

Melancholia and Destruction: Brushing Walter Benjamin's "Angel of History" Against the Grain

Sami Khatib

ABSTRACT

In his famous ninth Thesis "On the Concept of History" (1940), Walter Benjamin introduces the "Angel of History" by referring to Paul Klee's watercolored drawing "Angelus Novus" (1920). The gaze of this angel has often been associated with Benjamin's allegedly melancholic yearning for the restoration of a lost and catastrophically crushed past. Challenging mainstream interpretations of this allegory, Giorgio Agamben asked a simple question: what if the 'Angel of History' could close his wings and had his will? Against the grain of melancholic messianisms, Agamben invites us to see the "Angel of History" in a different light. Relying on Freud and Lacan, this paper discusses the split image of Benjamin's "Angel of History" torn between vision and gaze, melancholia and destruction.

for Oxana Timofeeva

*Tactics of attrition are what you enjoyed
Sitting at the chess table in the pear tree's shade.
The enemy who drove you from your books
Will not be worn down by the likes of us.
Brecht on Benjamin¹*

I.

In his classic article *Mourning and Melancholia* from 1917, Freud compared melancholy to mourning, exposing their antithetical features. Whereas "mourning is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction", melancholia is "a pathological disposition,"² for it fails to do the work of mourning, to withdraw libidinal energy from the lost object and to finally move on to another object. In this way, the melancholic remains fixated to the lost object, internalizes it and identifies herself with the desired yet impossible object. This pathology is complicated by the fact that "the patient cannot consciously perceive what he has lost either."³ Therefore, as Freud concludes, "melancholia is in some way related to an object-loss which is withdrawn from consciousness, in contradistinction to mourning, in which there is nothing about the loss

1 Brecht, quoted in Benjamin 1998a, p. XVIII. Brecht wrote this poem in 1941. It is not only a reflection on learning about the sad news that his friend had died (Benjamin killed himself in late September 1940 while trying to escape Vichy France), but also a reference to Benjamin's tactic of playing chess with Brecht. For a detailed account on Brecht and Benjamin as chess players see McGettigan 2010, pp. 62-64.

2 Freud, SE 14, p. 243.

3 Freud, SE 14, p. 245.

that is unconscious.”⁴ Although melancholy borrows some features from mourning, they relate to each other in an antithetical way. Whereas the work of mourning takes time to painfully part from its loved object, melancholy remains attached to the loss without being able to redirect libidinal energy to a new loved object. In this way, the predicates of mourning and melancholy form a chiasmus. During the work of mourning, the mourner is *conscious* about her lost object. The melancholic, on the contrary, is narcissistically conscious only about her loss, yet has *no consciousness* of her lost object. Therefore, melancholy cannot let go the lost object; rather, it internalizes, swallows it. As a result, melancholy fetishizes the loss itself up to the degree of identification without knowing exactly what has been lost. “In this way an object-loss was transformed into an ego-loss and the conflict between the ego and the loved person into a cleavage between the critical activity of the ego and the ego as altered by identification.”⁵ This alteration through identification is not triggered by the lost object but by the loss itself. But what is a loss without its object? What is the spectral nature of “the *shadow* of the object” that “fell upon the ego”⁶?

From his reading of Freud, Giorgio Agamben drew the conclusion that melancholy is a strategy of the psyche to avoid the chance of a real loss because the object has never been possessed in the first place and, therefore, there is nothing really to lose.⁷ In the case of melancholy, libido preemptively stages a loss before anything in the object could have been possessed in order to remain faithful and fixated to the desired object. In this way, melancholy produces a pseudo-loss, a fantasy, an imaginary negative object-relation, masking the real absence of any possible object, and thereby allowing for the detached cultivation of loss (as narcissistic faithfulness vis-à-vis the phantasmatically lost object).

Referring to Agamben, Rebecca Comay concludes that “[m]elancholia would thus be a way of staging a dispossession of that which was never one’s own to lose in the first place – and thus, precisely by *occluding structural lack as determinate loss*, would exemplify the strictly perverse effort to assert a *relation with the non-relational*.”⁸ This perverse reading brings melancholy close to fetishism – “the compensatory construction of imaginary unities in response to a traumatic loss (‘castration’) which structurally can be neither fully acknowledged nor denied.”⁹ Agreeing with Agamben’s parallelization of fetishism and melancholy, Comay, however,

4 Freud, SE 14, p. 245.

5 Freud, SE 14, p. 249.

6 Freud, SE 14, p. 259.

7 Agamben 1993, pp. 19-21.

8 Comay 2005, p. 89, emphasis mine.

9 Comay 2005, p. 90.

asks: “Could perversion be the mark of the subject’s impossible relationship to a loss which is ultimately not its own to acknowledge in the first place – but so too, equally, the index of a certain promise?”¹⁰ And if so, could we ask if there is a promise of melancholy that exceeds the horizon of perversion by presenting its inner contradictions in order to overcome the fantasy of melancholy altogether – by exiting fantasy through traversing it? What kind of present can let go of the “melancholic fixation on the past” and “explode the nostalgia to which it simultaneously seems committed, just as the perverse temporality of suspense or ‘lingering’ may undermine its own implicit consecration of an embalmed or reified present.”¹¹ This question seems paradoxical at first glance: “how might fixation yield a form of rupture?”¹² The possibility of rupture – the undoing of melancholic fixation in order to set free the fixated and the fixator – would assume that the fantasy of loss can be overcome or, rather, interrupted by acknowledging structural lack. As we will see, history is ontologically incomplete, it even lacks the lost object. In other words, a non-fetishistic concept of history that frees itself of melancholic fixation has to let go the fantasy of loss (of the past as some primordial unity, completeness or meaning). Is there a non-fetishistic promise of melancholia beyond fetishization, perversion, and internalization? These questions are posed most astutely in the work of Walter Benjamin.

