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FUTURES

Specters and Angels: Benjamin and Derrida

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

> If Benjamin's generation was forced to recognize that "capitalism will not die a natural death," ours has had to learn the further lesson that capitalism is not, for the foreseeable future, going to die at all.
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> —Irving Wohlfarth, "The Measure of the Possible, the Weight of the Real, and the Heat of the Moment"

From every area of contemporary discourse, we know that the pace of contemporary social, cultural, economic, and political change is unprecedented. Technological obsolescence occurs at the inception of production, deracination in human lives is ubiquitous and normal, divorce rates have almost caught up with marriage rates, yesterday's deal is history, today's corporate giant is the material of tomorrow's dissolved or merged identity. If all that was solid melted into air in the last century, today's economic, social, and technological transforma-

tions occur so rapidly that they often do not even achieve solidity before metamorphosing into something else. This much we know and recount to ourselves regularly. But we do not know much about the relationship of this pace of change to the history that shapes and constrains it, nor to the future that it heralds. On a daily basis we live the paradox that the most rapid-paced epoch in human history harbors a future that is both radically uncertain and profoundly beyond the grasp of the inhabitants of the present. Moving at such speed without any sense of control or predictability, we greet both past and future with bewilderment and anxiety. As a consequence, we inheritors of a radically disenchanted universe feel a greater political impotence than humans may have ever felt before, even as we occupy a global order more saturated by human power than ever before. Power without purpose, power without lines of determination, power without end in every sense of the word.

Perhaps at no other historical moment has Benjamin's angel been such a poignant signifier of our predicament. Without vision or a strong sense of agency, we are blown backward into the future as debris piles up in the single catastrophe that is history beyond and outside of human invention or intervention, a history of both dramatic and subtle unfreedom. We cannot close our wings against the storm, cannot not be moved—that moment has been extinguished by contemporary history itself. Our capacity to intervene in the trajectory and the wide range of effects of capital (as the most powerful moving force in modernity), to whatever extent it once existed, appears exhausted. So history surges on, but with no promise that past suffering will be redeemed, with no promise of eventual worldwide or even local emancipation, well-being, wisdom, or reduction of suffering. *Nihilistic* seems far too thin a term to describe such circumstances.

How are we to rectify this condition, which is to say, how are we to rectify our impotence in the face of a present and future of driven, rushing aimlessness? Part of the answer lies in how we might refigure the relation of the present to the past, how we might articulate the mass and force of the past in the present when they can no longer be captured by a progressive narrative. At stake in this rethinking are two questions: what kind of historical consciousness is possible and appropriate for contemporary political critique and analysis, and how

can agency be derived to make a more just, emancipatory, or felicitous future order. To see how urgently answers to both are needed, we might consider two instances of contemporary anxiety and confusion about historical political thinking, one drawn from the political domain and one from academic debates.

In contemporary political parlance, the relation of the present to the past is most often figured through idealizations and demonizations of particular epochs or individuals on the one hand, and reparations and apologies for past wrongs on the other. Especially with regard to the latter, we might ask what this figuring covers over, defers, or symptomatizes in the present. How does it elide the most difficult questions about the bearing of the past on the present? German repayments to European Jewish estates looted in the 1930s, White House apologies to African Americans for enslaving or mistreating them, state compensation to Japanese Americans from California sent to internment camps during World War II, lawsuits concerning reparations to Native Americans for stolen lands and breached treaties, China's resentment about Japan's failure to issue a written apology for its atrocities in the 1930s, even civil litigation by families who have suffered from wrongful verdicts in murder trials—what is the significance of conceiving historical trauma in terms of guilt, victimization, and, above all, reparation and apology? Once guilt is established and a measure of victimization secured by an apology or by material compensation, is the historical event presumed to be concluded, sealed as past, "healed," or brought to "closure"? Is this referral to the law and to an economy of debt and payment a way of attempting to designate the past as really past, and to liberate the present from that past? What anxiety about the way these past traumas *live* in the present might be signified by such impulses to resolve them through a discursive structure of wrong, debt, and payment?

Another sign of contemporary anxiety about history's bearing on the present appears in a particular mode of criticizing poststructuralist challenges to the status of materiality and objectivity in history. Responding to formulations that challenge notions of brute facticity and that, more generally, call into question objectivist or positivist accounts of history, many of these critics proclaim: "But the Holocaust really happened! It involved massive dislocation, human slaughter,

and obliteration of communities, estates, artifacts, and archives." There are two important political questions begged in the rejoinder that something "happened" in history: First, what account of this happening has the most veracity and why? Second, what are the meanings of this historical occurrence for political and cultural life in the present? It is the second of these questions that concerns us here. Of course the Holocaust happened, but to itemize the devastation that it wrought tells us nothing about what it means for those who, sixty years later, live in its historical aftermath in different ways in different parts of the world. Thus, an insistence on the materiality or facticity of the Holocaust is just as dodgy about the question of how the Holocaust lives in the present as it claims its putative opposition to be. The questions about history that matter for the political present are not answered by a factually precise accounting of the North American slave trade in the nineteenth century, or by a listing of the homosexuals, gypsies, Jews, and communists killed by European fascists in the 1930s and 1940s. Rather, the political questions produced by the current crisis in historiography and by the breakdown of a progressive historical metanarrative include these: How do the histories of slavery, colonialism, or Nazism in North America and Europe contour contemporary political, social, and cultural life? How do these histories constrain, produce, or occupy the present? No empirical or materialist history can answer these questions, yet that very failing appears to be what such histories are warring against both in their claims to truth and in their reproaches of those histories that call into question the possibility of an empirically "true" account. The complex *political* problem of the relation between past and present, and of both to the future, is resolved by neither facts nor truth. While scholars of postcolonial orders understand this well, precisely because colonial histories discursively suffuse the postcolonial present so overtly, it is no small irony that the hegemonic historiography of the metropoles still holds out objectivity as a form of historical and political salvation.

