

# As flowers turn towards the sun

## Walter Benjamin's Bergsonian image of the past

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Benjamin's theses 'On the Concept of History', the final precipitate of the unfinished *Arcades Project*, was intended to strike at the fundamental pillars of a thought complicit in its times.<sup>1</sup> On the seventieth anniversary of the Ribbentrop–Molotov pact, which prompted its drafting, it is tempting to question the attraction of this set of notes, not intended for publication for fear of 'misinterpretation'.<sup>2</sup> Faced with proliferating readings of its intricacies, the question nonetheless remains how to understand its 'messianism' given the post-religious attitude of its many advocates. This article examines once again the 'Copernican Revolution in historiography' announced by Benjamin, and its metaphysical commitments; here, in the light of its recruitment of a topology of historical time from Bergson's *Matter and Memory*, as mediated via Proust.

Benjamin's critique of chronological progression attacks the understanding of historical time as 'an advance through stages of empty, homogeneous time' (Thesis XIII). In place of uniform instants abstracted from a continuum, Benjamin presents us with the concepts of *Jetztzeit* ('now-time') and past as 'image'. What does this criticism entail, if it is not simply indicating the shortcomings of a historically determined reception of Marx? Benjamin's 'messianism' holds that certain pasts have not passed into non-being: his concept of historical time (which connects less to a philosophy of history as such than to a philosophy of historical *experience*) is concerned with a *re-presenting* (*Vergegenwärtigung*): the return of past time.

Both concepts, *Jetztzeit* and image, lack clear, systematic presentation, creating a philological problem that can only be addressed by mimicking Benjamin's own comportment towards the Jena Romantics. Early in his dissertation on the concept of art criticism in early German Romanticism, Benjamin raises two questions concerning his attempt to 'use the concept of reflection as a methodological grid for the thought of

the early Romantics'. The first is whether the Romantics thought systematically at all or pursued systematic interests in their thinking; the second is 'why, granting the existence of these basic systematic notions, they were registered in discourse so strikingly obscure, even mystifying.' Both of these questions have resonance for an attempt to present the 'systematic interests' here. To the first, Benjamin gave the following response:

their thinking can be *set in relation* to systematic lines of thought ... into a properly chosen system of co-ordinates, no matter whether the Romantics themselves completely specified this system or not.... To demonstrate this systematic referability, however, means nothing other than demonstrating the right and the possibility of a systematic commentary on early Romantic thought *by offering one*.<sup>3</sup>

### Remembrance, not science

Though often quoted, Benjamin's retelling of the story of the chess-playing 'Turk' is rarely read as a critique of a historically determined reception of Marxism. Yet the analogy of the automaton containing a hidden dwarf points to the latent theology in the theory of dialectical progress. 'The puppet called "historical materialism" is to win all the time' (Thesis I). This historical materialism, given in quotation marks, should be contrasted with that developed over the course of the 'Theses'. It is the thought that they are to win in the end that marks a theology ill-suited to the situation facing the working classes. It is 'faith in progress', the belief that history is on their side, that has 'corrupted the German working class' (Thesis XI).

Historical materialism, a vital weapon in the proletariat's cognitive and practical struggle, while not losing its productive, analytical power, is hamstrung by its ideas about time.<sup>4</sup> Or, rather, it is too close to the images of 'vulgar empiricism'; its destiny is to be reappropriated in such a way that revolutionary

action is stymied. Marx and Engels's invocation of the 'self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority in the interests of the immense majority'<sup>5</sup> decays into Josef Dietzgen's 'With each passing day, our cause becomes clearer and our people smarter.'<sup>6</sup> It is from the necessary critique of this faith in progress, a progress 'inexorable' and without limit, that, for Benjamin, a revised historical materialism must be constructed.

There are two main aspects to this construction. First, as counter-idea to progress, Benjamin insists on reading history as a negative totality, a 'catastrophe', whose trajectory is to be interrupted by revolutionary activity. In the 'Paralipomena to "On the Concept of History"', we find: '(Classless society is not the final goal of historical progress but its frequently miscarried, ultimately achieved interruption).' Classless society, a vision of de-alienated humanity, is not an advance in epochal terms (understood as a process rendering history meaningful or rational), but a breach. The continuum of history is to be broken. 'Marx says that revolutions are the locomotive of world history. But perhaps it is quite otherwise. Perhaps revolutions are an attempt by the passengers on this train – namely, the human race – to activate the emergency brake.'<sup>7</sup> This substitution could be seen as replacing one idea of practical reason with another, more productive one.

Benjamin's second concern is directed to the idea of abstract instants out of which time as a whole is composed. This is the time of measurement common to labour and science. Sufficient to account for positivist aims, Benjamin believes he has located a form of historical experience to which justice can be done only through a different set of ideas about historical time. As he writes in Konvolut N of the *Arcades Project*: 'in remembrance [*Eingedenken*] we have an experience that forbids us to conceive of history as fundamentally atheological, little as it may be granted us to write it with immediately theological concepts.'<sup>8</sup> Remembrance as socio-cultural experience escapes positivist historicism's purview. It is from this perspective that Benjamin is concerned to resist the reduction of history to a science, historical materialist or otherwise.<sup>9</sup> History's 'original role' as remembrance operates as an exception, or counter-example, which reorients ideas about history.

Benjamin understands the transition to capitalist modernity and its concomitant class struggle to have precipitated quasi-autonomous forms of social experience which have their own effects and which are not reducible to the economic conditions under which they were formed. That is, their *temporal structure* is held

to be radically distinct from the temporality of developing productive forces, social relations and means of production. It is his contention that the manner in which historical time is experienced in remembrance is intimately connected to the formation and atrophy of revolutionary consciousness.

There is thus a dual tension around the ideas about historical time in Benjamin's work – whether the ideas of historical materialism are *adequate* to the experience of remembrance, but, in addition, what ideas are most *productive* in relation to developing that experience. Benjamin makes two implicit references to Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire*, where each serves as a corrective.