II.

In 1920 Paul Klee drew a strange figure called *Angelus Novus*. 20 years later, after the Hitler-Stalin-Pact at the beginning of World War II, Benjamin referred to Klee’s peculiar oil transfer drawing with watercolor. In his last text, the “Theses On the Concept of History,” Benjamin introduced the now famous “Angel of History,” an allegorized condensation of his reflections on historiography, Marxism and messianicity.

There is a picture by Klee called *Angelus Novus*. It shows an angel who seems about to move away from something he stares at. His eyes are wide, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how the angel of history must look. His face is turned toward the past. Where a chain of events appears before *us*, *he* sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at 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 and has got caught in his wings; it is so strong that the angel can no longer close them. This storm drives him irresistibly into the future,

10 Comay 2005, p. 90.

11 Comay 2005, p. 95.

12 Comay 2005, p. 95.

to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows toward the sky. What we call progress is *this* storm.¹³

The angel and his gaze have often been read as an emblem of Benjamin's own "messianic" concept of history and his allegedly melancholic yearning for the restoration of a lost and catastrophically crushed past. This personification, however, misses the strategic function that Benjamin gave this allegory in the context of his Theses. To begin with, the figure of the angel neither represents Benjamin himself nor contains the abbreviated essence of his concept of history. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, angels are messengers, neither fully human beings nor divine entities, living in the interstices of historical immanence and eternal transcendence. Benjamin's clearly emphasizes the difference of our *historical* perspective vis-à-vis the angel's view ("a chain of events appears before *us*, *he* sees one single catastrophe"). In the original draft copy typescript Benjamin marked this difference even by using spaced out font.¹⁴ As I will argue in this paper, the entire argument on the angel's gaze hinges on this difference. The angel's perspective on history differs from ours and is thus not to be conflated with the one of history's oppressed or a properly messianic perspective. The angel is able to "see" something that is accessible to him only. To be sure, the angel's gaze is not neutral – there is a desire inscribed in his gaze: "The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed." His wish is intensive but impotent: the mighty storm of extensive history (which we call "progress") blows him towards the future. Let us postpone for a moment the question of the texture of this storm. Instead I suggest to distinguish between the angel's field of vision – non-linear history as catastrophic "pile of debris" – and his gaze upon the past.

According to Lacan we have to distinguish between gaze and vision. The angel of history clearly displays this split: what he sees is not "in" his gaze. "The split between gaze and vision will enable us [...] to add the scopoc drive to the list of the drives."¹⁵ And, as Lacan adds, this peculiar scopoc drive is attached to the "object petit a," the unattainable object cause of desire: "*The objet a in the field of the visible is the gaze.*"¹⁶ If we transpose this split to Benjamin's take on Klee's *Angelus Novus* as the "Angel of History," the angel's gaze needs to be distinguished from what he actually sees. Moreover, the angel's gaze is not only punctuated by his desire ("awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed") but *is* itself the unattainable object of desire (immortality and wholeness). We

13 Benjamin 2003, p. 392.

14 Benjamin 2010, p. 35.

15 Lacan 1978, p. 78.

16 Lacan 1978, p. 105.

cannot see what the *Angelus Novus* is looking at. It is precisely this feature that renders Klee's watercolor a possible allegory of the split in the field of *historical* vision. Benjamin writes that the angel stares at something, eyes widely open. It seems the angel is disturbed by something that has no stable place – something that is moving while he is being moved – something that has no clear boundaries, trajectory or place. We only know he cannot rest on his forced journey departing from a primordial past (paradise) bound to the future. However, if we look closely at the original drawing, we can detect a torsion in the field of the angel's vision, a divergent strabismus in his left eye. If, according to Lacan, the gaze never coincides with the subject's eye and, to this extent, expresses the subject's split nature itself,¹⁷ the gaze presents the objective, that is desubjectified dimension of seeing. Klee's angel articulates this "objective" dimension. What turns the *Angelus Novus* into Benjamin's "Angel of History" is not so much his wings but the torsion within his field of vision, articulating the split of the angel's "subjective" eye and his "objective" gaze. The object of his gaze cannot be "seen" – it is the unattainable object of desire, the primordial mythic state of paradise "before" humanity's fall into history.

If we read the "Angel of History" as a melancholic figure, the split in the angel's field of vision gets lost. Identifying his gaze and the latter's attachment to the object cause of his redemptive desire (unfractured wholeness and post-/pre-historical immortality) leads to the identification with an impossible, that is unattainable object. Melancholy can be regarded as a fetishistic subjectification and economization of undoing the split between eye and gaze. We will later return to this aspect. For the moment, it is worth noting that it is exactly a melancholic reading and, furthermore, the identification of Benjamin with the angel's allegedly melancholic gaze that has become a major source of Benjamin's popularity, triggering sentimental "Benjaminiana" and neutralizing the political thrust of his reflections on history.

III.

Challenging mainstream interpretations of the "Angel of History," Agamben asked a simple question: what if the angel could close his wings and had his will? Against the grain of melancholic readings and their handy appropriations in contemporary humanities and art discourses, Agamben invites us to see the angel in a different light.