One problem framing this chapter thus concerns the failure of conventional historiographies to provide useful maps for developing historically conscious political orientation in the present; the second concerns the ground of political motivation in the present, perhaps most succinctly characterized as a crisis in what Hannah Arendt termed

"love of the world."[1] Ours is a present that is hurtled into the future without regard for human attachments, needs, or capacities. A present that dishonors the past by erasing it with unprecedented speed and indifference. A present that equates the recent past with the anachronistic, with insufficient *technē* to survive. A present in which a knowledgeable politician is a policy wonk rather than a reader of political histories. A present whose inevitable and rapid eclipse is uppermost in the political consciousness of its inhabitants. How can such a present be loved—and if it cannot be, what are our investments in addressing its ills? What is there to attach to in a world of such incessant and rapid transformations? How can one sufficiently love the world generated by this present to want to do right by it? From what depth of feeling, conventionally cultivated through lifelong and generations-old attachments and values, can such a time be simultaneously embraced—providing the basis for love and loyalty—and challenged—providing the basis for political activism? If there are no such sources of continuity to draw on, then from what wellspring do we affirm our time, engage our dilemmas, define our imperatives? What incites our grievances and spurs our hopes?

A time of incessant change, Sheldon Wolin reminds us, is also a time saturated with loss. In his consideration of "invocation" as a figure for the potential value of political theory and political theorists, he recalls that invocation in ancient Rome "was an appeal to a departed deity," an effort to recover something lost. Thus, as a practice, "invocation may be said to imply memory and to enjoin recovery."[2] Walter Benjamin, writing half a century earlier in another era that both confounded the modernist ideal of progress and harbored unfathomable orders of power and loss, invoked an angel to refigure the presence of the past in political thought. The angel signified memory and reparation as well as despair, hope, and a disguised meaning in—and thus a partial redemption of—human suffering. More recently, Jacques Derrida has revisited Marx's texts to develop an image of the present as inhabited by specters and ghosts of the past and future. Deities, angels, specters, and ghosts . . . what are we to make of these creatures rising from the pens of radical thinkers in the twentieth century as they attempt to grasp our relation to the past and future, and in particular as they attempt to articulate the prospects for a postfoundational for-

mulation of justice? What leads a radical democrat to speak of deities, a Marxist literary critic to invoke angels, and a deconstructive philosopher of language to speak of specters and argue for a practice of "hauntology"? What must be exhausted in certain strains of secular, progressive thought for quasi-theological figures conventionally opposed to such thought, and deposed by it, to be made to seem valuable, perhaps even essential?

This chapter explores these questions indirectly, by considering Derrida's and Benjamin's reflections on the problems of historical consciousness—the relation of the past to the present, to memory, to loss, and hence to the future. Derrida's *Specters of Marx* offers an imaginative reading of selected texts by Marx and, by way of that reading, a critique of conventional understandings of Marx's contemporary legacy. Through this reading, too, Derrida endeavors to reconceive the press of history on the present, an endeavor that may break even more radically with progressive historiography than does genealogy as formulated by Nietzsche and Foucault. In his porous schema of spectrality that includes ghosts, haunting, and conjuration, Derrida experiments with a mode of historical consciousness that does not resort to discredited narratives of systematicity, periodicity, laws of development, or a bounded, coherent past and present. Derrida is also attentive to the problem of political judgment and political hope, and he attempts to establish a terrain for both without locating either in a narrative of progress or founding either in metaphysical precepts.

In "Theses on the Philosophy of History" and other meditations on historical consciousness, Benjamin provides a critique of progress, reworks the meaning of historical materialism through that critique, and offers grounds—or at least handholds or windows on possibility—for revolutionary political action. But Benjamin is not only a critic of modernist political conventions such as progress and materialist metaphysics; he is also the consummate theorist (poet) of political despair who mines a unique strain of hopefulness from the very same terrain. He is thus a theorist who promises a transformative orientation toward our contemporary political paralysis and suffering, which are framed by the combination of speed, unprecedented amounts of unharnessed power, an aimlessness of historical direction, and the resulting experience of impotence described above. Benjamin's location

of historical consciousness "within the cultural work of mourning" allows for the possibility of redeeming historical losses, a redemption that conventionally melancholic attachments to those losses would foreclose.[3] Achieving this redemption through what Benjamin terms an "activation" of the past opens new possibilities in the present as well. Together, Derrida's and Benjamin's writings on history offer partial strategies for configuring responsible political consciousness and political agency in the unsettling and unsettled time after progress.

BENJAMIN'S "THESES ON THE PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY"

> Thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well. Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock, by which it crystallizes into a monad. A historical materialist approaches a historical subject only where he encounters it as a monad. In this structure he recognizes the sign of a Messianic cessation of happening, or, put differently, a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past. He takes cognizance of it in order to blast a specific era out of the homogeneous course of history—blasting a specific life out of the era

> or a specific work out of the lifework. As a result of this method the lifework is preserved in this work and at the same time canceled; in the lifework the era; and in the era, the entire course of history. The nourishing fruit of the historically understood contains time as a precious but tasteless seed.
>
> —Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History"

For Walter Benjamin, the conundrum of modern history is its stormy forward movement absent a telos. But the conundrum of radical political action (set against Marx historiographically, while joining with him politically) lies in the need to break this stream of history, to interrupt or arrest historical process in order to inaugurate another possibility or, to use the term Benjamin was so fond of, "actuality" (*Aktualität*). The German word connotes both a realization or actualization (of possibility) and a making present, a materialization, even a particular production of the present through what is actualized in it. In Benjamin's deployment of *Aktualität*, that which is realized is simultaneously grasped as invented and inventive.[8] Thus, what Marx, after Hegel, called world-historical events do not for Benjamin fulfill or even chart history's mission: instead they explode historical processes, reroute history, even begin it anew by "actualizing" some element of the past as possibility in the present.

