



# Walter Benjamin

## The Construction of Hell

Seamus Deane

Blood and Iron. Bismarck's famous phrase for his policy of making Germany into the dominant European state has an eerie echo in Benjamin's work on the very different cultural domination of Europe by Paris in the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup>

1 Blood and Iron, 'durch Eisen und Blut'. The phrase occurs in a speech of 1862, 'not by speeches and the will of the majority are the great questions of the time decided ... but by blood and iron'. The references to and quotations from Benjamin are drawn for the most part from the following translations and editions: Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1999), hereafter cited in text (in parentheses) and in footnotes in the format: A, followed by page number, Section or Convolute letter (upper case) and subsection letters (lower case) and numerals. Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, 4 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1996–2003), hereafter *SW*; *Volume 1: 1913–1926* (1996), ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings; *Volume 2: 1927–1934* (1999), trans. Rodney Livingstone et al., ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith; *Volume 3: 1935–1938* (2002); *Volume 4: 1938–1940* (2003), trans. Edmund Jephcott et al., ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings.

In Paris there was blood enough on the streets in the sequence of revolutions from 1848 to 1851, through the days of the Commune and of the slaughter of the Parisian workers in May 1871 by the French government of Thiers, the Franco-Prussian War in 1870–71. Increasingly, the buildings were of iron too, the first man-made, progressively adaptable, building material. The early railway stations and bridges, and the railroad tracks so often associated in the nineteenth century with 'the unmistakable dream world that attaches to them' (A 156, F3, 4), revealed what the engineer and the proletarian builders first experienced, 'what was new and decisive about these structures, the feeling of space' (A 156, F3, 5). This itself is a figure for the new intellectual vista that opens; 'just as the magnificent vistas of the city provided by the new construction in iron ... for a long time were reserved exclusively for the workers and engineers, so too the philosopher here to garner fresh perspectives must be immune to vertigo — an independent and, if need be, solitary worker' (A 459, N1a, 1). It was iron that supported the great windows and domes of the arcades and created the lines of gas-lit iron lamps, the petrified trees of the urban savannah (A 422.3, 5). The use of iron girders allowed construction on such a large scale that, by the 1860s, the traditional competition within a building between the horizontal and the vertical took on a new rhythm. In Parisian apartment

buildings, for instance, the *porte-fenêtre* opens on to a balcony of fretted iron work which creates a continuous horizontal strip that echoes the horizontal of the street, and clarifies especially the verticals at the corners and the intersections, to produce an impression of restrained mass and weight that still bespeaks the power and satisfaction of the bourgeoisie. 'The institutions of the bourgeoisie's worldly and spiritual dominance were to find their apotheosis within the framework of the boulevards' (*Exposé of 1935*, A 11). Above all, there was the 'incomparable' Eiffel Tower, the huge naked iron pylon that declared itself as pure structure, engineering and architecture combined, the concept of the Modern with no archaic ornamentation, a skeleton that is also a body, an enormous weight that inhabits the air.<sup>2</sup> The Tower was later to become a radio mast, which is fitting enough; but at first it was sheer exhibit, image as Image, not designed for anything as limiting as a use. Built as the archway to the Exposition Universelle, the exhibition that marked the centenary of the French Revolution, and built too so that it could be demolished within twenty years as per contract, it remained a monument to the New, divorced from those traditions of France (especially its Catholicism) that the Sacré-Coeur, solid and white, an assembly of stylistic forms and not a formula, soon after was designed to embody in a symbolic challenge across the skyline of Paris, each



Lead image: Adolf Hitler at the Eiffel Tower, Paris, with his generals, the sculptor Arno Breker (on his right) and architect Albert Speer (on his left), 25 June 1940. Photograph: Harwood/Keystone/Hulton Archive/Getty Images.

Left: Walter Benjamin in the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, 1936. Photograph: Gisèle Freund, courtesy of Elisabeth Pérolini.

offering a view, not just of Paris, but of modernity itself. The Eiffel Tower presides over the new Paris of Baron Haussmann, with its wheeling boulevards that segmented the city into coherent units and swept away the huddles of housing and the menace of crowds that used to infest it; this Paris was meant to be, as Versailles had once been, an embodiment of rationality and of power. In the course of its completion, there were great upheavals — of people being transferred, of streets and houses being torn up, of the mess and noise of a building site that so much of central Paris had to become before it was fully Haussmannized. Benjamin’s essay, ‘Exposé of 1835’, which opens *The Arcades Project*, identifies the political aim of the rebuilding of Paris, from the introduction of wooden paving under Louis-Philippe in the 1830s, to Haussmann’s programme — ‘to secure the city against civil war’ (*Exposé of 1939*, A 23). But, ‘The burning of Paris is the worthy conclusion to Haussmann’s work of destruction’ (*Exposé of 1935*, A 13); the Commune, the First World War and Fascism were the three catastrophes through which the nineteenth century and its capital, Paris, fell into ruin.

‘Most of the Paris arcades are built in the fifteen years following 1822 ... They are the forerunners of department stores’ (*Exposé of 1939*, A 15). Eiffel built the first great department store, Au Bon Marché, in 1850. Throughout the century, Paris remained famous for its arcades and department stores, for the appeal of the astonishing mountains of commodities, for which being new and up-to-date became an inescapable and banal fate. The new technology, that combined iron and glass (especially after Paxton’s Crystal Palace in London, in 1851) bore within it the imagery of the new functionalism that was eventually to become manifest in the skyscraper, and from the outset rehearsed the dialectical opposition of the fixity and opacity of one material (iron) against the fragility and almost utopian transparency of the other (glass), was an immense achievement in engineering and architectural rationality. Yet the arcades were not sites of rationality, but of the market, crammed with products that swiftly became junk, sifted by collectors for the objects in which they saw, or believed they saw, that time (a year, a decade, a reign)

- 2 ‘The Ring of Saturn or Some Remarks on Iron Construction’, *The Arcades Project*, 887

Passage Choiseul, Paris, c. 1910; an example of an arcade. Photograph: LL/Roger Viollet/Getty Images.



had been most successfully or memorably(!) trapped. The collector had a counterpart/opposite in the mass-market consumer; and the consumer had discovered in the arcade a new vocation — shopping. Both collecting and shopping separated the item bought from use; the point was to have it, not to use it. Most representative of all those who were attracted by this new world of building, investment, financial corruption, political domination and pleasure, was the gambler; ‘Gambling converts time into a narcotic’, [Paul] Lafargue explains gambling as an imitation in miniature of the mysteries of economic fluctuation’ (*Exposé of 1935*, A 12). Fraud and speculation on a massive scale attended upon the building of Haussmann’s Paris. And the working class, decimated in the Commune, belatedly discovered that the illusory pact of the century with the bourgeoisie had finally been exposed. In part this pact had been paraded as philanthropy, the middle classes anxiously alleviating the plight of the poor; in the end it was exposed in massacre. So there was iron in the new Paris and there also was blood. This was the composite gift

of Haussmann and Louis Napoleon, ‘the careerist serving the usurper’ (A 913), but it was by no means all.

The endless emergence of this new city from the old is one of the recurrent themes in the *Arcades* and a companion to it is the quest for the moment within that process when the new Paris decisively arrives, when the cityscape is illuminated in a flash and the accumulations of history, that had seemed so happenstance, have their inner structure suddenly revealed — if only for that instant, if only in a glimpse. In one sense, we can envisage this as a moment in a continuum between, let us say, the apparent mess of a building site and the finished work, but that only reaches part of Benjamin’s elusive thought, which is usually dialectic in form. Afflicted by the spectacular disintegrations of daily, metropolitan life (with Paris always its chief exemplar), and seeking some means by which its ‘shock’, as he called it, could be captured and overcome simultaneously in one action, Benjamin turned to the practices of art rather than of politics and found in surrealist theory and paintings and

in the montage of Eisenstein's films how the 'passagework' between arbitrary detail and significance could be negotiated. This particular dialectical enterprise, predicated on the notions of intense fracture of experience and a countervailing order to be discovered or asserted within it, found its most enduring aesthetic response in the practice and principles of montage. 'This work has to develop to the highest degree the art of citing without quotation marks. Its theory is intimately related to that of montage' (A 458, N1, 10). Adopted in ever greater variations in all the arts (although it seemed film was its natural home), it became so characteristic of European modernist literary works by the mid-1920s that it was, by the time of Joyce's death, almost routine; but it gained a second wind from about 1945, when Joyce, one of whose true fascinations was 'his attraction for Americans',<sup>3</sup> became the iconic modernist (largely because he wrote in a species of English); montage and modernism were thereafter domesticated into the critical commentary of the Free World (but still rejected since the 1930s by doctrinal Communist realism), while Kafka, the great modernist novelist for Benjamin and Adorno, faded in comparison (largely because he wrote in German and had the misfortune to have had Max Brod as his biographer and lead interpreter).<sup>4</sup>

