and guided the puppet’s hand by means of strings. One can imagine a philosophical counterpart to this device. The puppet called “historical materialism” is to win all the time. It can easily be a match for anyone if it enlists the services of theology, which today, as we know, is wizened and has to keep out of sight. (*Illuminations* 253)

Yet how comfortably does this hunchback sit within the automaton? He is concealed within the automaton of historical materialism in an artificial and uncomfortable position. He is wizened and unattractive but joined to the brainless puppet of historical materialism in order to win all games. Yet how long can the games be played? For the coexistence of the hunchback and the puppet in Benjamin's parable depends on a ruse; it is a baroque contraption with a system of mirrors creating the illusion that the chess table was transparent—a baroque contraption in which modern history has become a *trauerspiel*. Perhaps these parable-theses were Benjamin's ironic version of baroque allegory for his own age, in which he gathered all the threads, fragments, and ruins of his life in a pessimistic messianism caught between catastrophe and hope. As in allegory, the ruins are heaped together, and these fragments do not attain a unity or an "identity" in any traditional kind of way. Benjamin would have opposed such a unity in any case. But they somehow are all connected in the field of vision of the allegorist, and the angel of history who, as Scholem puts it, is "the occult reality" of Benjamin's inner self (JJC 229).

Although the theses begin with the baroque puppet game, they conclude with a vision of Jewish memory in which redeemed time opens the future so that "every second of time was the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter" (*Illuminations* 264). Through remembrance comes redemption; by going back one also moves toward the future—like the angel of history who faces the past and is blown forward. In his essay on Kafka, Benjamin referred to memory as the heart of Judaism, and he cited a theological interpretation of *The Trial* which maintains that the real object of the trial is "forgetting, whose main characteristic is the forgetting of itself," and agrees that "this mysterious center . . . derives from the Jewish religion" where memory is intimately involved with piety (131). In forgetting and oblivion, he continues, things become distorted, and in Kafka all the figures of distortion are connected with the prototype of distortion, the hunchback. Quoting a folksong called "The Little Hunchback," Benjamin writes, "This little man is at home in distorted life; he will disappear with the coming of the Messiah" (134).

In the "Theses" the little hunchback of theology, like the angel of history, is also caught, and in need of redemption. Benjamin's messianic time is brought about by a revolutionary "tiger's leap into the past" which uses the power of memory to burst the historical continuum and realize the "time of now." This leap is similar to the faithless leap of allegory when, at the depths of its fall, it turns round toward redemption,

and where its own ultimate objects turn into allegories which “fill out and deny the void in which they are represented” (*OGTD* 233). Politics here is a kind of allegory of religion, and religion an allegory of politics. As Scholem comments:

It is matter of dispute whether one can speak here—as I am rather inclined to do—of a melancholy, indeed desperate view of history for which the hope that the latter might be burst asunder, by an act like redemption or revolution, continues to have about it something of that leap into transcendence which these theses seem to deny but which is even then implied in their materialistic formulation as their secret care. (*JJC* 235)

Or, one might ask, are these theses more like the parables of Kafka, which Benjamin described so beautifully as “fairy tales for dialecticians” (*Illuminations* 117)? Kafka, Benjamin wrote, struggled with the prehistoric world, the world of myth, and tried to rewrite legends as fairy tales. He “inserted little tricks into them; then he used them as proof ‘that inadequate, even childish measures may also serve to rescue one’ ” (117–18). “The wisest thing—so the fairy tale taught mankind in olden times, and teaches children to this day—is to meet the forces of the mythical world with cunning and high spirits.” The fairy tale thus has a “liberating magic” pointing to the complicity of nature with liberated man: “A mature man feels this complicity only occasionally, that is, when he is happy; but the child first meets it in fairy tales, and it makes him happy” (102).

But there was to be no happy ending to Benjamin’s life, and no arrival of the Messiah amid the ever-increasing pile of ruins. Today, Benjamin’s image is so fractured, Jurgen Habermas maintains, because Benjamin combined all kinds of diverging motifs without actually unifying them. Those who so desire can create a Marxist Benjamin, a kabbalistic Benjamin, a neo-conservative aesthetic Benjamin, and so forth: “Benjamin belongs to those authors who cannot be summarized and whose work is disposed to a history of disparate efforts” (“Consciousness Raising” 32). Habermas asserts that finally the hunchback theology and the puppet of materialism cannot come together because Benjamin’s idea of anarchic now-time cannot be integrated into a materialist theory of social development. Benjamin’s project was ultimately unsuccessful “because the theologian in him couldn’t accept the idea of making his messianic theory of experience serviceable to historical materialism.” Yet Benjamin also “sacrificed theology by accepting mystical illumination only as secular, i.e. universalizable exoteric experience”.

Yet Benjamin said of Kafka: "To do justice to the figure of Kafka in its purity and its peculiar beauty one must never lose sight of one thing: it is the purity and beauty of a failure. . . . There is nothing more memorable than the fervor with which Kafka emphasized his failure" (*Illuminations* 144–45). Ought one to say the same of Benjamin? That he, too, ultimately failed in his project to bring together the hunchback and the puppet? Or is it simply a matter of patience, of the hope and redemption that are there—but not for us? For despite his anguished self-contradictions, Benjamin, like Kafka, with whom he so identified, seems to preside over these fragments, parables and paradoxes with patience and serenity. As he wrote in the first version of "Agesilaus Santander": "For nothing can overcome my patience. Its wings resemble those of the angel in that very few pushes are enough for them to preserve themselves immovably in the face of her whom my patience is resolved to await" (*JJC* 204). Adds Scholem, "Benjamin was the most patient human being I ever came to know, and the decisiveness and radicalism of his thinking stood in vehement contrast to his infinitely patient and only very slowly opening nature. And to deal with Benjamin one had to have the greatest patience oneself. Only very patient people could gain deeper contact with him" (222).

There is, finally, the image of him left by the last person who saw him, the woman who guided him over the Pyrenees to the border of Spain. Lisa Fittko describes his unfailing courtesy in the midst of the worst dangers. The arduous trek over the mountains was made worse by his heart condition, and Benjamin was also lugging a briefcase with which he refused to part, and in which he had what he described as his new manuscript. He told her, "This briefcase is the most important thing I have. I mustn't lose it. My manuscript *must* be saved. It is more important than I am" ("Last Days" 52). But it, too, was lost after his suicide. Because of his ill health Benjamin walked slowly, but the night before he had calculated a precise walking pace that would allow him to survive the journey. He also knew that he would not have enough strength to cross the border again if the first attempt failed and if he were to be returned to France. "Here, too, he had calculated everything in advance, taking enough morphine with him for a fatal dose." He planned his crossing carefully, and "at regular intervals—about ten minutes, I think—he would stop and rest for perhaps a minute." He told her, "With this method I'll be able to go all the way. I rest at regular intervals—*before* I become exhausted. Never spend yourself entirely." Her reaction:



What a strange man, I thought A crystal-clear mind, unbending inner strength, yet hopelessly clumsy. *Walter Benjamin once wrote about the nature of his strength that "my patience is unconquerable"* Reading that phrase years later, I saw him before me once again, walking slowly and measuredly along the mountain path And his inner contradictions suddenly seemed less absurd (Italics in original.)

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