

The Gift of the Past

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1

History is layered. But the layers are not stacked neatly. The disrupting force of the present puts pressure on the past, scattering pieces of it forward into unanticipated locations. No one owns these pieces. To think so is to allow categories of private property to intrude into a commonly shared terrain wherein the laws of exclusionary inheritance do not apply. The history of humanity demands a communist mode of reception.

The goal is nothing short of a different world order. It will require rescuing the past based on a de-privatized, de-nationalized structure of collective memory. There is little danger of a new triumphalism in this task. Human universality is a scarred idea, and the sources of the

scarring must be remembered along with its moments of inspiration. Extreme inhumanities are part of a communist transmission of the past. The human disaster in Gaza cannot be made the legacy of Israel any more than the Holocaust belongs solely to the Germans. Neither historical role, of victim or oppressor, is encoded in our DNA. Past injury is not a license to kill.

2

Long ago, before the name Walter Benjamin was globally famous, I asked students in a seminar to consider the 9th thesis in his late text, “On the Concept of History” (1940) and draw an image that matched his description. I read it to them:

There is a picture by Klee called *Angelus Novus*. It shows an angel who seems about to move away from something he stares at. His eyes are wide, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how the angel of history must look. His face is turned toward the past. Where a chain of events appears before *us*, *he* sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet. (*SW* 4, p. 392; *GS* I:2, p. 697.)

My students drew mature angels, Christmas-card angels, and subtle-bodied angels from medieval art. None of these resembled the *Angelus Novus* painted by Paul Klee in 1920, and purchased by Benjamin shortly thereafter.

Today the Klee watercolor has become famous through Benjamin’s reception of it—indeed, too famous, the words so thickly applied that we cannot see the Klee

image without the overlay of Benjamin's comments on it. The elements reverse: the image is a caption for the text, rather than vice versa.



Paul Klee, *Angelus Novus*, 1920. Israel Museum, C 2008. Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.

Benjamin wrote his comments in a particular historical situation. Today, the object is pinned down by the caption; pinned down by the determinations of a particular catastrophe as if *it* extended endlessly into the future. Historical philosophy (*Geschichtsphilosophie*) hardens into ontology. The world, without distinctions, is called a prison camp.

Klee's picture hangs in the Israel Museum, indelibly linked to Benjamin's suicide while escaping Nazi-occupied France, as a permanent monument to the Holocaust. How did the painting get there? Carl Djerassi tells us in dramatic form:

Benjamin: But what happened to my *Angelus Novus*?

Scholem: I'm getting to that. At the reception in Sigfried Unseld's home [Unseld was head of the Suhrkamp publishing company; this reception followed Adorno's funeral in 1969], I met your son [Stefan]. (*Pause.*)

Benjamin: And?

Scholem: I raised the question of the *Angelus*. (*Pause.*)

Adorno: (*impatiently*): What does raising the question mean?

Scholem: I told him it was really mine (...) after all, by that time I'd read Walter's 1932 will, where he'd left it to me (...) and I asked Stefan to instruct your wife [Gretel Adorno] to hand it over to me. I thought that I could personally take it back to Jerusalem.

Benjamin: And Stefan agreed?

Scholem: He most certainly did not!

Benjamin (*surprised*): What?

Scholem: He felt that since you had not killed yourself in 1932. (...)

Adorno: (*even more impatiently*): Come on, Gerhard! So what happened? Tell us.

Scholem: Your wife Gretel wrote to the famous Kornfeld and Klipstein auction house in Bern for an estimate, and when she received it, it was clear to everyone that by 1969 we were talking about the most valuable item in Walter's estate. We all argued for nearly three years (...) during which the Klee remained in Gretel's home (...) until Stefan died in 1972. So the poor man never really could enjoy that drawing.

(...)

Scholem: I persuaded Siegfried Unseld (...) to be the middle man. He went to London, settled with Stefan's widow, and got

the picture from Gretel. (...) I took it with me to Jerusalem. (From Carl Djerassi, *Four Jews on Parnassus—A Conversation: Benjamin, Adorno, Scholem, Schönberg*, p. 82-4.)

Unsold unilaterally reduced the royalties from Benjamin's published works to be paid to Stefan's widow and her two young daughters. Scholem kept the painting in his Jerusalem home until his death, when his widow was persuaded to donate it to the Israel Museum.

3

Benjamin's own reading of Klee's painting kept changing. Angels were for him ephemeral creatures. In 1922, he planned a topical journal under the name *Angelus Novus*, wherein theology and current commentary were to be one and the same.