Those who see the angel of history in Benjamin's Ninth Thesis ["On

17 In *Seminar XI* (1964), Lacan famously wrote: "*You never look at me from the place from which I see you. Conversely, what I look at is never what I wish to see*" (Lacan 1978, p. 103). As Dylan Evans comments: "When the subject looks at an object, the object is always already gazing back at the subject, but from a point at which the subject cannot see it. This split between the eye and the gaze is nothing other than the subjective division itself, expressed in the field of vision" (Evans 1996, p. 73).

the Concept of History,” S.K.] as a melancholic figure would therefore most likely be horrified to witness what would happen if the angel, instead of being driven forward by the winds of progress, paused to accomplish his work. Here Benjamin’s intention is not very different from the one Marx expressed in a phrase that exerted a profound influence on Benjamin. In the introduction to the *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, considering the fact that in the course of history every event tends to be represented as a comedy, Marx asks: “Why does history take this course?” Marx answers: “So that humanity may happily [*heiter*] separate itself from its past.”¹⁸

Following Agamben’s reading, humanity’s *heitere*, cheerful or happy, separation from the past is forestalled by the storm of history as progress. Trying and failing to defy the powerful storm of historical time (what we call “storm”), the angel still wants us take leave of our past cheerfully. History’s debris remains catastrophic only if we keep on moving as things are. As Benjamin noted in the *Arcades Project*: “The concept of progress must be grounded in the idea of catastrophe. That things are ‘status quo’ is the catastrophe. It is not an ever-present possibility but what in each case is given.¹⁹ This post-catastrophic, if not post-apocalyptic condition also applies to the angel. Strangely reminiscent of Hegel’s “Owl of Minerva,” yet with a completely different conclusion, Benjamin admits that philosophy of history is always too late. Moreover, the angel never takes his flight, the storm of history is too powerful and his wings are already caught in the uneven, ever recurring status quo of catastrophe. Only a messianic standstill of history would allow the angel to close his wings and bring history to its messianic end. In contrast to eschatological concepts of history, however, Benjamin’s peculiar take on the Jewish and Christian motif of the messianic does not rely on the binary of either historical flatness (linear, fractured, future-directed, irreversible) or eschatological fullness (univocal, whole, eternal, circular). Rather, extensive history is only historical in the strict sense if punctuated by sparks of intensive messianicity – *historical* time is time “shot through with splinters of messianic time.”²⁰ Without this messianic tension history is not historical but “homogeneous, empty time.”²¹ In this sense, history is ontologically incomplete – it lacks its messianic completion, fulfillment and end. And it is only this structural lack that makes history “historical.” History as incomplete is bound to messianic redemption precisely for being unredeemed. The same structure

18 Agamben 1999, p. 154. Benjamin quotes the same passage from Marx (cf. Marx 1843) in the Konvolut of his *Arcades Project*, Benjamin 1999a, p. 467 (N 5a,2).

19 Benjamin 1999a, p. 473 (N 9a, 1).

20 Benjamin 2003, p. 397 (thesis A).

21 Benjamin 2003, p. 397 (thesis B).

holds true for the angel’s wings: authentically historical time, punctuated by messianic splinters, only emerges from the tension between the angel’s impossible desire (closing the wings, end of history, standstill) and the storm of history that moves him irresistibly towards the future. With regard to Agamben’s Marxian reading, a happy separation from the past would first necessitate a full realization and ‘working-through’ of this tension, rather than internalizing it as loss. Put differently, a melancholic reading of the unoblatable tension between the angel’s desire and his catastrophic vision would revert to a flat non-historical concept of history, fetishizing loss over structural lack.

This antagonistic tension is expressed by the split of angel’s vision. His “object-driven” gaze does not coincide with his subjective vision which fixates on history’s debris. Rather, it bears witness to an objective yearning that exceeds subjective melancholic fixation. However, taking Agamben’s reference to Marx seriously and confronting it with Lacan, the angel’s redemptive desire is impossible – it can only be addressed indirectly by confronting the impossibility of his desire with the political present. In other words, the angel’s redemptive desire corresponds to political action, that is, the destruction of ruling class’s history, the interruption of history as catastrophic status quo. Political action is thus the only (possible) answer to the (impossible) will of the angel to close his wings and to allow us to take leave of our past in a happy and truly reconciled way. This structure of correspondence, however, is asymmetric and non-linear. There is no direct translation, no equivalence. We cannot close the angel’s entangled wings on his behalf. We cannot reconcile the angel’s desire for redemptive stasis with the revolutionary-destructive will to “to blast open the continuum of history.”²² The split in the angel’s field of vision poses a problem that is either acknowledged politically and acted out historically or pathologically glossed over by identifying vision and gaze, internalizing the impossible object of desire as loss. Political action is the only “analytic,” that is non-pathological way of confronting the impossibility of undoing the split of the angel’s vision and acknowledging the unattainability of his object of desire. As we shall see, accepting this impasse does not lead to apolitical quietism but to a political ‘work of mourning’ which is, at the same time, an intervention in the concept of history, changing the parameters of historical vision. Such a changing, however, cannot indulge in its own melancholic fixation to the “Angel of History” and the latter’s identification with Benjamin’s allegedly melancholic character.

IV.

Not surprisingly, Agamben’s Marxian interpretation of Benjamin’s angel is at odds with most conventional readings. The “Angel of History” has mostly been taken as an emblem of Benjamin’s melancholic messian-

22 Benjamin, 2003, p. 396 (thesis XVI).

ism and, moreover, as a token of Benjamin's own melancholic personality. Suffice to say, before challenging these interpretations we need to rid ourselves of our own affective investment in the figure of the angel as an icon of contemporary "left-wing melancholy." Already 20 years ago the art historian Otto Karl Werckmeister sardonically noted:

Thus Paul Klee's watercolor *Angelus Novus* of 1920 has become, on Benjamin's rather than Klee's terms, a composite literary icon for left-wing intellectuals with uncertain political aspirations. Benjamin's interpretation of a "modern" artwork as a mirror of autobiographical self-assurance and as a fantasy of political dissent has been turned into a foundational text for a theoretically abbreviated and metaphorically stylized alternative historical idea bent on reflecting on its own inconclusiveness. As an icon of the left, *Angelus Novus* has seemed to hold out an elusive formula for making sense of the senseless, for reversing the irreversible, while being subject to a kind of political brooding all the more protracted the less promising the prospects for political practice appear to be. Thus Benjamin's suggestive visual allegory has become a meditative image – an *Andachtsbild* – for a dissident mentality vacillating between historical abstraction and political projection, between despondency and defiance, between assault and retreat. The image keeps the aggressive tension inherent in such a mentality in abeyance so that the tension stays put within the politically disenfranchised, and hence ideologically overcharged, realm of culture. For this perpetual holding pattern Benjamin's own notion of a dialectics at a standstill offers its own tailor-made philosophical validation.²³