In his critical engagement with the notion of progress, on which he considered all modern strains of philosophy and political life to rest, Benjamin by no means simply rejects historical process or historical force. To the contrary, the backward-looking angel of history both sees and feels the terrible press of history—a "single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage," a storm that "has got caught in his wings with such violence that he can no longer close them"—but can do nothing to stop it.[9] Indeed, it is the task not of the angel but of an ill-defined "us" to interrupt this force, to seize moments in the present as possibilities for action. Thus, Benjamin argues, "the awareness that they are about to make the continuum of history explode is characteristic of the revolutionary classes at the moment of their action" (p. 261). Great revolutions, he insists, always introduce new calendars, thereby marking both the interruption of one trajectory of history and the inauguration of another—an interruption and

transformation of the very temporality of politics, an interruption and transformation that historicists can never grasp.

Benjamin seeks to cast "interruption" as the spirit and metaphor not only of revolutionary politics but also of everyday politics. Interruption or "blasting open the continuum of history" becomes a kind of persistent revolutionary political orientation that breaks both with the notion of progress and with its cousin, uniquely "ripe" revolutionary conditions, even as it attends closely to historical configurations of opportunity or possibility. The "arrest" of history that revolution achieves not only sets history's sails in a new direction (as opposed to the progressivist view that revolution is a teleological conclusion of a historical process) but also indicts a fundamental premise of progress, namely that more just and felicitous times have steadily displaced more impoverished ones. For Benjamin, the past is not an inferior version of the present but an exploitable cache of both traumatic and utopian scenes. Thus, the theological moment that Benjamin believes inheres in all revolutionary hopes pertains to traces of the good life left behind, preserved and cultivated as imagistic memories. These are the traces that would inspirit revolutionary action, and it is precisely the ideology of progress that eliminates them from view. What Benjamin terms the revolutionary-historical "tiger's leap into the past" is thus the grand revolutionary gesture—at once political and intellectual—of disinterring repressed emancipatory hopes and experiences from their tombs beneath the putative march of progress. In Lutz Niethammer's phrase: "Benjamin's hope is that . . . it will be possible . . . to bring time to a halt . . . and to reach beyond the most insupportable conditions to assist the species-recollection of the good life . . . as the guide to human action. Through his tiger leaps, the historian must stand at their side and blast the repressed hopes out of the progress-leveled past."[10]

This "tiger's leap" is a complicated one, however, for as Benjamin notes, "it takes place in an arena where the ruling class gives the commands" (p. 261); the trick is to seize the interruption of history from the maw of bourgeois co-optation. When Benjamin adds that "the same leap in the open air of history is the dialectical one, which is how Marx understood the revolution" (p. 261), he is identifying the struggle between revolutionary and bourgeois forces as a struggle over

the present as well as over the meanings of history. History interrupted is a fecund political moment but it comes with no guarantees, with no lack of struggle and no certainty about the outcome. That is why Benjamin refers to this moment only as "a revolutionary *chance* in the fight for the oppressed past" (p. 263, emphasis added).

But how paradoxical is the notion of historicized political consciousness poised for action that Benjamin develops! Deeply attuned to the possibilities that history presents and that can be created within history, it is also committed to a kind of "forgetting" in which history is not simply blasted apart but is "gaily parted with."[11] Thus, the historical memory that Benjamin cultivates as political possibility in one moment is literally exploded by revolutionary action in another. History is never merely realized by revolutionary action but is invented, reworked, and also destroyed by it. Thus the history that Benjamin cherishes as resource for political action is also the history that must be treated indifferently, as dispensable, without reverence.

For a clearer view of this paradox, and its importance in developing a politics "after history" that also draws its energies from historical consciousness, we return to Benjamin's enigmatic angel. The figure of the angel in Benjamin's ninth thesis on the philosophy of history carries (but does not exhaust) his critique of progress and thus contributes to a reframing of the problem of political knowledge and political action in the era of *posthistoire*.[12] Gershom Scholem's genealogy of Benjamin's crafting of this figure (from Klee's *Angelus Novus*, which Benjamin owned, as well as from other sources) is immensely helpful in this regard, as is Niethammer's reading of the ninth thesis. Scholem begins by noting that the Hebrew *mal'āk*, which "angel" (in Greek, *angelos*) translates, also means "messenger." He adds that in one strain of Jewish tradition, each of us is thought to have a personal angel that represents our secret self, albeit in a problematic way: this angel can enter into opposition to and tension with the human to whom it is attached.[13] So Benjamin's messenger of history, harboring history's secret meaning, immediately casts history as tragic: unknowable to itself and in tension with itself, history is propelled toward a future to which its back is turned and which carries meaning only as a witness to catastrophe. The secret truth of history is at best a negative one, centered on this nebulously defined catastrophe; but perhaps

more important, history's "secret" is that its movement has no inherent meaning at all. The messenger of history is also paradoxically mute: it cannot speak to the future, even as history is implicated in the future. That is, history has bearing on the future insofar as the storm from Paradise is blowing toward the future (p. 261). But the angel cannot look there, it cannot speak, nor can it intervene in the storm into which it is only and always blown backward. The muteness and the impotence of the backward body—neither eyes nor hands can come to terms with where it is going, neither are of any use in grasping or shaping the body's experience—together figure the agency of the meaning of history as approximately nothing.

Paradise, Scholem suggests in this reading of Benjamin, is the primal past of humanity as well the utopian image of our future redemption; Benjamin borrows from Karl Krause a figure of Paradise as both origin and goal.[14] But the storm prevents the angel—history's meaning—from the redemptive work suggested here. The angel cannot "stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed" (p. 257), which Benjamin claims as its yearning, because there is a forward (nonprogressive) press of history, and because the angel is powerless and speechless. The angel is pushed toward a future into which it does not gaze, cannot gaze, but cannot not go, and also looks out over a past that it cannot redeem even as it longs to do so. The angel, however, sees history for what it is: "one single catastrophe," the ruins of freedom unrealized.