Thus it pleased Social Democrats to conscript the working class into the role of a redeemer of *future* generations. In this way, they cut through the tendons of the working class's best potential. With this training, the class unlearned its hatred and its self-sacrifice [*Opferwillen*], both of which feed on the image of benighted forbears, not on the ideal of freed descendants. (Thesis XII, my translation)

and

History is the object of a construction, whose site forms not from empty, homogeneous time but time filled by now-time [*Jetztzeit*]. So for Robespierre ancient Rome was a past period charged with now-time, which he blasted out from the continuum of history. The French Revolution understood itself as a returned Rome. It cited ancient Rome exactly as fashion cites a costume from past times. Fashion



has the scent for the relevant, wherever it passes in the thickets of yesteryear. Fashion is a tiger's leap into past times. However, the leap of fashion takes place in an arena in which the ruling class still gives the orders. Exactly the same leap in the clear sky of history is the dialectical leap as Marx conceived the Revolution. (Thesis XIV, my translation)

Compare these extracts to the first section of the *Eighteenth Brumaire*, where Marx contrasts the revolution to come with the bourgeois revolutions, which 'borrow [from the past] names, battle cries and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time-honoured disguise and borrowed language'.<sup>10</sup>

The social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot draw its poetry from the past, but only from the future. It cannot begin with itself before it has stripped off all superstition in regard to the past. Earlier revolutions required recollections of past world history in order to drug themselves concerning their content. In order to arrive at its own content, the revolution of the nineteenth century must let the dead bury the dead.<sup>11</sup>

Far from seeing the French Revolution's turn to Rome as an anaesthetic numbing, Benjamin adopts it as a model and insists that the energy for revolution comes from particular past times. For certain periods in the past are charged with a particular tension which can be brought to bear upon current conditions.

*Jetztzeit*, now-time, names a charged, rare conjunction of 'now' and 'then' where, in contrast to ideas of historical linearity, certain pasts have not been left behind in their passage through history. It is important to stress here that the past returns as an 'image' under particular conditions of collective, historical experience. In the *Arcades Project*, Benjamin insists that the past 'decomposes into images not narratives'.<sup>12</sup> The German *Bild* is the site of many difficulties for translation and interpretation, and there is significant work still to be done on its technical specificity in early neo-Kantianism and phenomenology of science. For Benjamin, however, since *Bild* translated *image*, this German legacy conjoins with one from France, that of Georges Sorel and Henri Bergson.

## Sorel

In *Reflections on Violence*, Sorel developed a theory of myth based on his reading of Bergson's early philosophy. These myths, collections of images, constituted for Sorel the 'forces that really move men' which give 'an aspect of complete reality to immediate action' by producing a coherent experience.<sup>13</sup> In this way,

they constitute a revolutionary mind-set. Sorel was concerned to contest a deterministic reading of political change and as such gives weight to a voluntarist concept of political will underlying the unity needed for organization. In the correction of Marx outlined above, we can discern at least the tenor of Sorel's insistence that any revolutionary enterprise trusting in the impact of 'investigations, scientific syntheses and demonstrations' is bound to fail.<sup>14</sup> My sense is that Benjamin is attempting to overcome this verdict in developing his own take on historical materialism as a supplement to the contemporary scientific slant. In particular, it is in the concept of *Anschaulichkeit* that this approach can be most clearly identified:

A central problem of historical materialism that ought to be seen in the end: must the Marxist understanding of history necessarily be acquired at the expense of the perceptibility [*Anschaulichkeit*] of history? Or, in what way is it possible to combine a heightened graphicness [*Anschaulichkeit*] with the conduct of the Marxist method?<sup>15</sup>

Sorel can be seen as setting a problem to which Benjamin responds.

Benjamin's own 'Critique of Violence', in which he adopted the notion of the 'general proletarian strike' from Sorel, remained a fragment in an abandoned political programme.<sup>16</sup> Here, the task for historical analysis is to identify those past occasions in which finite history has been interrupted (albeit in a limited, fruitless fashion) so as to determine the potential constructions and actions which can halt the trajectory of history. Revolutionary political action is generated by the possibility that an undistorted absolute could redeem history, if only certain material conditions were suspended.<sup>17</sup> Its abandoning coincides with Benjamin's first reading of Marx around 1924. If we turn to the work of the 1930s, we can see that several consistent themes – interruption, suspension, caesura – continue into the later work, where the task is still to produce a 'real state of emergency' which 'will improve our position in the struggle with fascism' (Thesis VIII). However, there are three new coordinates operating within the later work: 'image', *Jetztzeit* or 'now-time', and the replacement of reference to the quasi-Romantic absolute with reference to the 'messianic'. To rehearse the epistemological precursor to this 'Copernican Revolution' in historiography we may recall that to resolve the problem of synthetic *a priori* judgement, Kant identifies and breaks with the tradition:

Hitherto it has been assumed that all our knowledge must conform to objects. But all attempts to extend

our knowledge of objects by establishing something in regard to them *a priori*, by means of concepts, have, on this assumption, ended in failure. We must therefore make trial whether we may not have more success in the tasks of metaphysics, if we suppose that objects must conform to our knowledge.<sup>18</sup>

Benjamin's critique of a homogeneous, flat, placid past time, towards which the historian attends, entails a rejection of the 'fixed point which has been found in the 'what has been'.<sup>19</sup> In addition, it demands an account of past times which would be neither uniform, nor empty, but marked by a varying charge or valency.

The past carries with it a temporal index by which it is referred to redemption. There is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one. Our coming was expected on earth. Like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a weak Messianic power, a power to which the past has claim. ... As flowers turn toward the sun, by dint of a secret heliotropism the past strives to turn toward that sun rising in the sky of history. A historical materialist must be aware of this most inconspicuous of transformations. ... The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again. (Theses II–V)

The messianism of the 'Theses' is distinct from the 'divine' [*göttlich*] of essays such as 'Critique of Violence'. We no longer have a model of history constructed on the dualism of fallen time and the absolute, which might possibly arrive.<sup>20</sup> The return of past time in the *Jetztzeit* is not the arrival of any divine violence. Instead, interruption is achieved through a specific conjuncture of charged past time and the present, the *Jetztzeit*, which Benjamin terms variously an 'abridgement' or a 'constellation', in which the continuum of time is 'blasted apart'. Here, the weak messianic power rests with the revolutionary activity of each generation and is not restricted to the deposing, pure violence of the general strike. It is not that any 'inner connection' between 'Critique of Violence' and the 'On the Concept of History' is lacking, but the nature of this connection requires explication. Similarly, it is not that the earlier writings are more theological than the later – the metaphysical coordinates shift along an axis that is not reducible to one between idealist theology and materialist Marxism. Each configuration is an admixture of materialist practice and metaphysical commitment.