In 1931, Benjamin bestowed the mantle of the New Angel on the irreverent journalist Karl Kraus, a "poetic, martial angel" fiercely critical of the latest news. "The very term 'public opinion' outrages Kraus"; his satire cleans the linguistic clutter from "journalistically processed" news. Benjamin calls Kraus a monster "sprung from the child and the cannibal," his writing "barbaric," like Paul Klee's painting, in that it starts "from the very beginning" (*SW* 2, p. 432-57; *GS* II:1, p. 335-55).

In old engravings, there is a messenger who rushes toward us crying aloud, his hair on end, brandishing a sheet of paper in

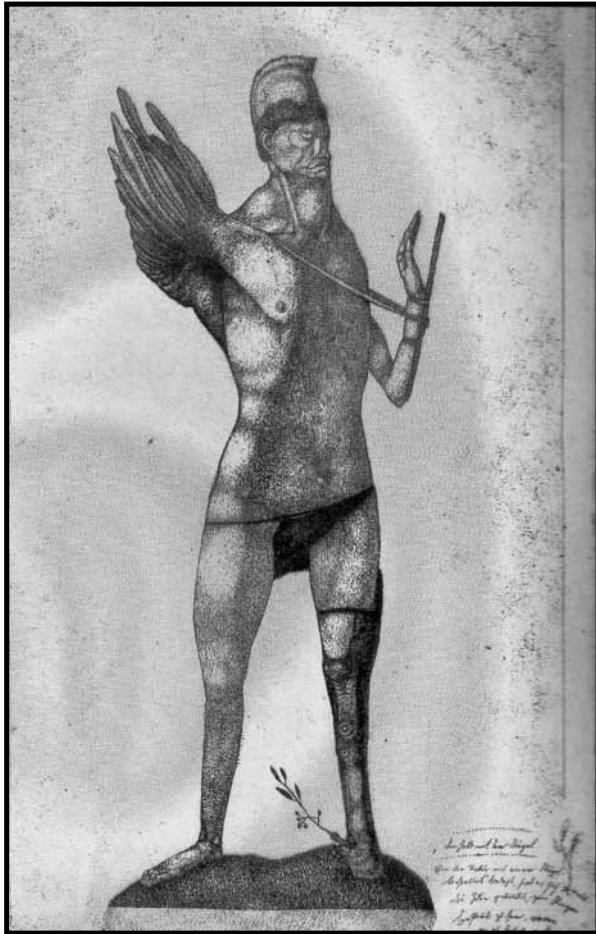
his hands—a sheet full of war and pestilence, of cries of murder and pain, of danger from fire and flood—spreading everywhere the Latest News. (...) Full of betrayal, earthquakes, poison, and fire from the *mundus intelligibilis* (*SW* 2, p. 432-3; *GS* II:1, p. 367).

(...)

Perhaps one of those [angels] who, according to the Talmud, are at each moment created anew in countless throngs, and who, once they have raised their voices before God, cease and pass into nothingness. Lamenting, chastising, or rejoicing? No matter—on this evanescent voice the ephemeral work of Kraus is modeled. Angelus—that is the messenger in the old engravings. (*SW* 2, p. 447; *GS* II:1, p. 367.)

Two years later, Benjamin described the *Angelus* as a woman, the female counterpart of himself, or indeed, himself in pursuit of a woman, a particular woman, Anna Maria (Toet) Blaupott ten Cate, whom he met in Ibiza in 1933. Benjamin is the suspended, if voracious, angel, ready to pounce on this woman he desires. Receding as time takes him forward, he hovers with persistence: “In short, nothing could overcome the man’s patience” (*SW* 2, p. 715; *GS* VI, p. 522). This is how *he* understood the relationship between image and caption. The latter was erasable, replaceable, and ephemeral, like the songs of Talmudic angels.

Paul Klee, too, envisioned multiple, topical angels. In 1905, his angel was a modern-day Icarus whose one wing signaled the earliest mechanical flights. Klee drew at least fifty different angels in his lifetime, more than half of them in the last year. (Both men died in 1940.)



Paul Klee, *Der Held mit dem Flügel* (The Hero with the Wing), 1905. Etching and drypoint; plate 10 x 6 1/4 in. (25.4 x 15.9 cm); sheet 16 x 12 1/16 in. (40.7 x 30.7 cm). Publisher: the artist, Bern. Printer: Max Girardet, Bern. Edition: approx. 30. Museum of Modern Art, New York, Purchase, 182.1942. © 2010 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn. The caption, bottom right, reads: "Especially endowed by nature with one wing, he has therefore formed the idea of being destined to fly, whereby he perishes."