### Looking

It is not easy to know what it is that provides the great illumination Benjamin seeks, although, indirectly, he offers various analogies. The flash is like that of an early camera apparatus in which an image is suddenly captured that might reveal a previously unnoticed pattern. Or it is like the flash of inspiration by which the great detective exposes the design that the blind accumulation of evidence by Plod the Policeman never would. In such an exposure, the overall structure is manifest in

every detail. It is the glimpse that matters; the gaze is not so much contemplative, as unseeing, even regressive. Indeed the gaze is of three kinds: the stupefied kind that Benjamin associated with the entranced mass audience of the cinema; the rapturous gaze of the devotee, or *cinéphile*, the specialist, the person who is in effect addicted and for whom rapture is an intensely private pleasure, even a prison, and not a shared joy. These first two kinds combine to form the third. When, for example, photographic stills are replaced by moving images, we experience the to-and-fro of a transition in which a reversal can suddenly take place. In this combined relationship, the third kind of gaze, the mass audience plays a critical role.<sup>5</sup>

Before traditional forms of art, such as a painting, the gaze is individual; it has a concentrated and contemplative element that is invited by the stillness of the painting, by its containment within a frame, by its repertoire of consecrated gestures. There is a literal sense in which a painting is 'timeless'. Unlike the photograph, it does not have the 'temporal factor' as part of its technology; a photograph needs exposure time. Iron construction reorganizes space, the camera reorganizes time, especially important as these categories had been assumed to be unchanging and because, on that account, they could achieve an 'auratic' quality. This famous 'aura' of the work of art dissolved in the rhythms of mass production and in the liquidation of those 'timeless' dimensions in which the sense of the sacred had traditionally nestled.<sup>6</sup> One of Baudelaire's prose poems, 'Perte d'auréole', ('Loss of halo' or 'Loss of aura'), 'spotlights the threat to the aura posed by the experience of shock' (A 375, J84a, 5). By contrast, photography and film — although other arts would come to imitate and rival these — required a different sensibility. The medium and its technology (which is itself integral to the medium, not an add-on) provides in a series of frames a series of little shocks, intolerable to the smooth traditional gaze.

3 Brian Nolan (aka Flann O'Brien), 'A Bash in the Tunnel', in John Ryan, ed., *A Bash in the Tunnel* (Brighton and London, 1970), 20

4 See Benjamin's 'Review of Brod's *Franz Kafka*', SW 3.317–21, and 'Letter to Gershom Scholem on Franz Kafka', 3.322–29. There is a radio review of Kafka, 'Franz Kafka: *Beim Bau der Chinesischen mauer*', SW, 2.494–500; and the famous essay 'Franz Kafka', 2.794–820, also included in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt (London, 1973), 111–40, along with the review of Brod, 141–48. In his 'Curriculum Vitae (III)' of 1928, SW, 2.78, Benjamin writes: 'In addition, I have been planning a book on the three great metaphysical writers of our day: Franz Kafka, James Joyce, and Marcel Proust.'

5 André Breton's *Manifeste du surréalisme* (Paris, 1924) was cited by Benjamin in footnote 39 of his famous essay, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Reproducibility' (3rd version), on this phenomenon: 'Shortly before film turned the viewing of images into a collective activity, image viewing by the individual, through the stereoscopes ... was briefly intensified.' See SW, 4.280.

6 A 343, J64a, 1: 'Mass production is the principal economic cause — and class warfare the principal social cause — of the decline of aura.'

- 7 On Chaplin, see 'Chaplin', 'Chaplin in Retrospect' and 'Hitler's Diminished Masculinity', *SW*, 1.199–200, 222–24, 792–93.
- 8 Cited in Emilie Bickerton, 'Adieu to *Cahiers*: Life Cycle of a Cinema Journal', *New Left Review*, 42 (2006), 69–98, 80
- 9 Georg Christoph Lichtenberg (1742–99), first great German aphorist; Benjamin's own *One-Way Street* (1928), *SW*, 1.444–88, or 'On the Concept of History (better known in English under the title 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' since it was published in *Illuminations*, 255–66), *SW*, 4. 389–400 or Adorno's *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life* (1951; trans. 1974) would be notable examples of works composed of aphorisms.
- 10 Susan Sontag, 'Introduction', in Walter Benjamin, *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (London, 1997), 24
- 11 'Karl Kraus', *SW*, 2.434
- 12 'Karl Kraus', *SW*, 2.448; 'And in Offenbach's operettas the bourgeois trinity of the true, the beautiful, and the good is brought together, freshly rehearsed and with musical accompaniment, in its star turn on the trapeze of idiocy.'

Thus, the new medium seems to be instantly amenable to the watching mass audience, even though the camera reveals much that the eye had never seen before. However new, it is familiar; the rhythm of the medium is fluent and yet arrives in sudden, separable images. It has a continuity founded on interruption. The mass audience is at home with this new form of looking. It cannot gaze at a film as an élite audience gazes at a traditional painting; for in response to the new medium, the gaze of the mass audience is a sequence of abrupt, lightning-fast adjustments to unreeling images that achieve an apparently natural movement. (This account would also allow for an analysis of the function of the musical track in film, in the history of which accompaniment is replaced by background music until gradually the music is fully incorporated into the predominantly visual medium as an interpretation, enhancement and even as a form of coercion.) In this third gaze we witness a historical dialectic between individual and collective, between a steady, unified gaze and a gaze constituted of a series of glimpses. In slow motion, the gaze would be seen to be a series of glimpses, but that is the point. The speed of looking has altered. Thus, the mass audience is avant-garde when it comes to looking at Charlie Chaplin and regressive when looking at Picasso; it recognizes the rapid, jerky movements of Chaplin as a revelation of something that was always there; it is a form of analysis in which hilarity is provoked by recognition.<sup>7</sup> Picasso, on the other hand, mounts an assault on seeing; because the general appeal of recognizability (realism) of the photo or film is missing, this looks merely like outrageous eccentricity. Later, in 1965, Jacques Rivette, director of *Paris Belongs to Us*, introduced a similar account of the 'pure gaze' of the submissive cinema audience which may owe something to Benjamin, but which certainly retains within it that Benjaminian heritage shared by so many — the recognition that in a mass society there is an intimate connection between the stupefaction of the audience,

starkly silhouetted in the darkness before the blaze of the screen, and individual addiction, however diverse its forms.<sup>8</sup> This connection perhaps derives from 'the two aspects of shock — its technological function in the mechanism and its sterilizing function in the experience' (A 692, Y 11, 2).

For Benjamin, this kind of looking and of presentation, founded on interruption or intermittence, has literary approximations — the series of aphorisms (as, for instance, in Lichtenberg, or in modern instances, Karl Kraus, Benjamin himself, Adorno), epigrams, paradoxes, any writing that, like his own, stops and starts and yet is fluent, turns on itself.<sup>9</sup> It evokes his own favoured imageries of the maze, labyrinth, arcade, vortex, web, network of streets, trail of clues, of indecision suddenly mastered by decisiveness, but just for a moment. Susan Sontag said it best: 'His style of thinking and writing, incorrectly called aphoristic, might better be called freeze-frame baroque'.<sup>10</sup> This vertiginous writing never allows its gaze to leave its ubiquitous contemporary enemy, 'the empty phrase. Which is the linguistic expression of the despotism with which, in journalism, topicality sets up its dominion over things.'<sup>11</sup> New social conditions, not just new technology, produce new forms of public communication and the consequence can be chillingly regressive. Journalism, radio and film, like operetta in music (Offenbach is the target here), blend new technologies with old clichés in a peculiarly nauseating soda pop for which the millions thirst. A sugar-laden commodity becomes the water of life. 'Just as prattle seals the enslavement of language with stupidity, so operetta transfigures stupidity through music.'<sup>12</sup> Chatter and triviality are not side-effects of these forms of mass production; they are its goal. Therefore, the condensed, compacted forms of the aphorism, epigram or philosophical parable enter into a constant battle with this new commodity of vacuity, an emptiness to which they may often surrender in their effort to overcome it.

*'Narcotic of the Century'*

As we can see from his own (controlled) experiments with hashish, Benjamin also wanted to distinguish within addiction itself, both the possibility of enslavement and that of exploration — in this latter instance, making the addiction an adventure into forbidden areas to gain an otherwise inaccessible insight (a long-standing inquiry in the nineteenth century, but underdeveloped in its political implications until Benjamin).<sup>13</sup> But Benjamin was suspicious of the linkages between religious ecstasies and drugs which helped drag surrealism into the regressions of spiritualism.