Lutz Niethammer also approaches Benjamin's angel theologically but from a different angle. Why, Niethammer asks, does Benjamin give us the image of an *angel* of history, when, on the one hand, historians usually choose a muse as their higher being and, on the other, angels in the Bible and in the Jewish tradition more generally relate to God or humanity, but not to history, which they typically hover outside of or above? What the Hebrew Bible knows, Niethammer argues, is the past, and this knowledge "is typically denoted by the same word that refers to what the face is turned towards in attention; while the word for the future also signifies what is hidden behind one's back." So, Niethammer concludes, "the position and line of vision of the new (or still young) angel in the storm thus evoke the religious tradition, as does the storm itself."[15] The religious line of vision of the angel

is thus precisely at odds with the secular dynamic of progress and reason constitutive of the Enlightenment. It is a vision that draws on its knowledge of Paradise—again, both an archaic and a utopian knowledge—or on the hopes and dreams of humankind. But disenchantment, itself occasioned by the idealization of progress and rationality, drains the power from this tradition's insights and instigations—indeed overwhelms them as if by a storm, a storm that makes ruins of everything, including messianic hopes and dreams. Benjamin's angel would seem to signify the extent to which the tradition of religious redemption (and hence religious inspiration) is rendered impotent by the force of ideological secularism: "the victims [of the history of progress] no longer have access to the power of religious redemption; for in the raging wind of disenchantment the angel is driven up and away."[16] Under the hegemony of progress, the divine messenger is incapable of action and redemptive politics is impossible. Only the rupture of progressive ideology, the "arrest" of historical process, permits an opening through which the politically productive elements of theology can return to history, allowing the redemptive powers of hope, dream, and utopian passion a place on the political and historical stage. Only then can history be rewritten, as a different future is coined from the present. But this description also suggests that the rupture of history and progressive ideology constitutes a simultaneously theological and secular opening for political understanding and action. It is an opening for both the messianic dreams *and* the human crafting that are erased by progressive historiography and politics. Thus does postfoundationalism potentially become at once spiritual and historical: its challenge to historical automatism reactivates the figures banished by that automatism—conscious and unconscious memories, hopes, and longings.

Taken together, Scholem's and Niethammer's readings suggest that while progress may be a delusion, it has functioned as a powerful ideology that has both displaced the Edenic elements of the past and destroyed the very memory of their existence. With the force of a storm, "piling wreckage upon wreckage," it has rendered theological yearnings impotent on earth. The angel who represents these yearnings and who apprehends the limitations of an Enlightenment perspective sees the ruin of this course of history; but powerless to

express its insight, the angel is itself a passive wisp in the winds of history. Yet this melancholy figure does not imply that Benjamin abandons the project of redemption and revolution. Instead, Benjamin's reformulated dialectical materialism, far too heavy with messianic and literary tropes to be acceptable to most Marxists, poses the prospect of simultaneously interrupting the continuum of history and redeeming the past.

Revolution and redemption at once and achieved through one another—it is hardly the most immediately plausible moment of hope to issue from Benjamin's despairing vision. To increase its credibility, we must leave the ninth thesis and investigate further both Benjamin's critique of progress and his formulation of dialectics. In the thirteenth thesis, Benjamin offers a terse, threefold critique of the conception of progress presented in the social democratic theory of his milieu. The Social Democrats, he claims, understand progress as "first of all, the progress of mankind itself[;] . . . [s]econdly, . . . something boundless, in keeping with the infinite perfectibility of mankind[;] . . . [and t]hirdly, . . . irresistible, something that automatically pursued a straight or spiral course" (p. 260). "Each of these predicates," he remarks, "is controversial and open to criticism." Yet Benjamin's critique goes beyond simply pointing out the groundlessness of the various premises of progress and instead aims at what "they have in common. The concept of the historical progress of mankind cannot be sundered from the concept of its progression through a homogeneous, empty time. A critique of the concept of such a progression must be the basis of any criticism of the concept of progress itself" (pp. 260–61).

What Benjamin names "homogeneous, empty time" is precisely the opposite of historical time. Time, he insists, is always "filled by the presence of the Now" (p. 261); time always has particular content that itself renders a particular meaning of time, rather than the other way around. Time has no transcendental status outside of the particular present ("the time of the now") that invests it with questions, meaning, or projects. Thus, the fundamental trouble with all notions of historical progress is their imbrication with a false transcendentalism—progress inevitably transpires above human consciousness, activity, and concerns. Within a progressive metanarrative, time is un-

structured by anything other than progress, and historical memory or consciousness framed by this metanarrative imagines itself to be unstructured by the present, and hence unsituated and unsaturated by the present. Benjamin's objection to progressive historiography is therefore not simply its groundlessness as historiography but the havoc it wreaks with a historically oriented political consciousness. Rather than focusing this consciousness on the parameters of the present, rather than engaging it to evoke and create historical memory, progress lifts consciousness out of time and space, treating past, present, and their relation as givens.

The problem of developing a political consciousness oriented toward historically shaped possibility is further illuminated in the eighth thesis, which immediately precedes Benjamin's invocation of the angel of history.

> The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the "state of emergency" in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight. Then we shall clearly realize that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency, and this will improve our position in the struggle against Fascism. One reason why Fascism has a chance is that in the name of progress its opponents treat it as a historical norm. The current amazement that the things we are experiencing are "still" possible in the twentieth century is *not* philosophical. This amazement is not the beginning of knowledge—unless it is the knowledge that the view of history which gives rise to it is untenable. (p. 257)

Like Derrida, Benjamin insists that it is not history that "ends" in the twentieth century but a certain concept of history, a concept that nonetheless continues to grip political thinking and reaction even in its ghostly form, producing "amazement" and literal dumbfounding. He sees progress, so often understood by radicals and reformers as a wellspring of political hope, as functioning in just the opposite way. Progress reconciles and attaches its adherents to an inevitable (even fatalistic) and unwittingly normative account of political formations and events. The hopefulness that a progressive view of history offers is both delusional and ultimately conservative, precluding a politics devoted to bringing about a "state of emergency" that can break with

this present or "blast open the continuum of history" (p. 262). Moreover, Benjamin argues, while it is the downtrodden who often cling hardest to the progressive promise, progress always measures the condition of the dominant class and is part of the ideology that naturalizes its dominance.[17] A progressive historiography ratifies the dominance of the bourgeoisie by tacitly articulating an ideology that erases the condition of the defeated or the oppressed in the name of a historical automatism, that is, in a process with no agent, no powers, and, most important, no victims—or at least none for whom anyone or anything is accountable.