What, then, does this 'secret heliotropism' signify? Combined with the emphasis on images it gives a clue to an almost secret engagement with Bergson in Benjamin's later work.<sup>21</sup>

## Bergson

If we pursue this thread by linking it to certain formulations found in the *Arcades Project*, we achieve a crucial insight: the image of the past is analogous to Bergson's 'memory-image'. Benjamin's Copernican Revolution in historiography recruits Bergson's presentation of memory, in *Matter and Memory*, to provide a topological model for the interrelation between past and present. If Bergson's model of memory-images combining with perception in activity were taken as a schematic for historical time, one would produce something akin to the specificity of *Jetztzeit*. The invocation of Bergson here should not be seen as contributing to a 'de-Marxification' of Benjamin.<sup>22</sup> Rather, it specifies the apparatus Benjamin develops to theorize the return of past time in remembrance, as a key to understanding his concern for revolutionary consciousness within communist political engagement.

Besides a handful of references in the *Arcades Project*, Benjamin's explicit discussion of Bergson is limited to his essay 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire'. Though that piece contains a critique, it also claims *Matter and Memory* as one of the 'towering' works of the early twentieth century; he concurs with a work that 'regards the structure of memory as decisive for the philosophical pattern of experience'.<sup>23</sup> The criticisms offered later in that essay regard the estrangement of the *durée* from historical experience and of Bergson's concept of action from politics.

Negotiating a path between materialism and speculative philosophy, Bergson criticizes a dominant yet incomplete scientism by questioning the assumption that perception is directed towards knowledge. He begins from a different axiom: that perception is concerned with action. He postulates that the amount of conscious perception experienced by a subject is directly proportional to the intensity *of* or capacity *for* action. Perceptual consciousness enlarges as the potential scope for action increases.<sup>24</sup> At the animal level, the body as sensory-motor system can respond to stimulus by immediate reaction – this impulse reaction is not action on Bergson's model. Instead it is the capacity to suspend such impulses which marks human development. Memory, distinguished in two ways, plays the vital role in this development: habit, as bodily memory organizes the sensory-motor system, but 'true memory' prolongs the past into the present of immediate perception and produces experience as a duration (*durée*).<sup>25</sup> This is Bergson's finessing of Kant's noumenal freedom of the subject, where *indetermination* marks the distance achieved from the causal laws of matter.

Not only, by memory of former experience, does this consciousness retain the past better and better, so as to organize it with the present in a newer and richer decision; but living with a more intense life, contracting, by its memory of immediate experience, a growing number of external moments in its present duration [*durée*], it becomes more capable of creating acts of which the inner determination, spread over as large a multiplicity of the moments of matter as you please, will pass the more easily through the meshes of necessity.<sup>26</sup>

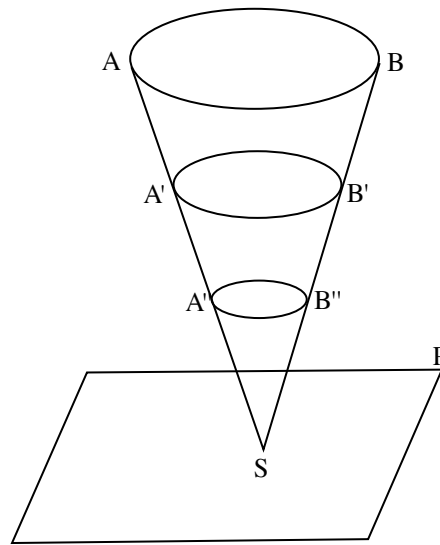
Thus perceptual consciousness is produced in the present, but without memory it would only be passive reaction: these two functions are abstracted in Bergson's theory but, according to him, neither pure perception nor pure memory is encountered in practice. These two elements are dialectically structured. All past psychological life survives in memory, but not all memories are able to become memory-images and so enter into experience. This is because the past is 'Always inhibited by the practical and useful consciousness of the present moment ... by the sensori-motor equilibrium of a nervous system connecting perception with action.'<sup>27</sup> Memory-images can only ally themselves with perception if the present makes an appeal to the particular memory-image or images.<sup>28</sup> 'Virtual, this memory can only become actual by means of the perception which attracts it. Powerless, it borrows life and strength from the present sensation in which it is materialized.'<sup>29</sup>

There are two main features from Bergson repeated in Benjamin. First, the past has a determining relation to the present but relies on the present for its actualization. (The 'founding concept' of historical materialism is 'not progress but actualisation'.<sup>30</sup>) Second, and at the same time, the past as memory-image is a source of that capacity without which operation in the present is condemned to limited reaction. Qualitatively distinct, far from being inert objects of study, *historical* pasts address the present equivocally and heterogeneously. In the *Arcades Project*, this dialectical structure is expressed by the concept of 'legibility':

For the historical index of the images not only says that they belong to a particular time; it says, above all, that they attain to legibility only at a particular time. And indeed, this acceding to 'legibility'

constitutes a specific critical point in the movement at their interior. Every present day is determined by the images that are synchronic with it: each 'now' is the now of a particular recognizability. In it, truth is charged to the bursting point with time. ... It is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words: image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is purely temporal, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: not temporal in nature but figural [*bildlich*].<sup>31</sup>

In laying the philosophical foundations for his concept of *durée*, Bergson had already conducted a critique of the quantifiable, homogeneous time of the instant. For all talk of the soul in Bergson, *Matter and Memory* provides one of the few genuinely novel breaks with the linear representation of time as a series or sequence of instants. Chiefly, the difference is that the past for Bergson has not passed into non-being. With the diagrammatic representation of the cone, he provides an image which can be used to grasp the relation between past and present as conceived in the *Jetztzeit*.