But the true, creative overcoming of religious illumination certainly does not lie in narcotics. It resides in a *profane illumination*, a materialistic, anthropological inspiration, to which hashish, opium, or whatever else can give an introductory lesson. (But a dangerous one; and the religious lesson is stricter).<sup>14</sup>

But while punctual revelations provided by chemicals are not revolutions, they may be understood as allegories of revolution or of utopia. And they are more than that; they reveal a structure the waking consciousness almost entirely ignores:

The appearances of superposition, of overlap, which come with hashish may be grasped through the concept of similitude. When we say that one face is similar to another, we mean that certain features of this second face appear to us in the first, without the latter's ceasing to be what it has been ... The category of similarity, which for the waking consciousness has only minimal relevance, attains unlimited relevance in the world of hashish. There, we may say, everything is face ... Under these conditions, even a sentence ... puts on a face, and this face resembles that of the sentence standing opposed to it.

In this way every truth points manifestly to its opposite, and this state of affairs explains the existence of doubt. Truth becomes something living; it lives solely in the rhythm by which statement and counterstatement displace each other in order to think each other. (A 418, M1a, 1)

He understood the images in Baudelaire's work that related to hashish as having a similar function — to intensify 'the historical hallucination of sameness which had taken root with the commodity economy'.<sup>15</sup> It is out of that sameness, of the kind that Daumier represented in his lithographs, where everyone had the same recognizable face of greed or meanness, that the possibility of reversal arises. It reaches such a rate of intoxicated hallucination that its sameness becomes semblance — that again is to say that in the poem or in the lithograph we see emerge the historical character of the condition, not simply a repeated grimace. Therefore, sameness is the one face repeated over and over; semblance occurs when those repeated faces merge into the face of a class or type that has become historically important; and the expression on that face — say, an expression of greed — is also taken to be typical. This is the kind of relationship that Lukács had been seeking to establish in the novel, identifying the process whereby the individual becomes generic, all the more difficult in a period in which uniformity has become a social, political and economic value.<sup>16</sup> From sameness to semblance is the distance travelled in Daumier and in Baudelaire; but as the speed necessary to cover that distance increases, so we can begin to recognize that atomized personal experience does in fact have as its other 'face', historical, collective experience. This tempo of recognition marks the characteristic prelude to what Benjamin called 'dialectics at a standstill', the Messiah-like revelation, so hoped-for, so often predicted by the most earnest and unremitting interpreters. At this speed, the present begins to warp; the old image

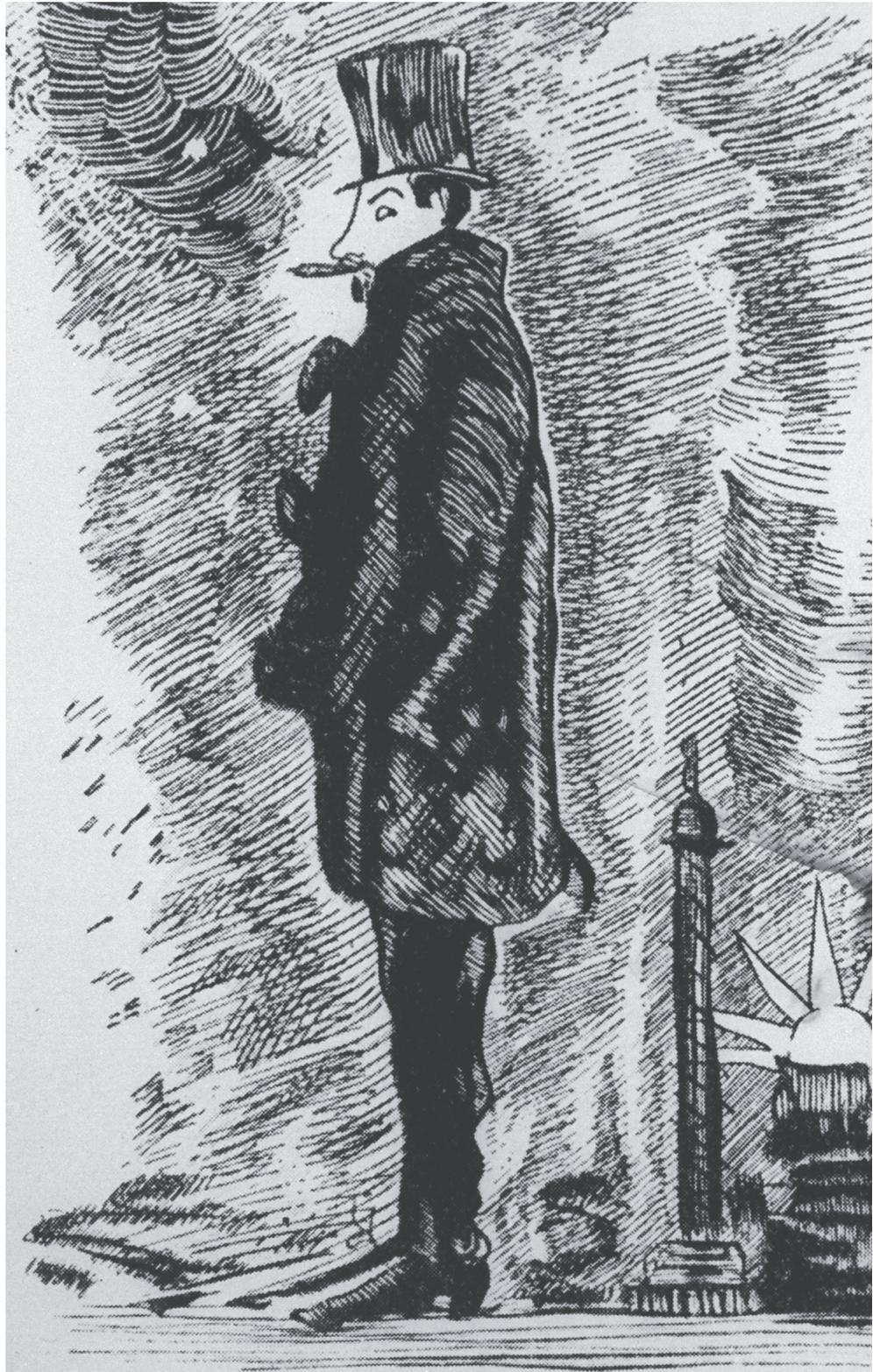
13 See the collection of Benjamin's notes on drug-taking and its possibilities for understanding modernity in Walter Benjamin, *On Hashish*, ed. Howard Eiland, Introduction by Marcus Boon (Cambridge, Mass., and London, 2006).

14 'Surrealism' in *SW*, 2.209

15 *SW*, 4.208

16 Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, first published in Berlin in 1920, trans. Anna Bostock (London, 1971), particularly chapters 3 and 4

Charles Baudelaire (1821–67), self-portrait drawn by the poet and critic, while under the influence of hashish. Photograph: Time Life Pictures/Mansell/Time Life Pictures/Getty Images.



it has been bearing begins to distort and dissolve. This is the image of preordained progress or development — really a dogma masquerading as a discovery. This is what Benjamin calls the ‘now’ (*Nu*); a new image begins to form within it and finally fills it so that it bursts open in a flash:

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*>. Only dialectical images are genuinely historical — that is, not archaic — images. (A 463, N3. 1)<sup>17</sup>

A constellation, then, is a previously unrecognized structure or network of relations that was always there, like the unconscious, and appears to us, like it, in articulated images, laden with the weight of the past and yet haloed in the light of discovery and recognition. So it is very far from exhibiting any arrow line, or advancing pattern of stadial evolutionary progress, like the Marxist philosophy of history Benjamin wants to replace with this messianic version of the breakthrough, the arrival which is always in preparation as the event which has already happened but is belatedly recognized. Its traces are there to be read but the full image will emulsify suddenly, giving the shock, not of fracture but of completion, its dialectical opposite. It is no surprise, therefore, to find that Benjamin’s chief animus is against historicism, the inverse of Marxism, as he understood both. He derided historicism’s ambition to show things as they really were and, along with it, he derides too the concept of ‘timeless truth’, which seems at first to contrast with historicism but actually

provides its monotonous undertone. A ‘fortified position of historicism is evident in the idea that history is something which can be narrated. In a materialist investigation, the epic moment will always be blown apart in the process of construction.’<sup>18</sup> This is the discursive form of the visual contrast between the gaze and the flash or glimpse. Instead of that continuous sequence of conventional historicist prose, which is in its very form bound up with the assumption of a smooth, unravelling and wholly explicable sequence, *The Arcades Project* deploys paratactic combinations of quotations, dissolving the univocal authority of the narrator and of the narrative into abrupt, discordant combinations. From the juxtapositions emerge otherwise hidden constellations. Benjamin is the Detective:

A remark by Ernst Bloch apropos of *The Arcades Project*: ‘History displays its Scotland Yard badge.’ It was in the context of a conversation in which I was describing how this work — comparable, in method, to the process of splitting the atom — liberates the enormous energies of history that are bound up in the ‘once upon a time’ of classical historiography. The history that showed things ‘as they really were’ was the strongest narcotic of the century. (A 463, N3. 4)<sup>19</sup>

For him the present always stands in need of recovery. To effect this, a new kind of experiment must be undertaken, as most notably it had already been, he believed, by those great writers who began to rebuild or even build for the first time the internal structures of consciousness, memory and therefore of history — Baudelaire, Proust, perhaps Freud.