Indeed, Benjamin's omnipresence in contemporary art and critical theory discourses has transformed his writings into a perpetuum mobile, instantly capable of producing relevance, meaning and authority for seemingly anyone who invokes his name. While Werckmeister aptly criticizes the use and abuse of the "Angel of History" as an *Andachtsbild*, meditative image, for left intellectuals, it was Benjamin himself who argued against a melancholic detachment from actual politics. In his short piece "Left-wing Melancholy" from 1931, a polemical review on left-leaning activist authors in Weimar Germany, he fiercely criticized

the attitude to which there is no longer, in general, any corresponding political action. It is not to the left of this or that tendency, but simply to the left of what is in general possible. For from the beginning all it has in mind is to enjoy itself in a negativistic quiet. The metamorphosis of political struggle from a compulsory decision into an object of

23 Werckmeister 1996, p. 242.

pleasure, from a means of production into an article of consumption that is this literature's latest hit.²⁴

Benjamin defines left-wing melancholy as a pseudo-radical attitude that does not intervene in the political conditions of the possible. Being "left of what is in general possible" leads to negativistic quiet because the political struggle for new possibilities has been given up *before* anything could have been lost in this struggle. Understood in this way, left-wing melancholy is a kind of preemptive strike against the possibility of a real loss – a political defeat after having been engaged in a struggle. In 1940, however, one could argue that Benjamin himself is in a position of those left-wing radicals that he had criticized during the last years of the Weimar Republic. While being exiled in France, he never fully succeeded in becoming actively engaged in the political struggle against fascism. His critical attempts to present himself as a "strategist on the literary struggle,"²⁵ waging class struggle on the field of literary criticism, only led to small-scale victories in the course of a large-scale defeat.

In 1940, Benjamin is defeated by both the victorious course of fascism and by having been denied a greater role in the antifascist struggle during his exile in Paris. Without going into detail of the difficulties that hampered his role as a leading political figure among German radical-leftist exiles, in early 1940, when writing the Theses, Benjamin seems to look like a left-wing melancholic himself mourning the loss of a political struggle that he had not even possessed in the first place. This is *one* way to read the Theses and today the main body of Benjamin scholarship provides us with more or less refined facets of this image. To be sure, it is possible to counter this image with Benjamin's own criticism of left-wing melancholy. However, in the context of the Theses, I propose to take the charge seriously and dwell on the question whether there is also a non-perverse reading of melancholy – a promise of undoing melancholic fixation by traversing the fantasy of loss in order to exit it.

If such a reading is possible, it first needs to estrange, denaturalize its object of inquiry. As Ilit Ferber rightly notes: "[T]here is the natural, almost instinctive, attraction to Benjamin's own melancholic disposition (to date, most of the scholarly work exploring this 'melancholic connection' has been preoccupied with this aspect)."²⁶ This tendency toward psychologization can rely on the image circulated by one of Benjamin's closest friends and sharpest readers, Gershom Scholem. For Scholem, Benjamin's version of Klee's *Angelus Novus* was "basically a melancholy figure, wrecked by the immanence of history, because the latter can only

24 Benjamin 1999b, p. 425.

25 Benjamin 1996, p. 460.

26 Ferber 2013, p. 17.

be overcome by a leap that does not save the past of history in an 'eternal image', but rather in a leap leading out of the historical continuum into the 'time of now', whether the latter is revolutionary or messianic."²⁷

Without challenging this interpretation directly,²⁸ it is worth noting Scholem is right to highlight the importance of the *Angelus Novus* not only in the context of the Theses but also in Benjamin's entire oeuvre and life. Bought in Munich in 1921, Klee's watercolor remained with Benjamin for most of his unsteady life.²⁹ After his death in 1940, the *Angelus Novus* was passed on to Scholem. Scholem's widow eventually gave it to the Israel Museum in Jerusalem where it is still stored and exhibited. In 1921, Benjamin and Scholem even wrote a draft proposal for a never realized political journal, named after the angel, *Angelus Novus*. Inspired by the Talmudic tale according to which "angels – who are born anew every instant in countless numbers – are created in order to perish and to vanish into the void, once they have sung their hymn in the presence of God,"³⁰ the journal was intended to explicate the political meaning of *Aktualität* – a central term of Benjamin's later Marxist period in the context of the *Arcades Project*. For *Aktualität* denotes both modal actuality and untimely contemporaneity.

The same passage will also return in the autobiographic sketch "Agesilaus Santander" written on Ibiza in summer 1933. The two slightly different versions of this piece make a reference to the "New Angel," drawing a different picture, revealing a more destructive face of the angel. Benjamin writes in the second version that the *Angelus Novus*, the "New Angel," presents himself as such an angel of actuality – angels "whose only task before they return to the void is to appear before His throne for a moment and sing His praises."³¹ Having denied the angel to sing his hymn for a while – in 1933 after the Nazis took power Benjamin could not return to his apartment in Berlin where the *Angelus Novus* still hang on the wall³² – the angel has sent "his feminine aspect after the masculine one reproduced in the picture."³³ The physiognomy of this angel reveals a different meaning