Politics and love, autobiography and transcendent truth—these were thought together by Benjamin, *pace* the loss of this polyvalence in the museum context. For Benjamin, art is just one form of human creation, no more or differently to be evaluated than any other—building type, technological invention, social institution, or object of child’s play. All of these forms consist of the human shaping of matter that is itself not humanly created. The material world is God’s creation. Its distinguishing sign is transitoriness. It manifests its divine origins by eternally passing away.

Transitoriness is the order of human happiness, which does not master nature, but speaks its name. Humans transform the “residue” of God’s “creative word” by bringing the natural world to speech in the secular language of human happiness (*SW* 2, p. 717; *GS* VII, p. 795). These two processes, secular and divine, face in opposing directions, like two parallel arrows simultaneously in play. Despite antithetical positioning, secular happiness and divine creation are in synergy, each augmenting the other in time—“just as a force, by virtue of the path it is moving along, can augment another force on the opposite path” (*SW* 3, p. 305; *GS* II, p. 203-4).

This simultaneously personal-political and theological-mystical idea of truth is the natural kernel of Benjamin’s Marxist and messianic convictions. It remains so constant in his lifetime of writing that dating the

“Theological-Political Fragment,” a text that deals with this theme directly (and contains the image of the counter-facing arrows), is the object of irresolvable philological dispute as to whether it was written in the early 1920s or in the winter of 1937-38. The passing presence of the material world and of human happiness in it leaves us with the metaphysical necessity of affirming transitoriness because only in passing is truth available to us. Its image is time-sensitive.

It is not that truth changes. We do.

4

Legenda: That which is to be read.

Creenda: That which is to be believed.

The remembered past is preserved in stories. As part of the collective imagination, it becomes legend. (What is too terrible in an individual’s experience cannot be remembered.) In legend, individually lived experience is whitewashed in the process of collectivizing it, cleansing it of that which is truly terrifying: ambiguity.

When legends are appropriated by power and fixed to objects, lifting these objects out of history and preserving them within a nimbus of absoluteness—good and evil, right and wrong, redeemed and damned—legends become orthodoxy, setting the parameters of right belief. Such legends are formed out of irreducible, unchanging

elements that refer to mythic constructs: “the nation,” “the West,” “the terrorist,” “the Muslim,” “the Jew.” These constructs, reassembled in various ways, police how the past is to be read.

Securing the borders of orthodoxy violates the historical fundament of transitoriness. When the past is constrained in a timeless medium, its rescue becomes a mode of entrapment. Once the sense of the world is formulated in this way, history enters the magic circle of political theology: right belief legitimates power that legitimates right belief. Orthodox remembrance is capable of performing murder on the material world—not only what has been in history, but what exists today. Collective memory becomes conformism. Anyone who remembers differently is suspect.

Control of how the past is read is therefore no small matter. Archives, museums, libraries, legal traditions, institutional records—all of these are storehouses of the past. Their benefactors supervise the production of orthodoxy—although religious and secular ruling groups are often in competition with (and among) each other in determining just what that is.

But even a book, or an image, can be threatening if it escapes the particular manner of reading that is affirmed by power. Archivists and scribes, artists and academics, find their patrons within this ruling milieu. Indeed, learning is the passion of the powerful. The symbiotic relationship between knowledge and power is critical

for maintaining order. Rulers cannot survive its loss for long. But orthodoxy is in constant danger of being undermined by the knowledge process itself. Storehouses of the past harbor evidence of errors, ambiguities, and complexities (not to speak of outright lies) that discredit official belief and threaten to topple collective legends.

The production of knowledge without a patron has been described as apocalyptic in its historical implications (Smith, 1978, p. 81). In times of struggle between the guardians of power and the guardians of truth, historical evidence becomes a prophetic weapon. If the rulers claim the role of the restrainer (*katechon*) who holds apocalyptic disorder at bay, the prophets protest against the given order in the name of human happiness, social justice, or God's will.

History writing is the place of this struggle between the need to preserve the present order and the desire to preserve truth. But here is the irony. If the preserved past is entrusted with the task of bearing witness to truth, if the producers of meaning treat the artifacts of the transient, material world with a reverent care close to worship, then how is this painstaking effort to be reconciled with the fact that the past is never given to us whole?

5

That which survives in the archives does so by chance. Disappearance is the rule. Annihilation is the

fate of whole cities, obliterating far more of the human record than is preserved. Wars and disasters of nature are indifferent destroyers. Human intention is at work as well. Heresy, degeneracy, blasphemy, treason, disbelief—these are just some of the threats to orthodoxy that call for destruction of the historical record.