Without such recovery, there is no present; there is only the plastic past of the old Soviet joke — we can’t predict the future but we can always change the past. That is what can be done when the present is without

17 Cf. A 456, N1, 1; ‘In the fields with which we are concerned, knowledge comes only in lightning flashes. The text is the long roll of thunder that follows.’

18 ‘Paralipomena to “On the Concept of History”’, in *SW*, 4.406

19 See A 442, M13a, 2: ‘Performed in the figure of the flâneur is that of the detective ... It suited him very well to see his indolence presented as a plausible front, behind which, in reality, hides the riveted attention of an observer who will not let the unsuspecting observer out of his sight.’

the dimension of the ‘now’, and lies instead under the spell of the ‘new’. It is repeatedly made to march in lockstep with that version of the past — ‘civilization’, ‘progress’, ‘development’, the key terms in a satanic lexicon. From this came the phantasmagoric world of the First World War, the arena in which nineteenth-century technology reached its zenith. Like a dark enchantment, it passed over Europe and changed everything — except property relations. That is the concentration, the obsession, within modern technological capitalism, that everything should change so that everything would stay the same.

Although the marriage of a messianic theology and Marxism in Benjamin is not at all a happy one, it is memorable for the fortunes of both. Certainly it scandalized Benjamin’s contrasting friends and mentors, the Talmudic scholar Gershom Scholem and the stalwart of the Frankfurt Institute, Adorno. For the first, Marxism, for the second, Judaism, was a farrago of unenlightened nonsense Benjamin would have done well to abandon. Perhaps he had too much of both ever to be enough of one for either of them.

### *A Cast of Characters*

Benjamin’s work has an ensemble of ‘characters’, whisper versions of the predators who stalk Balzac’s novels, although never so vulpine, but just as much products and expressions of Paris. They are all swamped in leisure, an intense version of it, closer to a nervous apathy than relaxation, although Benjamin repeatedly seeks to distinguish leisure from idleness, to which he devotes a whole Convolute in *The Arcades Project*:

In feudal society, the leisure of the poet is a recognized privilege. It is only in bourgeois society that the poet becomes an idler. Idleness seeks to avoid any sort

of tie to the idler’s line of work, and ultimately to the labor process in general. That distinguishes it from leisure. (A 802–03, m2a, 5, m3, 1)

Perhaps these figures are better understood as gradations of an idea that increasingly achieves realization as it is pursued.

He picks his way fastidiously from the aristocratic figure of the connoisseur, via that of the collector to the finally pathological figure of the addict (including the gambler and the counterfeiter), allowing us to glimpse how aristocratic leisure is increasingly converted in this progression into a hunger that time can never satisfy, for the gaze and the longing become more and more consuming, manic, until the addict becomes his addiction. This is one of the typical mutations from pre-modern to modern, from a state in which a carefully nurtured and educated individual taste becomes an increasingly generic mass social condition.

The connoisseur is chronologically the first; he still retains his leisure and his refinement as a class privilege. He yields to the collector, who brings with him the smell of mass production, of the arcades, of the sound of a bell tinkling in a dimly lit antique shop, of a taste that is in the process of exchanging the exquisite example for the nostalgic emblem, although the tempo of the quest perceptibly quickens as the idea of a complete understanding of the world is surrendered to the idea of a complete acquisition of a range of the objects that the world produces.

One need only study with due exactitude the physiognomy of the homes of great collectors. Then one would have a key to the nineteenth-century interior. Just as in the former case the objects gradually take possession of the residence, so in the latter it is a piece of furniture that would retrieve and assemble the stylistic traces of the centuries. (A 218, I3, 2)

Collections have an intimate relation to interiors, as well as to interiority (or ‘inwardness’); where they are amassed is usually called their ‘home’, although the items in themselves have of course no home. But the christening of a place as a home for objects indicates a sickness. Home is an interiority (a condition) that is only available as exteriority (a place). Benjamin quotes Kierkegaard on this in Convolute I (‘The Interior, The Trace’): “‘The art would be to be able to feel homesick, even though one is at home. Expertness in the use of illusion is required for this.’ ... This is the formula for the interior’ (A 218, I3, 5).

After the rather dingy collector comes the dandy, who collects the various ‘selves’ that make up his ‘self’, and who shines in his plumage against the dark uniforms of the male respectable classes and of the dirtier, but equally uniform, masses. He is at once an anachronism, the mimic aristocrat of an earlier era, and an avant-garde figure of shock, violating sexual convention and shrilly mocking the solemnities and sobrieties of the respectable. In him the prospect of complete aesthetic autonomy as a political and social project briefly threatens. Subjectivity was never so well dressed, but clearly, in his view of the matter, either it or mass society would have to go. (And of course, it went.) In his clothes, he makes his home; he carries his home on his back. In the composite figure of the dandy, the connoisseur returns to make a style of disdain and satiety; to be bored is a form of distinction. ‘Boredom—as index to participation in the sleep of the collective. Is this the reason it seems distinguished, so that the dandy makes a show of it?’ (A 108, D3, 7) And in the amalgam, the collector too reappears, with his habits of accumulation, trying to separate the value of a thing from its function. But this intervention neither stops nor slows the pace of remorseless production and consumption; those who regard themselves as doing that by their modified or different variations on consumption, merely demonstrate that to be so eager to be in

advance of their time is to be dominated by the wish to escape from its realities.

These figures have very sharp profiles in Benjamin’s work, although there are others in lesser roles in the cast for his *vie de bohème*, less distinct, but cousinly. All of them shared the conviction that they were members of a group, a cell, an élite cohort, that had separated from the middle classes and had a silent contract with the masses — usually to redeem them from their misery but more usually to rouse them from their supposed slumber. With these subordinate groupings, leisure is in shorter supply, although it did flourish well enough in those of them who were unemployed. They would most often be conspirators (anarchists especially), poets, émigrés, or journalists, sometimes all four; their avocations might be occasional or full-time. Certainly, they had to face more frontally the problems of economic survival than their grander counterparts; but in them the relationship between work (a futile, demeaning activity) and leisure (furtive, nocturnal, adventurous, the time/place of ‘real’ life) was corrosive, typically presenting itself in an ostensibly subversive ‘radicalism’ and embittered personality. (Benjamin came to consider *The Communist Manifesto* as their dismissal notice from history.<sup>20</sup>) They stood in relation to the real revolutionary as once the alchemist did to the new scientist. These groups thought of themselves as avant-garde; but they were living in a deluded state because, like the dandy, they thought that their egoism was revolutionary, politically and intellectually superior to the role of the collective in modern life. All forms of liberal individualism, even these exotic versions, were unconscious of the collective oblivion which they helped to create. But that — the collective itself — is a central problem, perhaps one that Benjamin never got past. The life of the peacock individual could be seen as primarily a form of display, and in its ‘decadence’ could be understood as dominated by addiction, including the

20 In Part III, 3, ‘Critical-Utopian Socialism and Communism’; Marx’s *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, first published in London in 1848, has generally been known since 1872 as *The Communist Manifesto*.

- 21 See, for a contemporary instance of this attempt to reconfigure the crowd theory of the nineteenth century and the Marxist proletariat, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's formulation of the idea of 'multitude' in *Empire* (Cambridge, Mass., and London, 2000), 60–66, 71–75.
- 22 Benjamin translated part of Aragon's book into German; it seemed to him to be a precursor of his own work on the arcades.

addiction to shocking the respectable classes. But how were the deluded masses of people, entrapped in the idiocy of modern urban life, ever to become the political subject of history, Marx's proletariat, Benjamin's own 'collective'?<sup>21</sup> What *could* work on them if the shock treatment of the surrealists, by far the most politically formidable of these groups, did not? The surrealists were, in their practice, revolutionary, but the masses turned away from experimental art to kitsch. A passage in Convolute K addresses this:

Socialism would never have entered the world if its proponents had sought only to excite the enthusiasm of the working classes for a better order of things. What made for the power and authority of the movement was that Marx understood how to interest the workers in a social order which would both benefit them and appear to them as just. It is exactly the same with art. At no point in time, no matter how utopian, will anyone win the masses over to a higher art; they can be won over only by one nearer to them. And the difficulty consists precisely in finding a form for art as such that, with the best conscience in the world, one could hold that it *is* a higher art. This will never happen with most of what is propagated by the avant-garde of the bourgeoisie ... The masses positively require from the work of art (which, for them, has its place in the circle of consumer items) something that is warming. Here the flame that is most readily kindled is that of hatred. Its heat, however, burns or sears without providing the 'heart's ease' which qualifies art for consumption. Kitsch, on the other hand, is nothing more than art with a 100 per cent, absolute and instantaneous availability for consumption. Precisely within the consecrated forms of expression, therefore, kitsch and art stand irreconcilably opposed. But for developing, living forms, what matters

is ... that they take 'kitsch' dialectically up into themselves, and hence bring themselves near to the masses while yet surmounting the kitsch. Today, perhaps, film alone is equal to this task — or, at any rate, more ready for it than any other form. (A 395, K3a.1)