27 Scholem 1976, p. 234f.

28 For a convincingly argued critique of Scholem's image of Benjamin see Agamben 1999.

29 Werckmeister 1981, p. 103–112.

30 Benjamin 1996, p. 296.

31 Benjamin 1999b, p. 714.

32 Cf. Scholem 1976, pp. 209f.

33 Benjamin 1999b, p. 715. Without discussing the theological implications of Benjamin's reference to a "feminine aspect" of the masculine angel (at length discussed in Scholem's and later Agamben's readings of this passage), the biographical circumstances have been unraveled by more recent Benjamin scholarship. On Ibiza Benjamin fell in love with the Dutch painter Anne Marie Blaupot ten Cate. Today, in light of the discovered correspondence between her and Benjamin (documented in Luhr 2000, pp. 129–173), we can take it for granted that Blaupot ten Cate is the female

of the seemingly melancholic figure mentioned in the later Theses. In 1933, the now exiled Benjamin writes:

But the angel resembles everything from which I have had to part: the people, and especially the things. He dwells in the things I no longer possess. [...] Indeed, the angel may have been attracted by a person who gives but who goes away empty-handed himself. For he, too, has claws and pointed, razor-sharp pinions, and makes no attempt to fall upon whomever he has his eye on. He looks him steadily in the eye, for a long time, and then retreats – in a series of spasms, but inexorably. Why? To draw him after himself on that road to the future along which he came, and which he knows he has chosen out of his sight."³⁴

At first glance, this angel looks like a melancholic figure of loss ("the angel resembles everything from which I [Benjamin] have had to part"). However, instead of fetishizing an unconscious loss, Benjamin consciously admits that he has already parted from the people and things he sorely misses in exile. Again, Benjamin's angel becomes the screen of the split in the field of vision. The angel looks the mourner who has already parted from the loved object, "steadily in the eye." He does not return Benjamin's gaze upon the lost object. Rather, he actively draws him away from these objects of desire, dragging him "on that road to the future along which he [the angel, S.K.] came." If the angel represents the dimension of loss and, to this extent, the desire for an unattainable object, the angel's gaze cannot coincide with Benjamin's own vision. Rather, the angel looks at him, the one who has already mourned loss and who "goes away empty-handed," "steadily in the eye, for a long time, and then retreats – in a series of spasms, but inexorably." In other words, the angel's fixating eye on the mourner's eye articulates the "objective" dimension of the gaze bound to the impossible object of desire vis-à-vis the mourner's subjective eye. The angel takes out the gaze of Benjamin's eye by looking into his eye. Moreover, the angel steals away the gaze leaving Benjamin's vision "empty-handed." This privative extraction is expressed by the angel's appearance. In contrast to what we see in Klee's watercolor, here the angel "has claws and pointed, razor-sharp pinions." These features enable the angel to almost surgically extract the gaze from the mourner's eye – by just looking into the mourner's eye, stealing his gaze away.

The privative function of the angel is acknowledged by Benjamin. Instead of disavowing the objective split of gaze and eye by means of melan-

reference of Benjamin's enigmatic sketch. In the initial German publication of "Agesilaus Santander" Benjamin's German editor Rolf Tiedemann referred to her only as a Dutch painter and translator (Tiedemann in Benjamin 1985, p. 809). Benjamin's love for her remained unanswered during his lifetime.

34 Benjamin 1999b, p. 715.

cholic identification of the subject with the lost object, he even affirms and radicalizes the destructive aspects of loss. Two years before “Agelilaus Santander,” in 1931 he mentioned Klee’s angel in his essay on Karl Kraus.

The average European has not succeeded in uniting his life with technology, because he has clung to the fetish of creative existence. One must have followed Loos in his struggle with the dragon “ornament,” heard the stellar Esperanto of Scheerbart’s creations, or seen Klee’s *New Angel* (who preferred to free men by taking from them, rather than make them happy by giving to them) to understand a humanity that proves itself by destruction.³⁵

The coupling of happiness and destruction, liberation and taking-away follows Benjamin’s ultra-modernist communist strategy of the early 1930s, radicalizing the implosion of the bourgeois-liberal universe of humanism. Explicitly referring to Klee, he even calls for a “new, positive concept of barbarism,”³⁶ announcing a new life-form, neither derived from a nostalgic past nor a prophetic future but from the poor now and the “dirty diapers of the present.”³⁷ In accordance with the Brechtian maxim “Don’t start from the good old things but the bad new ones,”³⁸ figures like the new barbarian, Klee’s “New Angel” and Kraus’s *Unmensch*, the “monster” or “Un-Human,” articulate a post-humanist experience of impoverishment, proletarianization, and capitalist privation that old humanism can no longer account for. With regard to Freud’s pathologization of melancholy, one could argue that these figures of destructive privation present the truly post-melancholic answer to melancholic faithfulness towards the lost object. Instead of fetishizing the ruins of “good old” humanism, they undertake the only possible form of the latter’s dialectical rescue: They let go the old by destroying the decaying carcass of humanism, taking leave of their past cheerfully. In these destructive figures “mankind is preparing to outlive culture, if need be. And the main thing is that it does so with a laugh. This laughter may occasionally sound barbaric. Well and good.”³⁹ In 1940, however, nothing seems “well and good.” The barbarism of fascism has revealed itself as the true heir of humanist culture. However, we cannot fail to also detect the destructive reverse side of Klee’s *Angelus Novus* in Benjamin’s ninth Thesis “On the Concept of History.”⁴⁰

35 Benjamin 1999b, p. 456.

36 Benjamin 1999b, p. 732.

37 Benjamin 1999b, p. 733.

38 Benjamin 1998a, p. 121.

39 Benjamin 1999b, p. 735.

40 In terms of the Theses, there is a clear link to Benjamin’s short piece on the “Destructive

One could add further philological material and philosophical arguments to counter the conventional melancholic reading of the “Angel of History” by following the latter’s destructive aspect. However, in our context, I suggest to go one step back and revisit the common hypothesis according to which Benjamin’s allegory could function as a melancholic emblem of Benjamin’s entire oeuvre. In light of the earlier stages and transformations of the angel, we are to question readings that follow a retrospective teleology, taking his last text as a politico-philosophical last will. Without diminishing the importance of Benjamin’s Theses, we should remind ourselves that this text was not intended for publication and was meant only to serve as an epistemo-political draft for a future prologue to his unfinished book on Baudelaire.⁴¹ Instead of reading Benjamin through the narrow perspective of his last text, I argue it is more productive to take into account Benjamin’s own theory of melancholy, outlined in his failed habilitation work on *The Origin of German Trauerspiel* from 1928. From there, we can grasp the contradictory layers that form and inform Benjamin’s take on Klee’s *Angelus Novus*. As we will see, Benjamin’s dialectical concept of melancholy lingers over the polar extremes of happy destruction and melancholic fetishization, political-exoteric struggle and philosophical-esoteric brooding.