It is this seamless historical narrative of "empty time"—reinforced by one version of dialectical materialism but challenged by Benjamin's version—that Benjamin seeks to disrupt with alternative historical images and new sites of political possibility.

> Historical materialism has to abandon the epic element in history. It blasts the epoch out of the reified "continuity of history." But it also blasts open the homogeneity of the epoch. It saturates it with *ecrasite*, that is, the present. . . .
>
> The destructive or critical impetus in materialist historiography comes into play in that blasting apart of historical continuity which allows the historical object to constitute itself. . . . Materialist historiography does not choose its objects casually. It does not pluck them from the process of history, but rather blasts them out of it. Its precautions are more extensive, its occurrences more essential.[18]

The "blasting open" or "blasting apart" that Benjamin identifies as the work of the historical materialist is neither objectively arrived at nor randomly crafted. It is instead a very specific kind of interpretive work, one that affirms historical contingency in its vision, acknowledges the element of invention resulting from this contingent quality, and yet insists on the materiality of the past that it glimpses and renders in the present. It insists, in other words, on the material unfolding of the past, but distinguishes this material unfolding from the bearing of the past on the present, and from our grasp of the past in the present.

In the sixth thesis, Benjamin declares: "To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was' (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of dan-

ger" (p. 255). This formulation of the history of the present as fleeting, appearing in fiery but transitory images, and as both capturing and signaling a moment of danger (the danger of being colonized, of rendering both interpreter and the past what Benjamin calls "a tool of the ruling classes") recurs several times in Benjamin; it corresponds directly to the project of using historical memory to undo the inevitability or the givenness of the present. The blasting that Benjamin invokes both illuminates and forces open possibilities in the present, in what Benjamin called "this particular Now," possibilities that are then "actualized." The "possible" in Benjamin, is, according to Irving Wohlfarth, paradoxically "both a measure and a gift"—a measure of the contours and contents of the present, but also a gift to the would-be revolutionary who wishes to make a different present. "True actuality," Wohlfarth adds, is untimely yet historically located—it stands both "in" and "against" its time, and thus actuality "must be 'wooed' from unfruitful surfaces."[19] What Benjamin calls "the truly actual" are intimations of another reality that can be actualized or realized only through political transformation; they lodge in "the oddest and most crabbed phenomena" yet "point from the heart of the present beyond itself." Again, revolutionary possibility does not simply ripen once and for all but rather takes specific shape in a specific time and is given this shape, at least in part, by revolutionary actors and historians. "Actuality, thus conceived, is a matter of actualizing the specific potential of this particular now."[20]

At this point, we are prepared to understand another of Benjamin's insistent connections between revolutionary historical consciousness and theological work. In appendix A of the "Theses on the Philosophy of History," he writes:

> Historicism contents itself with establishing a causal connection between various moments in history. But no fact that is a cause is for that very reason historical. It became historical posthumously, as it were, through events that may be separated from it by thousands of years. A historian who takes this as his point of departure stops telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary. Instead, he grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite

> earlier one. Thus he establishes a conception of the present as the "time of the now" which is shot through with chips of Messianic time. (p. 263)

Grasping the constellation that our own era forms with an earlier one entails grasping the extent to which (selected elements of the) past and present ignite each other, resemble each other, articulate with one another, figure meaning in one another. This grasp allows the past to illuminate the possibilities of the present, and especially to open hope in the present. Such an opening in turn allows the present itself to emerge as a time in which redemption—that is, the connection of a particular political aim in the present with a particular formation of oppression in the past—might be possible. This articulation of past and present constitutes those "chips of Messianic time" that redeem history not all at once but rather in fragments and patches. Benjamin's reformulated dialectical materialism abandons the totalized project of nineteenth-century dialectics, even as it refuses to abandon that project's redemptive aim.

Consider again those elements of modern historiography that Benjamin criticizes. "Historicism," "empty time," "eternity"—these are Benjamin's pejorative names for conceptions of history that misrepresent both the powers constitutive of the past and the possibilities of opening a different future. But more than misrepresentations, they are also sites of political corruption or disorientation, sometimes dangerous ones. Recall Benjamin's claim that "nothing has corrupted the German working class so much as the notion that it was moving with the current," a current Benjamin names "empty time" because it is divorced from "this particular Now," the diverse elements that constitute a present that might be other than itself (p. 258). As Derrida does in emphasizing the spectral nature of Marxist historiography, Benjamin here claims to be offering a way of reading and enacting Marx rather than departing from him. The dialectics that Benjamin takes over and radically reworks from Marxism does not signify the process by which history moves; instead, it aims to capture a peculiar meeting of past and present that occurs in the *image* of the past as a "blazing up." In *The Arcades Project*, he attempts to explain why:

> It isn't that the past casts its light on the present or the present casts its light on the past: rather, an image is that in which the *Then* and the *Now* come into a constellation like a flash of lightning. In other words: image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is a purely temporal, continuous one, the relation of the Then to the Now is dialectical—not development but image, leaping forth. Only dialectical images are genuine images; and the place one happens upon them is language.[21]