The first home for kitsch was the arcade, recognized as such by the surrealists, who indulged it as a liberation from the pompous and academic notions of art and propriety that were to them deadly and outdated. And it was Louis Aragon's *Paysan de Paris* that inspired the *The Arcades Project*, so much so that Benjamin could barely breathe when reading it for the first time.<sup>22</sup> The surrealists discovered the arcades; Benjamin politicized them, saw in them the isthmus, the passageway, which connected the external life of the street to the internal life of consciousness, in which the milling crowd could be seen as the collective in its living quarters:

Streets are the dwelling place of the collective. The collective is an eternally wakeful, eternally agitated being that — in the space between the building fronts — lives experiences, understands, and invents as much as individuals do within the privacy of their own four walls ... the arcade was the drawing room. More than anywhere else, the street reveals itself in the arcade as the furnished and familiar interior of the masses. (A 879, d°, 1)

### *Phantasmagoria*

However, within this strange living space, interior and exterior at once, amidst both the collective and the bourgeoisie — although Benjamin seems to indicate that it was more shocking for the latter, since it was more conscious of the (richly deserved) erosion of its traditional power — an epidemic had begun. In his bitter rejection of the middle class, whose son he

was, Benjamin reserved a particular bile for the privileged and benighted inhabitants of Vienna; it was no surprise to him that this was Freud's city, although its sickness was general all over Europe. (Vienna's dialectical opposite is Naples, the 'porous' city in which public and private consciousness, architecture as the maze of activity rather than the labyrinth of doom, the ruin as living space, evoke from Benjamin one of his rare lyric accounts of utopia, of the city of psychic and social health.<sup>23</sup>) In Vienna, one of the symptoms and sources of the presiding sickness was the *feuilleton* and its great diagnostician was Karl Kraus, towards whom Benjamin had an ambivalent jealous-admiring attitude. The epidemic disease caused the loss of experience, replaced it with a kind of instantaneity, and found its ripest victim in the private individual, attacking him through the 'nerves': 'How much renunciation and how much irony lie in the curious struggle for the "nerves", the last root fibres of the Viennese to which Kraus could still find Mother Earth adhering.'<sup>24</sup> However, the traces of Mother Earth became ever fainter as the epidemic intensified; the 'reduced human being of our days' was forced to 'seek sanctuary in the temple of living things in that most withered form: the form of a private individual'.<sup>25</sup> Privacy became privation and with that, the separation between the experience human beings had amassed over time and the slash of the instant sensation, unbridgeable:

On the *feuilleton*. It was a matter of injecting experience — as it were, intravenously — with the poison of sensation; that is to say, highlighting within ordinary experience the character of immediate experience. To this end, the experience of the big-city dweller presented itself. The *feuilletonist* turns this to account. He renders the city strange to its inhabitants. He is thus one of the first technicians called up by the heightened need for immediate experiences. (A 803, m3a, 2)

This sharpened, shallowed experience readily atrophied within conditions of mass production; the very form of knowledge and its traditional transmission systems changed:

Just as the industrial labor process separates off from handicraft, so the form of communication corresponding to this labor process — information — separates off from the form of communication corresponding to the artisanal process of labor, which is storytelling ... This connection must be kept in mind if one is to form an idea of the explosive force contained within information. This force is liberated in sensation. With the sensation, whatever still resembles wisdom, oral tradition, or the epic side of truth is razed to the ground. (A 804, m3a, 5)

'Literature submits to montage in the *feuilleton*.' (*Exposé of 1935*, A 13) The soundbite, the subeditor's heading, the cliché (even when mangled, as it often is), these are the moulds of journalistic banality, attempting always to stimulate for a moment the audience which the very process of newspaper production and the industrial rate of writing finally subdue into listless acceptance. The journalist is someone with nothing to say and the mass-produced skills with which to say it, over and over. Even in a Kraus, the bias of journalism as a genre towards cheapness is hard to resist; even he converts wisdom into opinion in his pursuit of the condensed phrase that, in conditions of mass production, becomes the empty phrase, released of its density so that it can be absorbed by the popular audience, while the writer strives to leave the signature of his subjectivity, of 'the famous journalist', upon his shrunken work. Kraus, though, in his opposition to the First World War and to the pharisaic nature of bourgeois respectability, did expose a vital passagework in modern history:

Kraus lived in a world in which the most shameful act was still the *faux pas*; he

23 'Naples', SW, 1.414–21

24 'Karl Kraus', SW, 2.438

25 'Karl Kraus', SW, 2.438

26 'Karl Kraus', *SW*, 2.436

27 *SW*, 3.32–49. See also 'Exchange with Theodor W. Adorno on the Essay "Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century"', 50–67, and *SW*, 4.3–92. See also, in the same volume, the 'Exchange with Theodor W.

Adorno on "The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire"', 99–113.

28 Balzac, *Old Goriot* (1834), trans. Marion Ayton Crawford (London, 1951), 74–77

distinguishes between the degrees of the monstrous, and does so precisely because his criterion is never that of bourgeois respectability, which once above the threshold of trivial misdemeanour becomes so quickly short of breath that it can form no conception of villainy on a world-historical scale.<sup>26</sup>

So Kraus (not to mention Marx) is a reminder that a dialectic reversal can take place, that journalism's displacement of literature can be countered in and by philosophy, that instant opinion *can* cross over into truth; perhaps, though, Benjamin regarded himself (rather than Kraus) as the writer whose work would enact that reversal. He had done his successful best to sabotage his academic career but then his other unsuccessful career as freelance intellectual was itself sabotaged by political circumstances. Still, it was the great intellectual demand he made of himself that was central to his failure, however brilliantly he responded to it in his first and only complete work published in his lifetime, the dense, seminal *Origins of German Tragedy* (1928), then in his famous individual essays and in the breathtaking accomplishments of *One-Way Street* (also 1928) and the unfinished, unfinishable and deliberate ruin of *The Arcades Project*. The demand was this: to become the creator of a work but not its author, to abandon an isolating subjectivity for immersion in the collectivity, to be one voice in a choir, one of the quoted in a composite mass of quotation from which a narrative or narratives had been released. Parataxis is not a rhetorical device here; it is now a principle of form. These constellated narratives did not take the shape of antique myths or epics; nor were they whimsically eccentric 'modern' self-communings. Both those elements would be glimpsable within them but they would not be their moulding forces. It is evident that, for example, the great essays 'Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century' and 'The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire',

written in 1935 and 1938 respectively, both unpublished in Benjamin's lifetime, are integrated into *The Arcades Project*, but that their form has been exploded and their content now glitters like shrapnel in the body of the larger work, reflecting in and off the commentaries of scores of other writers, in kaleidoscopic patterns the essays could not otherwise create.<sup>27</sup> Thus *The Arcades Project* is now recognizably a work of the same generation as *Finnegans Wake*, except that it is even more nakedly a construction, free of the traditional padding of the basic mythic narrative in which Joyce embedded his repeated, interlacing structure. Like the iron furniture which people used to cover in wood or plush, in order to hide its starkness and stifle its functional candour, *The Arcades Project* rises out of the nineteenth century as its most complete ruin, the weight and debauchery of the whole era melted down to the startling dinosaur skeleton of a civilization that had disappeared in a catastrophe it had brought upon itself — taking Benjamin with it.

### *The Arcades*

Modernism, seen in a Benjaminian light, is the attempt by the imagination to dominate reality dialectically transformed into the subordination of the imagination by capital. It is a process that involved the acclimatization of the masses to the spectacle, which took its early forms in the various -ramas, a long list of which, parodied by Balzac in *Père Goriot*, is given in Convolute Q — georama, diorama, panorama, etcetera.<sup>28</sup> The illusion created by the technology for their audiences is a surround of images — a map of France or of the world, lives of famous people in condensed and simplified versions, viewed in sections as the diorama wheels rumbled in their grooves. Benjamin had declared that '... technology is not the mastery of nature but of the relation between nature and man. Men as a species completed

their development thousands of years ago; but mankind as a species is just beginning his.<sup>29</sup> Yet technology, in harness with capitalism, dominated man by the creation of a world of enchantment, the glittering, nefarious phantasmagoria of the arcades. While ‘the energies that technology develops beyond this threshold [of human needs] are destructive’, exhibiting themselves in war and propaganda, this may be said to have ‘occurred behind the back of the last century’, which was still unaware of their destructive potential. Like the early twentieth-century Social Democrats, who remained in thrall to the illusions of postivism, who ‘saw the past as having been gathered up and stored forever in the granaries of the present’, the most grievous shocks were yet to come.<sup>30</sup> But the introductory music had begun.