V.

Already the pre-Marxist Benjamin was convinced that melancholy, however perverse its structure, contains the promise of its own undermining. As many readers of Benjamin have rightly pointed out, his book on German *Trauerspiel*, literally “Mourning Play,” does not strictly distinguish between mourning, *Trauer*, and melancholy. Benjamin’s account on the Baroque is not so much interested in the work of mourning, *Trauerarbeit*, but demonstrates how early modernity was able to *spielen* (play) with *Trauer* (mourning), turning mourning into the (theatrical) staging ground of what he describes the dialectics of melancholy. In his book on *Trauerspiel*, he writes:

Mourning is the state of mind in which feeling revives the emptied world in the form of a mask, and derives an enigmatic satisfaction in contemplating it. Every feeling is bound to an *a priori* object, and the representation of this object is its phenomenology. Accordingly the theory of mourning, which emerged unmistakably as a *pendant*

Character,” also written in 1931, which shares many features of his concept of positive barbarism from 1933. In the preparatory drafts of the Theses, he defines the “function of political utopia” as “to cast light on the sector of that worthy of destruction,” adding the note “My psychology of the Destructive Character and the proletarian one towards a critique of Blanqui” (Benjamin 1974, p. 1244, trans. mine).

41 See Tiedemann’s commentary to “On the Concept of History” in Benjamin 1974, pp. 1223-1227.

to the theory of tragedy, can only be developed in the description of that world which is revealed under the gaze of melancholy [*Blick des Melancholischen*].⁴²

Ferber comments: “The mourner, in Benjamin’s sense, attempts to revive the lost and emptied world in a manner different from that of Freud’s mourner, who eventually accepts the loss and is willing to part from it. In Benjamin’s alternative the mourner, when attempting to awaken life in what is lost, does so by contemplating a mask, the only material residue of the lost empty world, a basically theatrical gesture.”⁴³ Obviously, Benjamin’s use of terminology differs from Freud’s. Not distinguishing between mourning and melancholy, Benjamin presents mourning not only as a theatrical gesture but as a reaction to an actually emptied world: The early modern world of the Baroque reacts to the rise of natural sciences, experiencing itself deprived of its transcendent-medieval eschatology and trans-historical, theologically guaranteed teleology. What could be read as a reaction to cosmological emptiness, which, at the same time, actively revives the world and creates some sort of contemplative satisfaction for the subject (if not enjoyment), Freud places in the interior melancholic psyche. “In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself.”⁴⁴ In other words, for the gaze of melancholy world and world history have become the exterior display of inner emptiness. Yet for Benjamin the borders between inside and outside, the interior of the individual psyche and the external stage of world history, are not clearly distinguishable. For Benjamin the melancholic is the figure who is faithful to the initial loss of transcendent meaning without consciously knowing what this loss actually is and from where it originated: Did the emptied object empty the subject or did the subject herself empty the object in the first place? Reading Benjamin with Lacan (and, to this extent, against Benjamin’s line of argument), it is the “gaze of melancholy” that empties the subject’s vision upon the world. The melancholic gaze does not belong to the subject; it never coincides with the subject’s intention and perspective. Worldly emptiness appears as the symptom of the subject’s failed attempt to gain control over her melancholic gaze. One could read Benjamin’s theory of the origin of *Trauerspiel* as a theory of the theatrical mode of unintentionally working through this split, independently of how one regards this working through as successful or ultimately failed.

Without deciding this question, Benjamin’s account on Baroque melancholy proves instructive if read as a theorization of the split nature of the melancholic field of vision. Drawing on medieval astrology and

42 Benjamin 1998b, p. 139, trans. changed, see also Ferber’s comment in Ferber 2013, p. 38.

43 Ferber 2013, p. 38.

44 Freud, SE 14, p. 246.

the doctrine of temperaments, Benjamin develops the dialectics of the melancholic mind torn between phlegmatic *heaviness* of spirit (“acedia”) and contemplative *lightness* of a brilliant mind. For Benjamin, this dialectics was clearly displayed in the ancient-medieval theory of the impact of planet Saturn on human affairs:

Like melancholy, Saturn too, this spirit of contradictions, endows the soul, on the one hand, with sloth and dullness, on the other, with the power of intelligence and contemplation; like melancholy, Saturn also constantly threatens those who are subject to him, however illustrious they may be in and for themselves, with the dangers of depression or manic ecstasy.⁴⁵

Benjamin was well aware of the ancient-medieval fusion of the Greek myth of Kronos (or *Chronos*) with the later theory of Saturn which coalesce in the Baroque figure of the melancholic. The reference to Saturn and saturnine melancholia can also be traced to Benjamin “Angel of History” which does not only refer to Klee’s watercolor but also echoes his biographical sketch “Agesilaus Santander,” mentioned above. In the latter text he writes that the angel took advantage of the fact that he, Benjamin, “was born under the sign of Saturn – the planet of the slowest revolution, the star of hesitation and delay”⁴⁶. Seen from this angle, the fusion of Saturn and Kronos/Chronos can be read as a temporalization of the spatial (or, rather, topological) torsion in the field of melancholic vision. Missing the unattainable object cause of melancholic desire, objectified in the “gaze of melancholy,” the Saturnine subject is always ‘too late’ or ‘too early’ to grasp the lost object, oscillating between depressive belatedness and ecstatic presence of mind.