For Benjamin, dialectics defines the transformation achieved by the encounter of past and present, and images are the frozen expression of this encounter. In what he sometimes calls "true historical materialism," Benjamin claims that "history breaks down into images, not stories":[22] this very transduction of images for stories constitutes the immanent critique of the concept of progress that Benjamin insists is levied by "true" dialectical materialism, a critique waged *against* other versions of dialectical materialism. Benjamin's materialism entails an appreciation of the empirical truth of the past, but dialectics complicates this truth by recognizing that the past's play in the present is selective, interpreted, and imagistic. Similarly, while Benjamin's dialectical materialism converges with what Marxists call material conditions of actions, it distinguishes these conditions from the particular way in which the past presses on the present. He is thus differentiating three elements frequently collapsed by Marxists into one: the materialism of the past (a question of what happened), the materialism of the present (a question of what historical conditions shape contemporary political possibility), and the way in which past and present take their shape from one another in contemporary political consciousness (a question of memory and consciousness). In Benjamin's rendering, dialectics functions as a name for the process by which some element of the past is made to live in the present, is ignited by the present, and transforms present and past in this illumination. The past can have occurred without memory but it cannot live in the present without memory; significantly, historical memory is conveyed imagistically even when it is carried by narrative. Benjamin makes this claim with particular sharpness in response to a reprimand from Max Horkheimer. Horkheimer argues that "the assertion of [the] incompleteness

[of history] is idealistic, if completeness isn't included in it. Past injustice has occurred and is done with. The murdered are really murdered. . . . If one takes incompleteness completely seriously, one has to believe in the Last Judgment. . . . Perhaps there's a difference with regard to incompleteness between the positive and the negative, such that only injustice, terror, and the pain of the past are irreparable." Benjamin responds:

> The corrective to this line of thought lies in the reflection that history is not just a science but also a form of memoration. (*Eine Form des Eingedenkens*). What science has "established," memoration can modify. Memoration can make the incomplete (happiness) into something complete, and the complete (suffering) into something incomplete. That is theology; but in memoration we discover the experience (*Erfahrung*) that forbids us to conceive of history as thoroughly a-theological, even though we barely dare not attempt to write it according to literally theological concepts.[23]

Like Derrida's conception of history as haunting the present, history as images can never add up to a coherent totality but rather is always "incomplete." Dialectical images evoke slices of the past that bear on the present, that "blaze up" in the present, and that potentially tear up the conventional conception and relation of present and past. Derrida and Benjamin share this rejection of historical totalization in favor of a fragmented and fragmentary historiography and both, somewhat perversely, act in the name of Marx. Indeed, Benjamin is unapologetic about his insistence on the imagistic dimension of historical recognition—its truth value pertains precisely to its transitory, partial, and contingent character, its disruption of settled stories. In his notes on method in *The Arcades Project*, he says he wishes to demonstrate "that the materialistic presentation of history is imagistic in a higher sense than traditional historiography."[24] And he insists that the materialistic presentation of history is paradoxically more attuned to the Real to the extent that it cultivates the expression of the connection of past to present in an image, which is the medium of individual and collective memory and experience.

While this emphasis on the conjuring of historical images places dialectics in a register far more subjective than that of Marx, it is sub-

jectivity of a very particular sort. We have already seen that dialectics, for Benjamin, does not represent an objective process of development in the world, but rather is a name for the play of history in the present, the play between present and past in a particular political moment, a play that transforms past and present into the "Then" and "Now" as a form of mutual illumination. Heavily dependent on memory, this play is also fueled by anxiety about certain losses in the past and about losing position in the present, and hence by anxiety about the capacity to make a future. But though imagistic history is subjective, it is important to note that the form of this subjectivism is not individual. History does not simply draw on memory but produces it (and thereby, Benjamin adds, also presumes "destruction"); this is the phenomenon that places the past in a "critical condition" by attending to those "jags and crags that offer a handhold to someone who wishes to move beyond them."[25] Here, we are inevitably reminded of Foucault's genealogies, which are intended, *inter alia*, to articulate political possibilities in the present by telling alternative histories of the present and by producing a historical ontology of the present—one that reveals the fissures and breaks in its production, thereby interrupting a seamless narrative of the past that yielded a seamless architecture of the present. By featuring memory as something produced rather than given, by activating it as a strategic force that is engaged in "the fight for the oppressed past," by being instructed in it and cultivating its possibilities, we open "the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter" (p. 264).[26] Redemption of past suffering and retrieval of past possibility both become possible in the project of forging a future.

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We are now in a position to link Benjamin's cultivation of historical memory to disrupt the givenness of the present with his political critique of a melancholic relationship to the political present. Benjamin seeks to discern a way in which lost moments in the past, rather than being treated as lamentable and unrecoverable on the one hand or as superseded by progress on the other, might be cultivated as *incitations* in the present. What Benjamin tendentiously names "left melancholia" is a condition produced by attachment to a notion of progress in

which opportunities missed or political formations lost are experienced as permanent and unrecoverable. Left melancholia thus represents a refusal to come to terms with the particular character of the present: it is a failure to understand history other than as "empty time" or progress. It signifies as well a certain narcissism with regard to one's past political attachments and identity that frames all contemporary investments in political mobilization, alliance, or transformation.[27] If, however, history does not move toward a goal, if it does not unfold according to a plan, then, as Wohlfarth explains, "every historical moment has its own revolutionary chance—including, therefore, those moments where possibilities are severely reduced."[28]

The irony of melancholia, of course, is that attachment to the object of one's sorrowful loss supersedes the desire to recover from this loss, to live free of it in the present, to be unburdened by it. This supersession is what renders melancholia a persistent condition, a state, indeed a full-blown structure of desire, rather than a transient response to death or loss. In his 1917 meditation on melancholia, Freud reminds us of a second singular feature of melancholy: it entails "a loss of a more ideal kind [than mourning]. The object has not perhaps actually died, but has been lost as an object of love."[29] Moreover, Freud suggests, the melancholic often will not know precisely what it is about the object that has been loved and lost—"this would suggest that 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 that is unconscious."[30] The loss precipitating melancholy is more often than not unavowed and unavowable. Freud also suggests that the melancholic subject—low in self-regard, despairing, even suicidal—shifts the reproach of the once-loved object (a reproach leveled for not living up to the idealization by the beloved) onto itself, thus preserving the love or idealization of the object even as the loss of this love is experienced as melancholic.