‘Architecture is the most important testimony to latent “mythology”. And the most important architecture of the nineteenth century is the arcade’ (A 834). The latent mythology of the modern era is the market, with its demented believers in the naturalness of the cycle of production and consumption in its ever-accelerating spin that deepens into the three-dimensional vortex of ‘development’. Marx’s account, in his Introduction to the *Grundrisse* of the dialectic of production and consumption (completed by distribution), is amplified by Benjamin’s recognition that in consumption there is a libidinal appeal that is actually intensified by bewilderment.<sup>31</sup> To be a consumer, one must be dazed into a state of arousal that must be even more powerful than revolutionary fervour, a Parisian disease for which only an addiction to Parisian pleasure was the effective cure. All pleasures were there, to be bought; buying was not only a pleasure in itself, it was a gateway to other pleasures, a brilliant surrogate for freedom. The flâneur

makes himself available in purchasability. In venality of this kind,

[he] outdoes the whore; one might say that he takes the abstract concept of “For Sale”-ness on a stroll through the streets. He fulfills this concept only in his last incarnation: I mean, in the figure of the sandwich man.<sup>32</sup>

Bewilderment can be a pleasant state of shock, in which constant stimulation becomes a form of leisure. Indeed, leisured idleness is the most receptive soil for this entwining plant and the person most luxuriously entangled in its coils is the flâneur, who has fled from the dirt and noise of the street (not yet the boulevard) to the comparative hush and cleanness of the arcade, where his senses can open to the world of rinsed sensations, rather than curl up in disgust at the stench, dung and mud of the narrow thoroughfares and their even narrower pavements. The broad pavements of the boulevards and the department stores with their great glassed fronts eventually ended the dominance of the arcades about 1880, although that dominance and appeal was in fact enhanced for a time by the chaos of urban construction. But for sixty years, as Paris under Louis-Philippe and Guizot became a city of shopkeepers and failed to renew the revolutionary and Bonapartist history of its heroic political age, except as farce — as Marx so memorably described the tinpot dictatorship of Napoleon III — consumerism steadily digested the political and thereafter lived on its meal for two generations while France, the giant of fashion and culture, dwindled into a political pygmy.<sup>33</sup> The ‘meretricious Paris of the Second Empire’ disappeared briefly in the days of the Commune: ‘No longer was Paris the rendezvous of British landlords, Irish absentees, American ex-slaveholders and shoddy men, Russian ex-serfowners and Wallachian boyards.’ But this was the Paris overcome in the massacres of May 1871, amid the celebrations of the bourgeoisie, whom Marx believed (rather desperately) to be simultaneously attending upon the obsequies of their own class. ‘The Paris

29 *One-Way Street*, SW, 1.487

30 ‘Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian’, SW, 3.267

31 Karl Marx, ‘Introduction to the *Grundrisse*’, in Marx, *Later Political Writings*, ed. Terrell Carver (Cambridge, 1996), 133–40

32 ‘Exchange with Theodor W. Adorno on “The Flâneur” Section of “The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire”’, SW, 4.208

33 Benjamin often commented on the dual nature or history of Paris: ‘Paris is a counterpart in the social order to what Vesuvius is in the geographic order: a menacing, hazardous massif, an ever-active hotbed of revolution. But just as the slopes of Vesuvius, thanks to the layers of lava that cover them, have been transformed into paradisaical orchards, so the lava of revolutions provides uniquely fertile ground for the blossoming of art, festivity, fashion’ (A 83, C1, 6). On Louis Napoleon’s dictatorship, see *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*, in Marx, *Later Political Writings*, 31–127.

34 Marx, *The Civil War in France*, in *Later Political Writings*, 195

35 Benjamin translated two volumes of Proust's novel, *À l'ombre des jeunes filles* and *Le Côté de Guermantes*, 'two of the most perfect translations in German', according to Adorno in 'A Portrait of Walter Benjamin', in Theodor W. Adorno, *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, Mass., 1983), 230.

of M. Thiers was not the real Paris of the "vile multitude", but a phantom Paris, the Paris of the [renegade] *francs-fleurs*, the Paris of the Boulevards, male and female — the Paris of the rich, the capitalist, the gilded, the idle Paris, now thronging with its lackeys, its blacklegs, its literary *bohème*, and its *cocottes* at Versailles, Saint-Denis ...<sup>34</sup> This Paris leaves its traces everywhere in Benjamin's Paris; it is a site of carnage and debauch, both of which realities are integral to its incessant parade of its own stylish, fashionable subjectivity, for which the political had become a spectacle. The element of self-regard in this wilderness of mirrors led to the objectifying of the person, most obviously in the trade of prostitution:

Where doors and walls are made of mirrors, there is no telling outside from in, with all the equivocal illumination. Paris is a city of mirrors. The asphalt of its roadways smooth as glass, and at the entrance to all bistros, glass partitions. A profusion of windowpanes and mirrors in cafés, so as to make the inside brighter and to give all the nooks and crannies, into which Parisian taverns separate, a pleasing amplitude. Women here look at themselves more than elsewhere, and from this comes the distinctive beauty of the Parisienne. Before any man catches sight of her, she has already seen herself ten times reflected. But the man, too, sees his own physiognomy flash by. He gains his image more quickly here than elsewhere and also sees himself more quickly merged with this, his image. Even the eyes of passersby are veiled mirrors. And over the wide bed of the Seine, over Paris, the sky is spread out like the crystal mirror hanging over the drab beds in brothels. (A 877, c°, 1)

### *Baudelaire*

Hell had never seemed more attractive, repetitive and addictive, afflicted by an

ennui that was deepened by stimuli designed to erase it. This was especially so in Paris and, in Paris, especially in Baudelaire. It was Baudelaire who captained the ship of death in the pursuit of the new, but oddly not through the crystalline seas of the arcades. His poetry invokes the onset of modernity, but as a demoralization and a debauch. These strange territories of glass and polished marble, chilled by the solitude of crowds, heated by the devouring beat of commerce that sent a rippling erotic appeal through the cavernous ennui of their enclosed spaces, appear instead in the lustrous prose of Proust; a passage from *Du Côté de chez Swann*, says Benjamin,

shows very clearly how the old Romantic sentiment for landscape dissolves and a new Romantic conception of landscape emerges — of landscape that seems, rather, to be a cityscape, if it is true that the city is the properly sacred ground of *flânerie*. In this passage, at any rate, it would be presented as such for the first time since Baudelaire (whose work does not yet portray the arcades, though they were so numerous in his day). (A 420–21, M2a, 1)<sup>35</sup>

Yet the *flâneur* is not an idler, a creature of sensation only; he is an observer who has an empathy with the collective that allows him to feel for its degradation into a crowd, even though the feeling is never untainted by disgust, nor compromised by any flight from solitude. 'The Man of the Crowd' oscillates between anonymity and demonism, although, true to his literary origins in Poe, he can never disentangle the sinister from the absurd elements in his glide through the streets. (But Benjamin disagrees with Baudelaire that this figure could be a *flâneur*.) Is he an utterly new and evil phenomenon, or is he just a hothouse specimen from the romantic nursery? Baudelaire's *Fleurs du Mal* so combines in its title the elements of the orthodox and the shocking that the '*mal*' loses half the force

of the blow it wants to deliver, whatever associations of prostitution or satanism it generates.<sup>36</sup> For the histrionic aspect of the title or of the poems rarely separates itself entirely from a traditional or archaic grounding. However, this grounding can sometimes dispel the merely histrionic and lend to the work a metaphysical weight. ‘The concept of the demonic comes into play where the concept of modernity converges with Catholicism’ (A 236, J4a, 4). In some simple ways, Baudelaire signals the survival in his work of the ancient religious tradition and of the importance of the survival in it of allegory, a point Benjamin insists on.<sup>37</sup> Baudelaire’s title is of a piece with a general transfer of the floral motif to industrial and decorative design in which there is an attempt to give to self-consciously modern materials some of the prestige, even the ‘prettiness’, of an older convention. Flowers, for instance, grew too abundantly on iron railings, in arts and crafts wallpapers and hand-pressed book ornaments and decorations ever to lose their old-fashioned appeal as ‘natural’, ‘organic’ elements, tendrils and fronds surviving in a stark technological world; evil in that context is more like bad taste, it cannot escape modernism’s hapless inclination to kitsch, which is part of its rebellion, not against tradition, but against the new materials in which it found itself compelled to inaugurate a revolution in form (iron, concrete, plastic, and the like). ‘The life of flowers in Jugendstil: from the flowers of evil extends an arc, over the flower-souls of Odilon Redon, to the orchids which Proust weaves into the eroticism of his Swann’ (A 556, S7a, 3).<sup>38</sup> Or, ‘It may be supposed that in the typical Jugendstil line — conjoined in fantastic montage — nerve and electrical wire not infrequently meet (and the vegetal nervous system in particular operates, as a limiting form, to mediate between the world of organism and the world of technology)’ (A 558, S9, 2). Neurological shock is often imaged in the unexpected circuitries of languid line or