VI.

Benjamin’s last Theses can be regarded as a materialist account on the dialectical nature of the melancholic mind, expressed by the split in the melancholic field of vision. The “Angel of History” is always too late and too early to close his wings and (re)gain the lost object of history: a primordial past the restitution of which would be true novelty in contrast to the ‘eternal recurrence of the same.’ Traversing the fantasy of the lost object, the Theses call for both a “present which is not a transition, but in which time takes a stand and has come to a standstill,”⁴⁷ and, at the ‘same time’, an interruption of the paralysis of melancholic fixation. To repeat Comay’s question: “What would it mean to ‘traverse the fantasy’ so as to

45 Benjamin 1998b, p. 149.

46 Benjamin 1999b, p. 715.

47 Benjamin 2003, p. 396.

release the present from a reassuring stasis? To negotiate the switching station between the too early and the too late, between fetishistic 'before' and melancholic 'after', so as to change the terms of both postponement and its obverse?"⁴⁸ Once again, Benjamin's erratic sketch "Agesilaus Santander" could give us a hint: "He [the angel, S.K.] wants happiness – that is to say, the conflict in which the rapture of the unique, the new, the yet unborn is combined with that bliss of experiencing something once more, of possessing once again, of having lived."⁴⁹

Already before Benjamin wrote the Theses, he had been engaged in this dialectical twist, either in temporal or spatial terms. His materialist writing of the mid 1930s circled around the problem of how to traverse and, ultimately, exit the fetishistic-melancholic universe of commodified bourgeois culture and its phantasmagorias. In the *Arcades Project* and his studies on *Baudelaire* – texts that were planned and written as projects of the exiled *Institute for Social Research*⁵⁰ – Benjamin persistently raised the question of the possibility, technique and method of a collective awaking from the mythical dream world of capitalism. Rather than engaging in the critico-ideological task of presenting phantasmagorias as the 'necessarily false' form of capitalist consciousness, he tried to get hold of them as collective dream and wish images. Instead of perceiving phantasmagorias exclusively as part and parcel of 'false consciousness', he was interested in their materiality. Taking them in their sheer material presence as petrified artifacts, phantasmagorias become legible as the material screen of the collective unconscious the content of which are images lingering at the thresholds of myth and awakening. With microscopic precision and meticulous patience, Benjamin traced the exterior of these images in everyday cultural products, architecture, art, and literature of the 19th century. His theory of the "dialectical image" can be summed up as an attempt to exploit the constitutive ambiguity of the specifically commodified dream images in a revolutionary way. As is well known, Benjamin's close friend Theodor W. Adorno, who also functioned as a mediator between him and the exiled *Institute for Social Research*, was not convinced by this approach. In the first "Exposé" of the *Arcades Project* from 1935, Benjamin presented an outline of his theory of the dialectics of awakening, oscillating between dreaming anticipation and belated realization of dream elements.

The realization of dream elements, in the course of waking up, is the paradigm of dialectical thinking. Thus, dialectical thinking is the organ of historical awakening. Every epoch, in fact, not only dreams the one

48 Comay 2005, p. 96.

49 Benjamin 1999b, p. 715.

50 Parts of Benjamin's unfinished book on Baudelaire were published in the Institute's journal, the famous *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, the germ cell of what was later known as Frankfurt School.

to follow but, in dreaming, precipitates its awakening. It bears its end within itself and unfolds it – as Hegel already noticed – by cunning. With the destabilizing of the market economy, we begin to recognize the monuments of the bourgeoisie as ruins even before they have crumbled.⁵¹

It was Benjamin's deliberate Marxist wager that dialectical images as crystallizations of collective dream images could interrupt the continuity of the dream-filled sleep of capitalism and even anticipate the disintegration of phantasmagoric immanence. This stance earned him the fierce criticism of Adorno. In the now famous "Hornberg letter" from 1935 his friend objected that

If you transpose the dialectical image into consciousness as a 'dream', you not only rob the concept of its magic and thereby rather domesticate it, but it is also deprived of precisely that crucial and objective liberating potential [*Schlüsselgewalt*, literally: "power of the keys"] that would legitimate it in materialist terms. The fetish character of the commodity is not a fact of consciousness; it is rather dialectical in character, in the eminent sense that it produces consciousness.⁵²

What triggered Adorno's disapproval relates to a passage of the 1935 *Arcades Exposé* in which Benjamin scandalously stated: "Ambiguity is the appearance of dialectic in images, the law of dialectics at a standstill. This standstill is utopia and the dialectical image, therefore, dream image. Such an image is afforded by the commodity per se: as fetish."⁵³ Juxtaposing fetish and the utopian exit from commodity fetishism without further mediation and even assuming that the constitutive ambiguity of dream images could be dialectically accelerated (and thus implying that exploiting dialectical ambiguities of collective images could bypass the quasi-transcendental validity of commodity fetishism) proved to be incompatible with Adorno's post-Hegelian Marxism. To be sure, in his response Benjamin insisted on the "irruptions of waking consciousness,"⁵⁴ upholding his basic argument. However, in the second half of the 1930s European fascism had already established its power in the domains of the political imaginary, social practice, and state ideology. Independently with whom one sides in the classic debate between Adorno and Benjamin, one cannot fail to recognize that Benjamin's materialist strategy was dedicated to finding the breakages from where the dreaming immanence of capitalist phantasmagorias could be punctuated and, ultimately, exited. He thought he could trace them by radicalizing the dialectical tensions within the