If I represent by a cone SAB, the totality of recollections accumulated in my memory, the base AB, situated in the past remains motionless, while the summit S, which indicates at all times my present, moves forward unceasingly, and unceasingly also touches the moving plane P of my actual representation of the universe.... Over the surface of the base are spread ... my recollections in their totality.... We tend to scatter ourselves over AB in the measure that we detach ourselves from our sensory and motor state to live in the life of dreams; we tend to concentrate ourselves in S in the measure that we attach ourselves more firmly to the present reality...

In point of fact, the normal self never stays in either of these extreme positions; it ... gives to its representations just enough image and just enough idea for them to be able to lend useful aid to the present action.<sup>32</sup>

What is of particular interest here is the attempt to depict the ontological difference between the present universe (P) and past (the base AB). Whether a cone is the best figure to represent the self or subject is moot. There is a constitutive ambiguity in the meaning of S (which could be seen to give a spatial interpretation

to P). On consideration we can see that it is asked to depict three different aspects of Bergson's idea:

1. the temporal interrelation of memory and present, conceived as occupying two ontologically distinct terrains;
2. the attitude or attunement of the subject, more or less reflective, whether turned towards memory or the present; dreaming as different again;
3. the capacity for action – the ability 'to lend useful aid'.

With regard to the last point, the 'apex' of the cone fails to depict the relative zones of indetermination created by the conjunction of memory and present. That aside, its place as the contact point of the present, which 'moves forward unceasingly', and the past, which 'rotates' in this direction, describes the heliotropism of Benjamin's Copernican Revolution in historiography: if AB refers to the past, S to the subject, and P to present reality.<sup>33</sup> If we invert the cone, the analogy of flowers (the cone) turning to the sun (S) rising in the sky (P) is clearer.

For Bergson the past is 'constantly pressing forward ... so as to insert the largest possible part of itself into the present action'.<sup>34</sup> Benjamin's 'weak Messianic power' belonging to each present is to actualize the image of the past through its return. The image utilized by Benjamin of 'telescoping the past through the present'<sup>35</sup> can be combined to better represent the structure of the conjuncture or convergence of AB and P at S. Here I envisage 'telescoping' as naming the manner in which telescopes open and collapse, rather than the function of the lenses. The state of exception, the caesura in the present (P), the 'point of explosion', is the condition of possibility for transformation: AB contracts into P, through the subject S, in what Benjamin terms the 'death of the *intentio*, which thus coincides with the birth of authentic historical time, the time of truth'.<sup>36</sup> The relative extent of the telescoping, the cone compacting along its jointures, determines the proportional 'charge' of the *Jetztzeit*. Thus the purpose of historiography is not to reconstruct the base AB, but to enable the conditions for the transformation of the present, the conjunction as constellation of (AB/P).

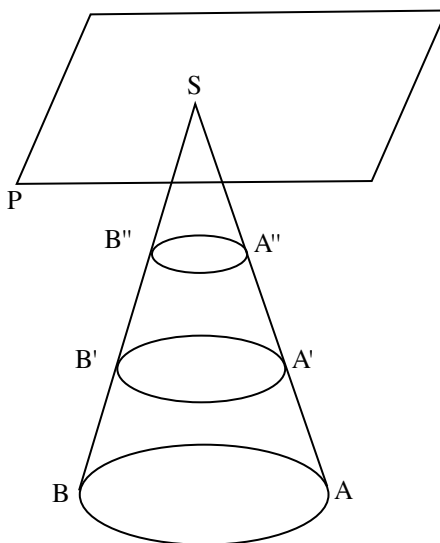
For Bergson, pure memory cannot be annihilated, but its connection to the present can be severed by

accident (aphasia resulting from trauma and injury forms the empirical basis of *Matter and Memory*). Benjamin writes:

A chronicler who recites events ... acts in accordance with the following truth: nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history. To be sure, only a redeemed mankind receives the fullness of its past – which is to say, only for a redeemed mankind has its past become citable in all its moments. (Thesis III)

In the possible absence of such redemption, the past can be lost: 'For that image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably' (Thesis V). On this schematic, fascism is the accident or catastrophe which severs the past from a present to which it turns. Its rise to power at that time marked a trajectory to be interrupted through revolutionary measures.

What is gained by imposing this structure on Benjamin's theses? Besides offering an interpretation of the 'secret heliotropism' which is grounded in Benjamin's insistence on 'image' (*Bild*), it accounts for the return of past time in a charged combination so that its revolutionary aspect is captured. The *Jetztzeit* is *not* the 'mystical *nunc stans*'. Above all, it provides a model,



until now lacking, which would not represent historical time as 'an advance through stages of empty [*leere*], homogeneous time' (Thesis XIII). For Benjamin, historical times vary in terms of their degree of 'charge' (*leer* can indicate 'empty' or 'flat', lacking energy).<sup>37</sup> Only to the extent that past times breach linearity, through potential return, do they become historical.

Historicism contents itself with establishing a causal connection between different moments

of history. But if a fact of the case is a cause, it does not mean that it is already historical. It might become historical, afterwards, through occurrences which might be separated from it by thousands of years. The historian, who commences from this insight, stops letting the series of occurrences run through his fingers like a rosary. He grasps hold of the constellation in which his own epoch is connected with a completely determined earlier one. In this way, he grounds a concept of the present as 'now-time' in which shards of messianic time are violently precipitated. (*Theses*, Appendix A, my translation)

At this point, it is important to distinguish this adaptation of a particular topology from *Matter and Memory* from the metaphysical monism privileged in contemporary neo-Bergsonism: the metaphysics of becoming, intuition and *élan vital* are not present in Benjamin's historicization of memory.<sup>38</sup> For all its musty metaphysics, the cone represents one of the few novel contributions to thinking of memory and time. It is one of the 'fertile parts of his work' that 'falsifies the whole'.<sup>39</sup> It can be extracted and adapted without subscribing to the reflections on the soul in the later sections of *Matter and Memory*. As Osborne has rightly noted, the monism of *élan vital* is insufficient to 'sustain any philosophical concept of history'.<sup>40</sup> However, the earlier account of 'memory' can sustain a structure for maximizing the radical potential of remembrance.