Texts and images are both vulnerable to attack. Precisely which objects are available from the past, whose written and visual sources are saved, is astoundingly arbitrary. Only a confirmed believer can be sanguine about their providential arrangement.

Great libraries disappear. More than half a million manuscripts, both secular and religious, were produced, collected, and later lost at each of these imperial centers:

- Library of Alexandria, founded in Ptolemaic Egypt, 3rd century BCE, disappeared by 5th century CE.
- House of Wisdom in Baghdad under the Abbasid Caliphate, 9th-13th centuries.
- Library of Cordoba under the Andalusian Umayyads, 9th-10th centuries.
- House of Wisdom in Fustat (now Cairo) under the Fatimid Caliphate, 11th-12th centuries.

Europe was late to assemble a major collection (the Vatican Library held only 1,160 volumes when formally established in 1475), but intentional destruction was common. Two cases connected with religious and imperial expansion resulted in irretrievable loss:

- The public burning of thousands of Arabic/Andalusian manuscripts by the Spanish Inquisition, Granada, 1499.
- The obliteration of Maya sacred books by the Spanish bishop of colonial Yucatan, 1562, along with 5,000 “diabolical” cult images.

Wikipedia lists 87 historical instances of book burning. But the act itself is not the issue. Historical contexts and consequences change. There is no direct continuity between past and present in these instances, at least not for the point being made.

We are concerned with the political connection between knowledge and power that leads to the partial and arbitrary silencing of the past, and here secular modernity has added something new. If earlier, false belief was under attack, now the enemy takes on ethnic and racial tones. Modern states establish libraries and archives as guardians of the imagined national community, those who claim rights to the land by birth (*natio*). Patriotism appropriates the aura of religion. It purifies present acts of violence against perceived enemies, whose *own* past is first defiled, and then destroyed. Ethnic archives are obliterated. National libraries come under fire. Recent casualties include:

- The Irish National Archives, containing 1,000 years of historical documentation, destroyed in the Civil War, 1922.
- The Catalonian library founded by Pompeu Fabra, destroyed by Franco’s troops, 1939.

- The Judaica Collection at Birobidzhan, capital of the Soviet Jewish autonomous national zone, established as a socialist alternative to Zionism, destroyed in the anti-Semitic climate of Stalin's last years.
- The Zaluski Library, Warsaw, founded in the eighteenth century as one of Europe's first public libraries, destroyed in the burning of the city as punishment for Warsaw's anti-Nazi uprising, 1944.
- The Jaffna Public Library in Tamil-dominated northern Sri Lanka, 97,000 volumes, including rare palm-leaf volumes, destroyed by Sinhalese paramilitary, 1981. Statues of Tamil cultural or religious figures were destroyed or defaced.
- Bosnia's National and University Library in Sarajevo, shelled and burned by Bosnian Serb gunners in 1992. The library held 1.5 million volumes, including more than 155,000 rare books and manuscripts.
- The National Museum and Library of Iraq in central Baghdad, destroyed in the U.S. invasion of Iraq, 2003. Statues and other ancient artifacts were looted or destroyed.



Destroyed interior of the Bosnian National Library (photo by Roger Richards/DVreporter.com, February 1996), <http://www.digitaljournalist.org/issue0302/rr38.html>.

Mushin Hasan, deputy director of the National Museum of Iraq in Baghdad, sits on destroyed artifacts in April 2003.

Photograph: Mario Tama/GettyIraqi, http://blogs.guardian.co.uk/art/category/heritage_antiquities/



There is a less violent, more common form of erasure. It is the practice of preserving only “our” past that provides a continuous, linear trajectory for imagining “our” future. Archaeologists dig quickly through layers of history to find what is of interest to present power. Attention to mythic origins—the stuff of national legend that shores up the dominance of those who rule—dismisses the

recent past as refuse. *Its* ground is a mere construction site for future growth. In the process, material evidence of crimes against living human beings is destroyed. Their records, declared of no value, disappear and, with them, the possibility of imagining any community at all.

Excavating the earth in search of the cultural heritage of a particular people while bulldozing the counter-evidence poisons present consciousness by shrouding it in myth. One finds only what has already been determined to be there.

For it is an irretrievable image of the past which threatens to disappear in any present that does not recognize itself as intended in that image. (*SW* 4, p. 391; *GS* I:1, p. 695.)

But go deeper into the historical evidence, below the level of official legend, and it becomes clear that “our” past is not, and never has been, our own. Objects survive through trading hands. Books move and thrive in diaspora; scholarship flourishes through cosmopolitan exchange. Texts and artifacts follow the lines of pilgrimages, troops, and trade.