Now why would Benjamin use the term *melancholia*, and the emotional economy it represents, to talk about a particular formation on and of the Left? Benjamin never offers a precise formulation of left melancholia. Instead, he deploys it as a term of opprobrium for those more beholden to certain long-held sentiments and objects than to the possibilities of political transformation in the present. Benjamin is

particularly attuned to the melancholic's investment in "things" and in precepts or stories that acquire thinglike form. In the *Trauerspiel*, he argues that "melancholy betrays the world for the sake of knowledge," suggesting that the loyalty of the melancholic converts its truth ("every loyal vow or memory") about its beloved into a thing—indeed, imbues knowledge itself with a thinglike quality. Another version of this formulation: "in its tenacious self-absorption [melancholy] embraces dead objects in its contemplation." More simply, melancholia is loyal "to the world of things,"[31] suggesting a certain logic of fetishism—with all the conservatism and withdrawal from human relations that fetishistic desire implies—within the melancholic logic. In the critique of Erich Kastner's poems in which he first coins the phrase "left melancholia," Benjamin suggests that sentiments themselves become things for the left melancholic, who "takes as much pride in the traces of former spiritual goods as the bourgeois do in their material goods."[32] We are more loyal to our left passions and reasons, our left analyses and convictions, than to the existing world that we presumably seek to alter with these terms or to the future that would be aligned with them. Left melancholy, in short, is Benjamin's name for a mournful, conservative, backward-looking attachment to feelings, analyses, or relations that have become fetishized and frozen in the heart of the critic. And if supplementation from Freud is helpful here, then this condition presumably issues from some unaccountable loss, some unavowably crushed ideal—an ideal that lives in empty time rather than the time of the Now precisely to the extent that it is imagined to have been killed by time, that it is lost in time, that it is unrecoverable.

To "stand entirely to the left of the possible" is the political stance of the left melancholic, who prefers a particular analysis—who prefers to brood on the losses that this analysis documents—over seizing and developing the prospects of political transformation in the present. This is the stance of the "revolutionary hack" and contrasts with that of the thinker-activist, who would "stand to the left within the possible."[33] It would be a mistake to misread Benjamin's critique here as an argument for becoming reconciled to the conditions of the present or for rejecting the place of historical memory in shaping the possibili-

ties of the present. Rather, we are encountering again that most difficult paradox in Benjamin's formulation of the bearing of history on the political present: his insistence that we must cultivate memory while fostering a means of "gaily parting with the past."[34] We must reconcile ourselves to parting with our past—and here Benjamin quotes Marx and not Nietzsche—if we are to do the work of mourning rather than submit to melancholia, the latter being the condition that binds us to the past as a collection of things, as a way of knowing, in such a way that we are complacent about the present. But parting with the past does not mean forgetting it; it involves instead what Benjamin terms "mindfulness," a particular form of remembering aimed at rendering history as what Norbert Bolz and Willem van Reijen call "an outrage to the present." They elaborate:

> The contemporary accentuates the present as something that is historically crucial, as a crisis. History can do it justice not as a science but only as a "form of being mindful." Mindfulness means remembrance stretched by forgetting; here, forgetting should be understood not as not-remembering, but as counter-remembering. In mindfulness, what has been experienced is not pinned down but opened up to its pre- and post-history. But this also means that through mindfulness past suffering is experienced as something unfinished.[35]

Suffering that is not yet finished is not only suffering that must still be endured but also suffering that can still be redeemed; it might develop another face through contemporary practices. Making a historical event or formation contemporary, making it "an outrage to the present" and thus exploding or reworking both the way in which it has been remembered and the way in which it is positioned in historical consciousness as "past," is precisely the opposite of bringing that phenomena to "closure" through reparation or apology (our most ubiquitous form of historical political thinking today). The former demands that we redeem the past through a specific and contemporary practice of justice; the latter gazes impotently at the past even as it attempts to establish history as irrelevant to the present or, at best, as a reproachful claim or grievance in the present. Hence Benjamin's sense of history as both an "activation of the past" and a convocation of demands on

the present, both an accusation against the present and a challenge to fixed and conventional understandings of the past. Hence, too, his insistence on the possibility of redeeming the past (and thus actually transforming the past) through revolutionary action in the present.

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The memoration that Benjamin locates at the nexus of historical understanding and political consciousness is neither an individual nor institutional nor collective memory of "what really happened"; it is, rather, a dynamic, episodic, agentic, and imagistic form of remembering that counters the force of one conjuration of the past with that of another. It is simultaneously a coming to terms with our losses and a redemption of them, achieved by cultivating a different version of them in a rearticulation of past and present. What Benjamin offers, then, is not so much a way (for historians) to do history as a way (for political actors) to think historically, a way to develop political consciousness of the historically inflected construction of contemporary political life and to discern or fashion openings or possibilities there. Benjamin also offers a way to address history as we make a future—providing not just a method of consulting the past but a means of redeeming or transforming it, and thus a way of recovering the past that paradoxically loosens its grip on our political psyches at the moment it is addressed consciously and deliberately.

Taken together, Benjamin's strange and incomplete dialectical materialism and Derrida's "hauntology" certainly will not satisfy those who want scientific, systematic, or empirically precise formulas to determine how the past bears on the present. Nor will it satisfy those buoyed by a belief that *posthistoire* means that we are without responsibility to history and are unclaimed by it—that we spring free of history into a present where we can conjure meanings and possibilities as we wish. It will not satisfy unreconstructed liberals, for whom the continued claim of progress and belief in the autonomy of the will render history largely irrelevant to political life except as episodes of trauma or greatness, episodes to recoil from or to emulate. And it will not satisfy unreconstructed Marxists, for whom history is always extremely heavy and determining, radically constraining the scope

of possibilities in the present, and for whom iron laws of history reveal what the future must be. But it may offer some initial sightings for those who wish to discern a ground for political action that attends to and mobilizes history once history appears to lack a distinct shape and trajectory. This is the possibility held out by these postmaterialists who work more in language and image than in historical data, by these post-Marxists who want to extend, revive, and enliven the Marxist project with figures that Marx could not avow, even as he spawned them. Taken together, the reflections of Derrida and Benjamin tender not a new conception of historical development but novel touchstones for a political consciousness that would mobilize and activate history rather than submitting to, fulfilling, taming, or jettisoning it. It is a consciousness that simultaneously seeks to ignite the past and to open a path for departing from it, one that conjures the power of the past while resisting any preordained implications of that power for the making of a more just future. It may even be a political consciousness that offers modest new possibilities for the practice of freedom.

26. Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, p. 221. It is difficult not to think here of the campaign for gay and lesbian marriage, in which a potentially insurgent practice of love and sexuality seeks housing in an institution that itself is organized to prohibit such insurgency.

27. Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, p. 23.

28. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, p. 11.

29. "No *one* is accountable for existing at all, or for being constituted as he is. . . . We invented the concept 'purpose': in reality purpose is *lacking*. . . . We deny God; in denying God, we deny accountability: only by doing *that* do we redeem the world" (Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, p. 54).

30. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p. 168.

31. Ibid., p. 137.

32. Political thinkers as diverse as Rousseau, Arendt, Foucault, and Wolin contribute to this perspective on how institutionalization affects democracy.

33. For a consideration of this antidemocratic bind and the possibility of a democratic response to it that focuses on constitutionalism rather than on the state, see Sheldon Wolin's "Constitutional Order, Revolutionary Violence, and Modern Power: An Essay of Juxtapositions," an occasional paper published by the Department of Political Science, York University, Ontario, 1990, and "Fugitive Democracy."

CHAPTER SEVEN
SPECTERS AND ANGELS: BENJAMIN AND DERRIDA

1. See Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982).

2. Sheldon Wolin, "Political Theory: From Vocation to Invocation," in *Vocations of Political Theory*, ed. Jason Frank and John Tambornino (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p. 5.

3. Michael P. Steinberg, introduction to *Walter Benjamin and the Demands of History*, ed. Michael P. Steinberg (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996), p. 15.

4. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, and the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. xvii. This work is hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

5. Derrida's meditation on justice in "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority,' " which includes a close deconstructive reading of Benjamin, has a rather different (although not obviously incompatible) set of emphases from those in *Specters of Marx*. See *Cardozo Law Review* 11 (1990): 919–1045.

6. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "The Manifesto of the Communist Party," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 1978), p. 473.

7. Mark Poster's analysis of *Specters of Marx* emphasizes strongly Derrida's (and deconstruction's) claim to be Marx's proper heir: "Derrida boldly proposes to improve upon Marx, to eliminate his 'pre-deconstructive' limitation, to 'radicalize' him, and calls for 'a new International' that will instantiate 'a new Enlightenment for the century to come.' " "Textual Agents: History at 'The End of History,' " in *"Culture" and the Problem of the Disciplines*, ed. John Carlos Rowe (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p. 217.

8. Irving Wohlfarth argues that "actuality is, *pace* Nietzsche, the eternal return of what is *not* the same." "The Measure of the Possible, the Weight of the Real, and the Heat of the Moment: Benjamin's Actuality Today," *New Formations*, special issue titled "The Actuality of Walter Benjamin," no. 20 (summer 1993): 4.

9. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), p. 257. This work is hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

10. Lutz Niethammer, *Posthistoire: Has History Come to an End?* trans. Patrick Camiller (London: Verso, 1992), pp. 119–20.

11. Walter Benjamin, "N: [Re The Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress]" (an excerpt from *The Arcades Project*), in *Benjamin: Philosophy, History, Aesthetics*, ed. Gary Smith (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 55.

12. Benjamin's critique is often (mis)read through Theodor Adorno's rejoinder to it in "Progress," in Smith, *Benjamin*.

13. Gershom Scholem, "Walter Benjamin and His Angel," in *On Walter Benjamin: Critical Essays and Recollections*, ed. Gary Smith (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1988), p. 65.

14. Ibid., p. 83.

15. Niethammer, *Posthistoire*, p. 111.

16. Ibid.

17. Marx makes a similar point about the character of progress in his claim that "each new class which puts itself in the place of one ruling before it, is compelled . . . to represent its interest as the common interest of all the members of society[;] . . . it has to give its ideas the form of universality and represent them as the only rational, universally valid ones." *The German Ideology*, in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, p. 174.

18. Benjamin, "N," pp. 65, 66.

19. Wohlfarth, "The Measure of the Possible," pp. 2, 4.

20. Ibid., pp. 5, 2.

21. Benjamin, "N," p. 49.

22. Ibid., p. 67.

23. Ibid., p. 61.

24. Ibid., p. 51.

25. Ibid., pp. 60, 64.

26. The longer passage from which this phrase is drawn is instructive: "We know that the Jews were prohibited from investigating the future. The Torah and the prayers instruct them in remembrance, however. This stripped the future of its magic, to which all those succumb who turn to the soothsayers for enlightenment. This does not imply, however, that for the Jews the future turned into homogenous, empty time. For every second of time was the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter" ("Theses on the Philosophy of History," p. 264).

27. For Benjamin's bewitching formulation of the "Then" and the "Now" as political terms unapproachable by "Past" and "Present," see "N," especially pp. 49, 51–52, 80.

28. Wohlfarth, "The Measure of the Possible," p. 2.

29. Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, ed. and trans. James Strachey, vol. 14 (London: Hogarth, 1957), p. 245.

30. Ibid. This sharp distinction between melancholia and mourning may be something of an overstatement on Freud's part. Surely mourning includes unconscious dimensions of loss and attachment, just as it often triggers a chain of unconscious losses that are only indirectly related to the overtly lost object.

31. Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: Verso, 1977), pp. 156–57.

32. Walter Benjamin, "Left Wing Melancholy," trans. Ben Brewster, in *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, ed. Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), p. 305.

33. Wohlfarth, "The Measure of the Possible," p. 3.

34. Benjamin, "N," p. 55.

35. Norbert Bolz and Willem van Reijen, *Walter Benjamin*, trans. Laimdota Mazzarins (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1991), p. 19.