A further qualification is necessary. For Benjamin, 'Bergson emphasized the antagonism between the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa* which arises from memory. But he leads us to believe that turning to the contemplative actualization of the stream of life is a matter of free choice.'<sup>41</sup> Bergson's account depicts a 'well-balanced man' who directs attention and summons memory to give practical aid.<sup>42</sup> In contrast, the full character of Benjamin's account is only appreciated if we factor in Proust's 'immanent critique of Bergson' through the notion of the *mémoire involontaire*. In the 'Paralipomena to the Theses on the Concept of History', Benjamin makes explicit the connection to his notion of the 'dialectical image': 'The dialectical image can be defined as the involuntary memory of redeemed humanity.'<sup>43</sup>

## Proust

In 1925, in the early stages of his shifting affiliation to communism, Benjamin was commissioned to translate Proust's *À la Recherche du temps perdu* in conjunction with Franz Hessel: only the early volumes appeared before the publisher went bust. A traditional intellectual history might see this as the key moment in Benjamin's development away from his self-described 'German period'. If Proust's *À la Recherche* is an attempt to 'produce experience synthetically' under damaged modern conditions, then Benjamin's historiography seeks to produce historico-political experience synthetically under conditions of increasing barbarism. Its task is to find and somehow present that which the collective has lived through but which can no longer be assimilated into experience to produce a *charge* directed towards changed conditions. As Proust writes,

we ought to fear ... even the past, which often comes to life for us only when the future has come and gone – and not only the past which we discover after the event but the past which we have long kept stored within ourselves and suddenly learn how to interpret.<sup>44</sup>

In the hope of harnessing this fearful power of the past, Benjamin seeks a 'unique experience' with it that shocks or strikes, but generates a 'revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past'.<sup>45</sup>

The 'messianic' does not name an alternative order, register or era of time. It is a model of conjunctural past time returning within a particular form of experience, remembrance; there is a plurality of forms of time in Benjamin's work, but remembrance is the one with political relevance.<sup>46</sup> It does not conceptualize history as a whole – it is mortgaged to revolutionary energetics. As such, there is further reconstructive work to be done that would position it more broadly within a totalizing philosophy of history – a history of all possible histories. What comes back in the return of past time? What is the role of the historian? What is the relation between remembrance and revolutionary consciousness?

To start with the first question. In one sense, one could read the return of past time in the *Jetztzeit* as the liberation of its potential energy: 'this work – comparable, in method, to the splitting of the atom – liberates the enormous energies of history that are bound up in the "once upon a time" of classical historiography.'<sup>47</sup> This would distinguish the 'Copernican revolution' from the time travel of popular culture. Similarly, on this reading, it is hard to support the moral interpretation offered by Axel Honneth. Although Honneth recognizes the connection to Bergson, his insistence that it is a model for the restitution of past injustices through communicative engagement with dead victims sets the 'Theses' a test it cannot pass.<sup>48</sup> As Honneth concludes, whatever form of reanimation occurs, it cannot bring the dead back as 'interacting participants in a moral community'.<sup>49</sup> However, one does not need to see the 'images' as revenants to whom a debt can now be settled, but rather as a force with transformative potential. With this in mind, the references to redemption ought not to be understood with reference to 'resurrection'. In the quotation from the third thesis above, the 'past become[s] citable in all its moments'; that is, available to voluntary memory. On a single occasion, Benjamin references the Gnostic doctrine of apocatastasis: the redemptive return of the whole of past time in a single instant, the abridgement of the entire course of history.<sup>50</sup> In diagrammatic form,

point S would disappear, as P and the entire base AB form a compacted cylinder before contracting into a vanishing point.

From this discussion of the 'energetics' of the *Jetztzeit*, we can see that Benjamin is not concerned with a ceaseless mourning for the lost oppressed. Although Benjamin advocates 'honouring the nameless' and can be seen as formative for 'writing history from below' (especially Thesis VII), the materialist historian 'invites the dead to the banquet table' in order to 'bring the present into a critical state'.<sup>51</sup> The task of the historian is not simply mapping and constellating those periods of past *Jetztzeit*, but synthesizing the conditions for remembrance to be activated as a revolutionary force. Benjamin's approach to historiography should not be understood separated from the outline of the *operative* writer's activity in 'The Author as Producer'.<sup>52</sup> Honneth's remarks that 'Benjamin undertakes the difficult, indeed daring, attempt, to transfer Proust's narrative techniques to the depiction of history'<sup>53</sup> should be viewed from this broader perspective.

Memory in Bergson appears as a capacity managed by the subject with mastery over its functions. The emphasis on the involuntary in Benjamin raises questions about the nature of revolutionary consciousness. The energy of past-time overwhelms the practical judgement of the rational subject. Indeed, with the cessation of passive happening (*die Stillstellung des Geschehens*), the creation of a political zone of indetermination, a state of exception (*Ausnahmezustand*), comes the possibility of that which was once gone writing its own history (Thesis XVI). This ambiguity captures the idea that the subject is here the site of rupture.

In the *Theses*, Benjamin is aware throughout of the 'high price our accustomed thinking will have to pay' to avoid complicity or conformism (Thesis X). To recapitulate, the worry surrounding certain of Marx's conceptions is that they are too similar to certain bourgeois images, which will appropriate or distort their radical charge. Ready-made, inherited, habitual concepts which capture something of passing reality in so far as they are directed at practical accomplishment represent for Bergson what must be overcome to reach a true, metaphysical intuition. If, for Bergson, the 'mind must do itself violence, reverse the operation by which it ordinarily thinks, continually upsetting its categories, or rather, recasting them',<sup>54</sup> this is transformed by Benjamin's concern to struggle against fascism.