Empires monopolize knowledge through linguistic appropriation, supporting the Great Translation Movements that have marked the rise of their power. Ptolemy’s astronomy, Galen’s medicine, Plato and Aristotle’s philosophy—all of these human achievements owe their survival to a series of imperial languages. This heritage of ancient Greece, lauded by Europe as its own, passed from Greek into Persian translations (under the Sassanids),

into Arabic (under the Abbasids), and ultimately Latin (in Toledo and Sicily), as the precondition for the European Renaissance. When vernaculars of Europe replaced Latin as the languages of power, translations became a strategy of intra-European imperial competition.

The last Great Translation Movement after Europe's decline is into English (the language of this text).

We face an uncomfortable fact: Without empires, no cultural heritage. Without diasporas, no national past. The Iraqi National Museum was founded under the imperialist mandate of the British (who are spearheading its present restoration). Sarajevo's Oriental Institute, destroyed in the civil war, housed a "Bosnian" past that included ancient manuscripts in Arabic, Persian, and Hebrew—not only Adzamijski (Bosnian Slavic in Arabic script). So, "our" past is possible precisely because of those who are not considered part of our story.

Today, microfilmed replicas of manuscripts lost in wartime allow the restoration of centers of learning. Electronic collections promise to prevent effective obliteration. Has global communication, then, made imperialism's appropriation of knowledge obsolete?

Eighty percent of material on the Internet is in English.

6

In a time when Europe's imperial nations were engaged in unprecedented human destruction in the name of partial, political identities, Walter Benjamin had

cause to hover, like Klee's *Angelus Novus*, rejecting all existing alternatives.

This hovering prophet of the apocalypse, who could find no patron in power, was not one to take the moral categories of good and evil and reverse their referents, whereby past victims in history are glorified as present conquerors. He wrote in 1938: "Wrongs that are endured are apt to foster self-righteousness. This has been true for the scholars who have emigrated" (*SW* 3, p. 310; *GS* III, p. 522).

Benjamin desired a home in Europe, which gave him no refuge—not Germany, not France, and not Spain. He distinguished the Zionist movement as a political organization from his own spiritual identification with certain ideas that, even if they were "expressed by a German ten times over," he defined as Jewish:

First and foremost, I must affirm what in me is valuable, and should someone say to me that this valuable aspect of myself and other 'Jews' is not Jewish, I cannot regret that for a moment. (*GS* II:3, p. 837-38.)

For him, a *weak* messianic power belongs to the living generation, those human beings who share this moment in time, not to any particular ethnic, or religious, or national collective. He did not choose Central Park in New York, where Adorno and the Institute for Social Research awaited him, or Israel to join Gershom Scholem, or Moscow where his early love Asja Lacis was politically engaged, or an ultimate return from exile to Communist

East Berlin, where his friend Bertolt Brecht lived out his natural life.

Because of his indecision (or was it revolutionary patience?), Benjamin's legacy is open to us today.

7

The temporal matrix in which truth is embedded, essentially transient, is the criterion for critical judgment—a difficult idea, because it goes against conventional procedures that narrate history sequentially and at a distance. In view of the fleeting nature of truth, any attempt at permanence of historical interpretation leads to error.

Our situation demands a new form of exegesis, one that rescues the legibility of the past against the conventions of official memory.

If “progress” yields a constant heap of debris, this is due to the continuation of the same—war's destruction, economic exploitation, and turning the other of one's own collective identity into a scapegoat as the political enemy to be exterminated. Interrupting the interminable repetition of the same necessitates remembering the past through those present inhumanities of which one is at this very moment an accomplice.

Here it is someone else's past, or someone else's present that needs to come into the picture. Past events cannot provide a key to the present unless they are radically separated from a direct lineage of inheritance. When the layers of history are superimposed in a way that only one's

own history can be read through them, the horrors of the past are repeated precisely in the process of paying them infinite due. Never again ends up being always the same.

Benjamin speaks of “smashing” the continuum of history. This process entails violence. He uses “militant terminology” and “terrorist metaphors” in order to blast apart the dominant historical narrative (Werckmeister, *Icons*, 1999, p. 24).

The past ricochets off the present and scatters into enemy territory. Historical fragments are the remains of an explosion. Blasted free of official memory, the fragments of history are preserved in images. They retain the nearness of original experience, and with it, ambiguity. Their meaning is released *only* in a constellation with the present.

They harbor a warning. The gift of the past is a Trojan horse. One thinks one knows whence it comes and to whom it belongs. But the gift is to others, those the so-called rightful heirs are presently destroying.

There is nothing in human history that is foreign to us.

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