gesture; the nerve is a frond as much as it is a wire.<sup>39</sup> Shock is knowable as such only in leisure; relayed through the feudal ‘wiring’ of arches and ferns, it is always delayed shock. In such imagery, the ‘new’ tries to escape from the ‘natural’ and intricacy of pattern becomes an index of cultural depth and complexity. The iconography of Catholicism or of *ancien régime* architecture is extolled as a lost repertoire of crafts and meanings that hum with a meaning that the stark geometries of iron cannot transmit. Such kitsch is often a central element in the jejune political regressions that, throughout modernism, exploited the idea of, for instance, the traditional building (church or mansion) with all its plasterwork and sculpture, outfacing the inhuman elements of a new dispensation, characterized by mass-production and a banality of the new that exceeded even their own banality of the old. Even the furniture and the pattern of its arrangements in the pseudo-castles or fortress apartments of the middle classes were legible to Benjamin in the light of a derision that he shares with Lukács, whom he quotes to the effect that ‘from the perspective of the philosophy of history, it is characteristic of the middle classes that their new opponent, the proletariat, should have entered the arena at a moment when the old adversary, feudalism, was not yet vanquished. And they will never quite have done with feudalism’ (A 215, I2, 3).<sup>40</sup>

Benjamin’s reading completes Baudelaire’s portrait of *flânerie*. In each case, the *flâneur* is a self-portrait of the intellectual *in extremis*, attempting (vainly) to recover in the present the past that has been lost, before it is too late. It is too easy to say that it always is too late; nevertheless, recovery is badly delayed; there are always unforeseen complications, the most subtle and decisive of which is that the newly reified world cannot be redeemed in the sense that what preceded it can be restored. There is no question of that. Baudelaire’s achievement has nothing to do with restoration, which

36 This theme recurs throughout *Convolute J*, Baudelaire; see A 316ff.

37 Several quotations from Baudelaire himself and from Gautier on Baudelaire emphasize the importance of allegory for the former’s poetry. See, for instance, A 308, J43a, 8; A 316, J48a, 7; A 324, J53, 3; and for the relation between allegory and commodity, see A 335, J59, 10: ‘The commodity form emerges in Baudelaire as the social content of the allegorical form of perception. Form and content are united in the prostitute, as in their synthesis.’

38 Jugendstil was a style of architectural, figurative and applied art of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, associated with the periodical *Die Jugend* (Youth). See A 557, S8a, 1: ‘Jugendstil is the second attempt on the part of art to come to terms with technology. The first attempt was realism.’ Benjamin regarded it as a regressive movement that attempted to restore aura after the conditions for its existence had disappeared. ‘Jugendstil forces the auratic’ (A 557, S8, 8).

39 See Benjamin on the experience of shock in Baudelaire’s poetry, ‘On Some Motifs in Baudelaire’, SW, 4.319–20. See also, on shock in war and in modern work practices, Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (Cambridge, Mass., and London, 2000), 101–11.

- 40 See Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness* (1922), trans. Rodney Livingstone (London, 1971). This book had a profound impact on Benjamin.
- 41 In A 324–25, J55a, 1, Benjamin quotes from his own work, *On the Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London, 1998).

Benjamin is at pains to distinguish from redemption. As the use of iron had created a new organization of space, so too the combination of iron frame and plate-glass sheeting extended the phantasmagoric world of reflections, of crowds milling within interiors, of motley images and shadows in gaslight, electric light, sunlight, rainlight. The dialectic between open space, fresh air (both associated with the spirit of revolution) and enclosure, interior, the whole city becoming a room (regression, neurosis), dominates much of Benjamin's writing, although it is more pronounced, even hectic at times, in *The Arcades Project* (as in Convolute F, 'Iron Construction' for example). The greenhouse, the winter garden, the train station in their early forms in the first third of the century had become, he claimed, dreary spectacles, for 'no one as yet understood how to build with glass and iron'. But while the engineering problems had long been solved, there was no similar advance in human or social terms; the deadly infelicities of the combination of plants and iron in the pseudo-mythic garden, awoke Benjamin's Baudelairean wince of sexual disgust and social disdain: 'Now it is the same with the human material on the inside of the arcades as with the materials of their construction. Pimps are the iron bearings of this street, and its glass breakables are the whores' (A 155, F3, 2).

Benjamin observed how a great middle-class or aristocratic house could be altered for public use, with all its plushness and comfort retained, even exaggerated, for the use of the general public, as most obviously in the café (Benjamin's own favourite interior/ exterior in Paris or elsewhere). Space that belonged to particular classes had now been reorganized for the general masses; that was a benign political implication, reinforced further by the sociability of the café, and the achievement of a public world infused with the warmth of what had previously been the private. Thus the *habitué* of the café or of the arcade, in the person of the

flâneur, has a crucial role to play in the phantasmagoric world of late capitalism, as the agent of the awakening from its dreaming existence, imminent because the fantasy has in its intensity reached the point of reversal in which the process of transformation will begin. But this status is erratic; the flâneur can also seem at times to be the wilful representative of a world in which technology and commerce have been awarded the salute that should belong only to genuine social and human progress. But more often, we see in this figure a satiated Faust beginning to tire of the material world he has ransacked and beginning also to become aware, in shock, of the terms of the pact that he has signed; 'the motif of shock emerges in the "scornful laughter of hell" which rouses the startled allegorist from his brooding' (A 383, J90).<sup>41</sup> Benjamin points to what he regards as the matching examples of Proust and Freud, in whose work the moment of awakening from sleep and dream has such strategic importance (as in the opening of *À La Recherche du temps perdu*); these are examples of a generational and historical effort to rethink the relationship between specific individual and generic human experience, one that does not regard these as polarities but as the presiding elements in a dynamic interchange that will have transformative effects on the structure of human thinking about thinking and therefore on everything else. The awakening in shock from a dream is the best example of dialectical reversal, for in it, always imminent but constantly deferred, the communal comes to be known through the individual experience and the individual through the communal. It is remarkable, he observes, how Baudelaire seldom uses the first-person singular and how, in key poems, 'it is kept in the background' (A 317, J49, 3). It is in that representation of subjectivity passing over into a collective voice that the new era dawns. 'The imminent awakening is poised, like the wooden horse of the Greeks, in the Troy of dreams' (A 392, K2, 4).

*Allegory and Melancholy*

In Benjamin's conceptual grammar, repetition is the signature of hell. Its modern versions are Nietzsche's woeful 'eternal return' and the 'always-the-same' of liberal humanism, both of which deny the possibility of any escape from history.<sup>42</sup> But it also has a home in the myths of antiquity — Sisyphus, Tantalus, Ixion, the Danaids (all myths of eternal punishment) — and it is in this sense that history is understood to be mythical and many of its most attractive formulations (Hegelian, in particular) to be no more than versions of a fate or destiny that awaits its fulfilment — and it is a long, boring wait.

The belief in progress — in an infinite perfectibility understood as an infinite ethical task — and the representation of eternal return are complementary. They are the indissoluble antinomies in the face of which the dialectical conception of historical time must be developed. In this conception, the idea of eternal return appears precisely as that 'shallow rationalism' which the belief in progress is accused of being, while faith in progress seems no less to belong to the mythic mode of thought than does the idea of eternal return. (A 119, D10a, 5)

Emancipation is, therefore, impossible — it could be denied to some on the sectarian grounds of class, race, gender or religion, or to all on the wider ground of the concept of human nature, which itself is hopelessly dependent upon fate for company. Still, conceptually as well as economically, one can say with Kafka, 'dependency keeps you young' (A 306, J42a, 8). Myth, the old one, and history, the young one, make a terrific pair; their tacit agreement is that they are really one; their appearance of difference is a fake aggression; it conceals their mournful obsequiousness to one another and to the 'fate' that binds them. Fate is not some secret force, but a relation or web of

relationships, although in common idolatry it is taken to have some behind-the-scenes existence of its own.