Alongside this general theme, two supplementary concerns must be raised. Benjamin opposes the master-

ful, bourgeois subject in control of a diminished, unproductive experience; in so doing, he co-opts intoxication, a theme present throughout his writings. To win the 'energies of intoxication for the revolution' involves rejecting the 'sclerotic liberal-moral-humanistic ideal of freedom' which figures as autonomous choice and calculation.<sup>55</sup> Moreover, Benjamin accepts that certain images are necessary for the formation of revolutionary consciousness, where 'spiritual forces' manifest themselves as 'courage, humour, cunning and fortitude' (Thesis IV). This sits uneasily with some commentators.<sup>56</sup> These reservations cannot be dismissed as a jejune reluctance to face up to the sacrifices and deleterious impact of drawn-out political engagement. We perhaps need only recall the citation from Mussolini which has led many on the left to flee from this kind of 'irrationalism'. 'I owe most to Georges Sorel. This master of syndicalism by his rough theories of revolutionary tactics has contributed most to form the discipline, energy and power of the fascist cohorts.'<sup>57</sup> Images as 'myths' to dupe cannon fodder would be ideology and propaganda in the worst sense. There is no means to sidestep this problem in Benjamin, since the insistence on remembrance and image prevents any separation, *à la* Althusser, between science and ideology. What distinguishes the images of fascism from those proposed by Benjamin? If we remain with the idea of an intellectual elite arguing over which images best capture the minds of the proletariat, then we are stuck with Sorel.

It is not possible here to trace this complex through Benjamin's work. I can only offer three preliminary indications. First, as already indicated, Benjamin's interest in 'images' appears as a response to the problem set by Sorel, not an acceptance of its terms. In the concept of *Anschaulichkeit* is located an effort to provide a supplement to historical materialism – to address a potential weakness. The influence of *Reflections on Violence* marks it out as a real historical force with which to wrestle. Second, contra Sorel's elitism, the efforts of the 'operative writer' set out in 'The Author as Producer' are directed against the division of labour which would divide the intellectual who attempts to instigate the 'real state of emergency' from the intoxicated agents of revolutionary action.<sup>58</sup> Third, Benjamin produced extensive writings on experience, its various forms, and the conditions pertaining to it, which provide resources to displace naive notions of political will and agency and give new inflection to the old problem of enthusiasm. Revolutionary consciousness is not simply characterized by the absence of sober, practical judgement. Whilst the overcoming of



the latter figures in Benjamin as masochism, destructive character and intoxication, it also does so, *pace* Proust, as happiness.<sup>59</sup>

## Alchemy

Convinced of a political crisis in the present (indeed, the imminent possibility of absolute destruction), the historical materialist seeks to 'brush history against the grain' to find that which is lost or effaced in the historical victory parade depicted in common sense. In producing a constellation between the 'then' of the oppressed past and the 'now' of the present, the historical materialist experiences a time no longer inert or gone. Rather than infinite mourning for the lost other, or salutary narratives ruined by historicist prejudices, the historical materialist taps the political unconscious by seeking that image which steals past the conformist intellect to unanchor that deeply buried, unknown catalyst; to chip away at an enervating sadness to glimpse and effect a transformed life. Paradoxically, under Benjamin's transformation, the historical materialist becomes an alchemist seeking to distil from profane experience a collective Damascene illumination.

It is a historical index to the changed conditions of philosophical experience that 'Proustian communism' can be developed as something to which the masses can be won. Honneth, Jameson and Wohlfarth conclude that interest today cannot lie in the implementation of its politics or historiography and that in this regard Benjamin is not 'our contemporary'.<sup>60</sup> Nevertheless, the desire for its relevance to persist, for it to be contemporary, reverberates with Adorno's reversal of Croce's question: opposed to asking 'what is living and what is dead' in Benjamin, we intuit political experience to have regressed and atrophied through the cumulative impact of the twentieth century.<sup>61</sup> The pulse of intellectual life that animates that brief, gnomic touchstone continually forces itself upon an imagination ill-served by what appears today.

As a counterpoint, or stimulus to a broader endeavour, the very 'strangeness' of what has been presented here may have some value. Adorno notes that in Benjamin's work 'The absurd is presented as though it were self-evident, in order to disempower what is self-evident.'<sup>62</sup> This insight stimulates the question: could an alternative conception of time appear as anything other than metaphysical today? A revanchist 'common sense' burrowing its way out from under the fragmenting socialist palimpsest is eager to assert the real as rational, and the speculative irrational. Sensed good fortune at coming to this text late may rather indicate a thoroughly depoliticized existence.

The generation of a concept of history that resists the realized unreason of contingency and counterfactual historiography will require a metaphysical armature in order to put the crucial question to the eternalized present of governmental administration. Adorno, in his most Benjaminian moment, wrote: 'beside the *demand* thus placed on *thought*, the question of the reality or unreality of redemption itself hardly matters.'<sup>63</sup> If we wager that thought, beyond its ability to record, can contribute to stripping the future of its cruel wonders, its barbaric magic, then Benjamin lies ahead of us as more than an attenuated emblem of melancholy.

## Notes

1. Walter Benjamin, 'Über den Begriff der Geschichte', in *Illuminationen*, Surhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 1977, pp. 251–61; 'On the Concept of History', trans. Harry Zohn, in *Selected Writings*, Volume 4: 1938–1940, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, Belknap, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA and London, 2003, pp. 389–400. Hereafter citations are embedded in the main text with references to the numbered thesis.
2. 'I don't need to inform you that I have not the least intention of publishing these notes (and certainly not in the form in which they have been presented to you). They would open up the floodgates to enthusiastic misinterpretation.' Walter Benjamin, Letter to Gretel Adorno (April 1940), cited in Esther Leslie, *Walter Benjamin: Overpowering Conformism*, Pluto Press, London, 2000, p. 207.
3. Walter Benjamin, 'The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism' (1920), trans. David Lachtermann, Howard Eiland and Ian Balfour, in *Selected Writings*, Volume 1: 1913–1926, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, Belknap, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA and London, 1996, pp. 116–200; p. 135, italics added.
4. I concur with Peter Osborne's reading that historical materialism is more important for Benjamin as the living, intellectual tradition of Communism than as the theory of Marxism. See Peter Osborne, 'Small-scale Victories, Large-scale Defeats', in Peter Osborne and Andrew Benjamin, eds, *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy: Destruction and Experience*, Clinamen Press, Manchester, 2000, pp. 57–107; p. 68.
5. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, trans. Samuel Moore, Penguin, London, 1967, p. 92.
6. Cited by Benjamin in Thesis XIII.
7. Walter Benjamin, 'Paralipomena to "On the Concept of History"', trans. Edmund Jephcott and Howard Eiland, in *Selected Writings*, Volume 4: 1938–1940, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, Belknap, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA and London, 2003, pp. 401–11; p. 402.
8. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, Belknap, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA and London, 1999, Konvolut N8,1, p. 471.
9. Benjamin, 'Paralipomena', p. 401.
10. Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*,

- Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1934, p. 11.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 12–13.
  12. It is not clear whether this latter claim has transhistorical validity, or whether the emphasis on image connects to the destructive character of modernity such that traditional modes of communication are no longer able to express modern experience. Cf. Walter Benjamin, 'The Storyteller', in *Illuminations*, pp. 83–107.
  13. Georges Sorel, *Reflections on Violence* (1908), trans. T.E. Hulme and J. Roth, Free Press, Glencoe IL, 1950, pp. 48–9.
  14. *Ibid.*, p. 117.
  15. *Arcades Project*, Konvolut N2,6, p. 461 (translation altered).
  16. Walter Benjamin, 'Critique of Violence' (1921), trans. Edmund Jephcott, in *Selected Writings*, Volume 1: 1913–1926, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, Belknap, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA and London, 1996, pp. 236–52.
  17. History is depicted as an institutional cycle of law-making and law-preserving violence and should be considered alongside Sorel's adoption of Vico's notions of the waxing (*corsi*) and waning (*recorsi*) of epochs. The law-bound nexus of guilt (*Schuldzusammenhang*) prevents the unmediated appearance of the Absolute in experience. A weak divine (*göttlich*) power cannot break through these constraining structures in anything other than a distorted form. Benjamin recruits Sorel's revolutionary syndicalism to advocate their destruction (*Entsetzung*). Structurally, the argument is identical to that disjunction presented by Johannes de Silentio in *Fear and Trembling: either* Abraham is justified by the possibility of a direct relationship to God *or* there is no faith. For the early Benjamin, *either* there is the possibility of divine violence, which expiates in its undistorted arrival, *or* there is only the cycle of lawful order heading for catastrophe. Theology here cannot be 'a guaranteed economics of salvation'. Only 'on the abolition of state power [is] a new historical epoch founded' ('Critique of Violence', p. 252). If we momentarily introduce a different terminology, then we can say that fidelity in Benjamin's early practice is towards the possible appearance of the absolute as the only hope for finite history.
  18. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith, Macmillan, London, 1933, 'Preface to Second Edition', B xvi, p. 22.
  19. 'The Copernican revolution in historical perception is as follows. Formerly it was thought that a fixed point had been found in the "what has been," and one saw the present engaged in tentatively concentrating the forces of knowledge on this ground. Now this relation is to be overturned, and what has been is to acquire its dialectical fixation through the synthesis which awakening achieves with the opposing dream images. Politics attains primacy over history. Indeed, historical "facts" becomes something that just now happened to us, just now struck us: to establish them is the affair of memory. ... What Proust intends with the experimental rearrangement of furniture, what Bloch recognizes as the darkness of the lived moment, is nothing other than what here has been secured on the level of historical, and collectively.' Walter Benjamin, 'The Arcades of Paris' in *The Arcades Project*, pp. 873–84; p. 883.
  20. In Irving Wohlfarth's recent three-part essay in *Radical Philosophy*, it is this systematic shift that is absent from his consideration of Benjamin's continued adherence to aspects of his early anarchism. Irving Wohlfarth, 'Entsetzen: Walter Benjamin and the Red Army Faction, Part One', *Radical Philosophy* 152, November/December 2008, pp. 7–20; 'Critique of Violence – The Deposing of Law: Walter Benjamin and the Red Army Faction, Part Two', *Radical Philosophy* 153, January/February 2009, pp. 13–26; 'Spectres of Anarchy: Walter Benjamin and the Red Army Faction, Part Three', *Radical Philosophy* 154, March/April 2009, pp. 9–24.
  21. For further references to the connection to Bergson, see Axel Honneth, 'A Communicative Disclosure of the Past: On the Relation between Anthropology and Philosophy of History in Walter Benjamin', trans. John Farrell, *New Formations* 20, Summer 1993, pp. 83–94.
  22. See: Leslie, *Walter Benjamin*; and T.J. Clark, 'Should Benjamin Have Read Marx?', *Boundary 2*, vol. 30, no. 1, Summer 2003, pp. 31–49.
  23. 'Towering above this literature is Bergson's early monumental work, *Matière et mémoire*. ... The title suggests that it regards the structure of memory as decisive for the philosophical pattern of experience. Experience is indeed a matter of tradition, in collective existence as well as private life. It is less the product of facts firmly anchored in memory than of a convergence in memory of accumulated and frequently unconscious data. It is not, however, Bergson's intention to attach any specific historical label to memory. On the contrary, he rejects any historical determination of memory.' Walter Benjamin, 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire' (1939), in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt, Fontana, London, 1992, pp. 152–96; pp. 153–4.
  24. Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory* (1896), trans. N.M. Paul and W.S. Palmer, Zone Books, New York, 1991, p. 32.
  25. 'any perception ... always occupies a certain *durée* and involves, consequently, an effort of memory which prolongs, one into another, a plurality of moments.' *Ibid.*, p. 34.
  26. *Ibid.*, p. 242–3 (translation altered).
  27. *Ibid.*, p. 95.
  28. *Ibid.*, pp. 152–3.
  29. *Ibid.*, pp. 127.
  30. *Arcades Project*, Konvolut N2,2, p. 460.
  31. *Arcades Project*, Konvolut N3,1, p. 463.
  32. Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, pp. 152–63.
  33. 'memory, laden with the whole of the past, responds to the appeal of the present state by two simultaneous movements, one of translation, by which it moves in its entirety to meet experience, thus contracting more or less, though without dividing, with a view to action; and the other of rotation on itself, by which it turns towards the situation of the moment, presenting to it that side of itself which may prove to be the most useful.' *Ibid.*, pp. 168–9.
  34. *Ibid.*
  35. *Arcades Project*, Konvolut N7a,3, p. 471.
  36. *Ibid.*, Konvolut N3,1, p. 463.
  37. The German term *homogene* must be translated as 'homogeneous' in the mathematical sense to indicate uniformity of degree, not the biological term 'homogenous' indicating common descent.
  38. Deleuze's reference to the cone in *Bergsonism* is motivated by the account of virtuality – the *coexistence* of the present and the past. It is not concerned with *historical* time. Gilles Deleuze, *Bergsonism* (1966), trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam, Zone Books, New