51 Benjamin 1999a, p. 13.

52 Adorno in Benjamin/Adorno 1999, p. 105.

53 Benjamin 1999a, p. 11.

54 Benjamin in Benjamin/Adorno 1999, p. 119.

world of collective dream images, accelerating threshold experiences in their polar extremes (however “mythical” or “ideological” they may be). “That, of course, can happen only through the awakening of a not-yet-conscious knowledge of what has been.”⁵⁵

Benjamin’s contradictory strategy of anticipating a not-yet-conscious-knowledge of something-that-has-been only makes sense if one keeps in mind that for Benjamin history is ontologically incomplete. *History will have been* – and it is this peculiar form of *futur antérieur* that, in terms of the Theses, provides the structural condition of possibility for both the retroactive redemption of missed chances for happiness in the past⁵⁶ and the anticipating pulling of the “emergency brake”⁵⁷ of the catastrophically racing train of capitalist modernity. As Comay succinctly put it: “This defines the peculiar temporality of Benjamin’s messianism – the rescuing of a past futurity and the retroactive stimulation of a ‘not yet’ forever to come.”⁵⁸ It all hinges, however, on how we read this temporal paradox. The idea of messianic time might be a traversing of the phantasms of historical consciousness, ever oscillating between a fetishistic “before” and a melancholic “after.” Such circular traversing in the name of the “Angel of History” could go on forever – unless messianic fantasy rids itself of its own phantasmatic investment into the past. The self-voiding of messianic fantasy is not to be found in melancholic brooding, esoteric wisdom, or theological investigation. Only politics could offer the cure in which the work of mourning takes on a constructive shape. In other words, only the coincidence of political construction with messianic destruction provides a possible way out of the circular movement from ‘not yet’ to ‘too late’. As Benjamin wrote in the alternative version of Thesis 17: “For the revolutionary thinker, the peculiar revolutionary chance offered by every historical moment gets its warrant from the political situation. But it is equally grounded, for this thinker, in the right of entry which the historical moment enjoys vis-à-vis a quite distinct chamber of the past, one which up to that point has been closed and locked. The entrance into this chamber coincides in a strict sense with political action, and it is by means of such entry that political action, however destructive, reveals itself as messianic.”⁵⁹

55 Benjamin 1999a, p. 458 (N I,9).

56 Cf. the second Thesis “On the Concept of History”: “the image of happiness we cherish is thoroughly colored by the time to which the course of our own existence has assigned us. There is happiness – such as could arouse envy in us – only in the air we have breathed, among people we could have talked to, women who could have given themselves to us. In other words, the idea of happiness is indissolubly bound up with the idea of redemption” (Benjamin 2003, p. 389).

57 Benjamin 2003, p. 402.

58 Comay 2005, p. 101.

59 Benjamin 2003, p. 402.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Agamben, Giorgio 1993, *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture*, trans. Ronald L. Martinez, Minneapolis: UP Minnesota.
- 1999, *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, ed. and trans. Daniel Heller Roazen, Stanford: Stanford UP.
- Benjamin, Walter 1974: *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Hermann Schweppenhäuser and Rolf Tiedemann, vol. 1, Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp.
- 1996, *Selected Writings*, ed. Marcus Bollock and Michael W. Jennings, vol. 1, Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard UP.
- 1998a, *Understanding Brecht*, ed. Stanley Mitchell, trans. Anna Bostock, London: Verso.
- 1998b, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne, London: Verso.
- 1999a, *Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, Cambridge, MA.: Belknap Press of Harvard UP.
- 1999b, *Selected Writings*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith, trans. Rodney Livingstone et al., vol. 2.2, Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard UP.
- 2003, *Selected Writings*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, trans. Edmund Jephcott et al., vol. 4, Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard UP.
- 2010 *Über den Begriff der Geschichte*, ed. Gérard Raulet, ‘Werke und Nachlaß: Kritische Gesamtausgabe’, vol. 19, Berlin: Suhrkamp.
- Benjamin, Walter; Adorno, Theodor W. 1999, *The Complete Correspondence 1928–1940*, ed. Henri Lonitz, trans. Nicholas Walker, Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP.
- Comay, Rebecca 2005, *The Sickness of Tradition: Between Melancholia and Fetishism*, in ‘Walter Benjamin and History’, ed. Andrew Benjamin, London, New York: Continuum, 2005. 88-101.
- Evans, Dylan 1996, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, London, New York: Continuum.
- Ferber, Ilit 2013, *Philosophy and Melancholy: Benjamin’s Early Reflections on Theater and Language*, Stanford: Stanford UP.
- Freud, Sigmund, SE 14, *Mourning and Melancholia*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey in collaboration with Anna Freud, trans. James Strachey, vol. 14, London: Hogarth Press.
- Lacan, Jacques 1978, *Book XI: The Four fundamental concepts of psycho-analysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan, The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, New York: Norton.
- Luhr, Geret (ed.) 2000, *Was noch begraben lag. Zu Walter Benjamins Exil. Briefe und Dokumente*, Berlin: Bostelmann u. Siebenhaar.
- Marx, Karl 1843, *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right. Introduction*, online resource, stable URL: <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critique-hpr/intro.htm>>.
- McGettigan, Andrew 2010, *Benjamin and Brecht. Attrition in friendship*, *Radical Philosophy*, 161, 62–64.
- Scholem, Gershom 1976, *Walter Benjamin and His Angel*, in *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis: Selected Essays*, ed. Werner Dannhauser, New York: Schocken.
- Werckmeister, Karl Otto 1996, *Walter Benjamin’s Angel of History, or the Transfiguration of the Revolutionary into the Historian*, in *Critical Inquiry*, 22: 2, 239-267.
- 1981, *Walter Benjamin, Paul Klee und der “Engel der Geschichte”*, in Karl Otto Werckmeister, *Versuche über Paul Klee*, Frankfurt a. M.: Syndikat, 98-123.