- York, 1991, pp. 59–60.
39. Max Horkheimer, 'On Bergson's Metaphysics of Time' (1934), trans. Peter Thomas, rev. Stewart Martin, *Radical Philosophy* 131, May/June 2005, pp. 9–19; p. 10.
  40. Peter Osborne, 'Marx and the Philosophy of Time', *Radical Philosophy* 147, January/February 2008, pp. 15–22; p. 15.
  41. Benjamin, 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire', p. 154.
  42. Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, p. 153.
  43. Benjamin, 'Paralipomena', p. 403.
  44. Marcel Proust, *The Captive* (1923), trans. C.K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin, rev. D.J. Enright, Vintage, London, 1996, p. 91.
  45. The Bergsonian companion to Proust is Borges's involuntary dreamer 'Funes the Memorious', who, having been paralysed in a riding accident, 'never moved from his cot' and deprived of sensori-motor activity and the organizing function of habit is incapable of even the abstraction that would untangle the 'garbage heap' of his memory and move beyond the limited, incurable associations that mark his cognitive life. Jorge Luis Borges, 'Funes the Memorious', trans. James E. Irby, in *Labyrinths*, Penguin, London, 1970, pp. 87–95. Cf. Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, p. 155: 'A human being who should dream his life instead of living it would no doubt thus keep before his eyes at each moment the infinite multitude of details of his past history.'
  46. Cf. Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA and London, pp. 242–3. Other examples of forms of experience which determine different temporalities include those of Benjamin's core 'types': the gambler, the flâneur and the collector. Of the last, he writes: 'At the conclusion of *Matière et Mémoire*, Bergson develops this idea that perception is a function of time. If, let us say, we were to live vis-à-vis some things more calmly and vis-à-vis others more rapidly according to a different rhythm, there would be nothing "subsistent" for us, but instead everything would happen right before our eyes: everything would strike us. But this is the way things are for the great collector. They strike him. How he himself pursues and encounters them, what changes in the ensemble of items are effected by a newly supervening item – all this shows him his affairs in constant flux.' *Arcades Project*, Konvolut H1a,5, p. 206. The reference is to *Matter and Memory*, p. 207.
  47. *Arcades Project*, Konvolut N3,4, p. 463.
  48. 'What represents the core of Benjamin's theory is the conviction that only magical forms of experience can provide the methodological model for an attitude within which we can disclose the past in such a way that the injustices perpetrated there can be atoned for retrospectively in the present.' Honneth, 'A Communicative Disclosure of the Past', p. 91.
  49. *Ibid.*, p. 92.
  50. 'And so on, ad infinitum, until the entire past is brought into the present in a historical apocatastasis.' *Arcades Project*, Konvolut N1a,3, p. 459. On the notion of abridgement compare these passages: Benjamin – "'Now-time'", which as a model of Messianic time, comprises the entire history of mankind in a monstrous abbreviation, coincides exactly with the stature which the history of mankind has in the universe' (*Thesis XVII*, translation altered); Bergson – 'And would not the whole of history be contained in a very short time for a consciousness at a higher degree of tension than our own, which should watch the development of humanity while contracting it ... into the great phases of evolution [condensing periods into a] few more differentiated moments of an intenser life, and in thus summing up a very long history' (*Matter and Memory*, pp. 207–8).
  51. *Arcades Project*, Konvolut N15,2 and N7a,5, pp. 481 and 471.
  52. Walter Benjamin, 'Author as Producer' (1934), trans. Anna Bostock, in *Understanding Brecht*, Verso, London, 1973, pp. 85–103.
  53. Honneth, 'A Communicative Disclosure of the Past', p. 93.
  54. Henri Bergson, 'Introduction to Metaphysics' (1903), trans. Mabelle Andison, in *Creative Mind: Introduction to Metaphysics*, Philosophical Library, Michigan, 1946, p. 190.
  55. Walter Benjamin, 'Surrealism' (1929), trans. Edmund Jephcott, in *Selected Writings*, Volume 2: 1927–1934, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith, Belknap, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA and London, 1999, pp. 207–21; p. 215.
  56. Terry Eagleton, for example: 'The surrealists, Benjamin writes, perceived an ecstatic or anarchic component in every revolutionary act; but, he quickly adds, "to place the accent exclusively on it would be to subordinate the methodical and disciplinary preparation for revolution entirely to a praxis oscillating between fitness exercises and celebration in advance". Precisely such a subordination scars Benjamin's own work, all the way from the spasmodic Sorelian violence espoused in his early ultra-leftist apocalypticism to the revolutionary Messianism and political poetry of the *Theses* themselves.' Terry Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin: Towards a Revolutionary Criticism*, Verso, London, 1981, p. 177.
  57. Cited in Arthur Versluis, *The New Inquisitions: Heretic-hunting and the Intellectual Origins of Modern Totalitarianism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2006, p. 39.
  58. As noted in 'The Author as Producer', the intellectual's solidarity with the working class can never be immediate or unmediated – the concern must be to address functional relationships in transforming the mediating conditions. Benjamin, 'The Author as Producer', p. 102.
  59. '[H]istory is not simply a science but also and not least a form of remembrance [*Eingedenken*]. What science has "determined," remembrance can modify. Such mindfulness can make the incomplete (happiness) into something complete, and the complete (suffering) into something incomplete.' *Arcades Project*, Konvolut N8,1, p. 471.
  60. Honneth, 'A Communicative Disclosure of the Past', p. 94. Wohlfarth: 'A modern secular mind cannot but be disconcerted (*entsetzt*) by these unargued, unarguable fiats, which raise the following questions in the present context.' 'Critique of Violence – The Deposing of Law', p. 21. Fredric Jameson, 'An Unfinished Project', *London Review of Books*, 3 August 1995, pp. 8–9.
  61. Theodor Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen, MIT Press, Cambridge MA and London, 1993, p. 1.
  62. Theodor Adorno, 'Benjamin's *Einbahnstrasse*', trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen, in *Notes to Literature*, Volume 2, Columbia University Press, New York, 1992, p. 323.
  63. Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, Verso, London, 1997, p. 247.