*The Arcades Project* reworks some of the basic themes of Benjamin's famous study of seventeenth-century German baroque drama, the plays of mourning, *Trauerspiel*.<sup>43</sup> It too dwells on repetition, on the petrified world of German Lutheranism, where subjection to fate, comparable to the pagan belief in the foreordained, had achieved its melancholy post-Catholic intensity. In this world, the symbolic had lost its importance as an expression of religious mysteries; the possibility of the mystical instant, where time and symbol intersect, had disappeared or at least declined. As a consequence, this universe was closed shut. It was in mourning for a lost hope, doomed to an inescapable fate, looking for meaning in a world that presented itself almost entirely in one of two forms — that of material nature and, set within it like a bas-relief on rock, history. History is in time indeed; therefore it cannot be read as myth, from which time has been exorcised. For that which is in time and yet subject to a timeless fate, there is only one available form of representation — allegory. Benjamin explains at length how the romantics had given allegory a bad name by comparing it unfavourably with symbol; in effect they were saying that the goal (unwitting, a desire secret to itself) of allegory all along was to become symbol and that this had finally been achieved in the eighteenth century after much aimless foostering and yearning in the sculpted deserts of the baroque, or in the untidy bric-à-brac of the magician's cell or the alchemist's study. This is precisely what Benjamin wishes to reject, this kind of romantic self-satisfaction that sees the goal of a style, genre, whatever it may be, realized in itself, in its own present. Yet that post-history of allegory, which is dominated by the romantic takeover bid, is inescapably part of our understanding of what allegory is and how it functions, as much as its pre-

42 See the entries on Nietzsche and Baudelaire in A 337, J60, 7 and in A 340–41, J62a, 2.

43 *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, hereafter *Origin*

- 44 *Origin*, 226–27  
 45 ‘The Influence of *Les Fleurs du Mal*’, *SW*, 4.96  
 46 *Origin*, 139  
 47 *Origin*, 196n.  
 48 *Origin*, 196

history. In allegory, in the Benjaminian terms which continued to operate in *The Arcades Project*, the material world has gone to the devil. Previously, it had been divided among the pagan deities; but now Satan has arrived as sole ruler.

With the revival of paganism in the Renaissance, and Christianity in the Counter-Reformation, allegory, the form of their conflict, also had to be renewed. The importance of this for the *Trauerspiel* is that, in the figure of Satan, the middle ages had bound the material and the demonic inextricably together. Above all, the concentration of the numerous pagan powers into *one*, theologically rigorously defined, Antichrist meant that this supreme manifestation of darkness was imposed upon matter more unambiguously than in a number of demons.<sup>44</sup>

This allegorical world is reproduced in Baudelaire; the satanism of his material world is immediately recognizable, presenting itself as novel, then fading almost instantly into banality. This is a more potent energy in his work than the posturing, the diabolism of disaffected groups in which it was a substitute for political conspiracy. In a fragment, written in 1938, Benjamin extended his vision of the seventeenth century to the nineteenth:

The allegorical mode of presentation is always built on a devalued world of appearances. The specific devaluation of the world of things, as manifested in the commodity, is the foundation of Baudelaire’s allegorical intention. As an embodiment of the commodity, the whore has a central place in his poetry. From another point of view, the whore is allegory incarnate. The props with which fashion equips her are her allegorical emblems. The hallmark of genuineness for the commodity is the fetish; for the allegory, it is the emblem.<sup>45</sup>

Clearly, the German world of which *Trauerspiel* is an expression is also a forerunner of the world of modernity in the arcades of Paris; it even has, in its grottoes and catacombs, versions of the arcade and of the passage across the threshold that divides or conjoins interior and exterior (A 214, I1a, 4). The very idea of sovereignty, the centre that creates meaning just in virtue of being a centre, is under question in both universes. The Reformation had ruined the papal centre; kingship, spiritually and politically, had been stunned; it was possible, in the seventeenth century as in the nineteenth, to announce that God was dead. Was it then the consequence that, in modern mode, meaning must be invented, must assume (with tragic gesture) a mask? ‘Mourning is the state of mind in which feeling revives the empty world in the form of a mask, and derives an enigmatic satisfaction in contemplating it’.<sup>46</sup>

The condition of mourning or melancholy is aggravated by the asymmetry between it and the political world of the court where sovereignty rests; sovereignty bespeaks order and significance. But that political idea no longer radiates the force it once had into the provinces of philosophy or morality. Authority itself is now flawed. While sovereignty aspires always in speech to the condition of wisdom in the form of the proverb or maxim, ‘not to be spoken by servants but by noble and senior characters’, and while what it utters is the wisdom of the ancients, *sapientia veterum*, this is now mere repetition.<sup>47</sup> The wisdom of the dead has become dead wisdom; analysis is suffocated in this airless universe. ‘It is not uncommon for speech in the dialogues to be no more than a caption, conjured up from allegorical constellations in which the figures are related to one another. In short: as its caption, the maxim declares the stage setting to be allegorical.’<sup>48</sup> But the alternative to the maxim or proverb is the staccato of indecision, all the more excruciating in a prince or sovereign. For to be resigned to

fate can produce equanimity and ritual behaviour; but it can also produce anguish, the question always of what fate is, if our actions produce it or are in conformity with it. If the ruler has a weakened belief in his capacity to rule or even in the unquestionable nature of rule, then what?

The antithesis between the power of the ruler and his capacity to rule led to a feature peculiar to the *Trauerspiel* which is, however, only apparently a generic feature and which can be illuminated only against the background of the theory of sovereignty. This is the indecisiveness of the tyrant. The prince, who is responsible for making the decision to proclaim the state of emergency, reveals, at the first opportunity, that he is almost incapable of making a decision ... the theatrical figures of this epoch always appear in the harsh light of their changing resolve.<sup>49</sup>

This is the world of Hamlet. Hamlet is in almost every respect a character from a German play of mourning. Except that the play *Hamlet* is a tragedy and that he himself is a tragic hero. Benjamin says that the ‘object of philosophical criticism is to show that the function of artistic forms is as follows: to make historical content ... into philosophical truth’.<sup>50</sup> The philosophical truth of *Hamlet* is the creation of subjectivity as a historical phenomenon, comparable to that of the Cartesian ‘*cogito*’. However, there is a fundamental difference between the two. For there is, so to say, a good and a bad subjectivity. The bad kind has as its goal ‘absolute knowledge’; the good kind, ‘truth’. The bad kind is satanic, inexhaustible, Faustian, polarizing the universe into the wholly material versus the wholly spiritual, its realm is that of the polymath, the alchemist, the adept who is willing, even eager, to undergo isolation from God and man; the good kind is redemptive, limited, cleansed of ‘the final phantasmagoria of the

objective’.<sup>51</sup> Shakespeare’s achievement, in Benjamin’s reading, was to open the closed world of the mourning play, to show the melancholic the path out of prison. Thus we can in truth *only* have *Hamlet* without the prince of melancholy, anguish and indecision the romantics celebrated. It is only after his Luciferian fall into subjectivity, illustrated in all the allegories of dumbshow, tyrannic ostentation, intriguers and spies, contemplations on the *memento mori* — ‘the fall from emblem to emblem down into the dizziness of its bottomless depths’ that the ‘turn-about’, the reversal comes; ‘all this vanishes with this *one* about-turn’.<sup>52</sup> ‘Only Shakespeare was capable of striking Christian sparks from the baroque rigidity of the melancholic ... this drama will also be recognized as the unique spectacle in which [the ascendancy of Saturn and marks of *acedia*] are overcome in the spirit of Christianity’.<sup>53</sup>

*Hamlet* is both an allegory and an instance of a redeemed social world. In this particular tragedy (and in tragedy as such) we witness a reversal — of the double helix of the automatism of myth and fate and the fall of the subjective rebel spirit — and the redemption from that endless melancholy, that hell of repetition, by a martyr-saint who has brought the generic fate of his kind to a culmination in himself, and who is on that account the tragic hero. Hamlet is an observer of the world and he finds, as is proper to the melancholic, that the world is marked by decay, that everything human or historical is written in the natural world under the sign of transience; thus he ‘cannot find satisfaction in what he sees enacted, only in his own fate. His life, the exemplary object of his mourning, points, before its extinction, to the Christian providence in whose bosom his mournful images are transformed into a blessed existence’.<sup>54</sup>

Benjamin’s book was published in 1928. Some four or five years later, Carl Schmitt, the legal philosopher and historian, later

- 49 *Origin*, 70–71
- 50 *Origin*, 182
- 51 *Origin*, 232
- 52 *Origin*, 232
- 53 *Origin*, 158
- 54 *Origin*, 158

- 55 Carl Schmitt, *Hamlet or Hecuba: The Interruption of Time in the Play*, trans. Simona Draghici (London, 2006)
- 56 In 'Curriculum Vitae (III)' of 1928, Benjamin names Schmitt as one of the basic influences on his book. See *SW*, 2.78.
- 57 Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political* (1932), trans. George Schwab (Chicago and London, 1996), 72
- 58 Schmitt, *Hamlet or Hecuba*, 146–47
- 59 *Origin*, 228–29

to be known as a leading apologist for and theoretician of Fascism, began a response to it, although this was not published until 1956 as chapter 3 of a book on *Hamlet*, including a section on 'The Source of the Tragic' with an appendix on Benjamin's treatise.<sup>55</sup> Benjamin had sent Schmitt a copy of his book in 1930, with a letter of thanks for the help Schmitt's definition of sovereignty had been to him.<sup>56</sup> Schmitt's work on Shakespeare extended his general critique of liberalism and its subjugation of 'state and politics', as a consequence of which 'every political concept' has 'a double face. Thus the political concept of battle in liberal thought becomes competition in the domain of economics and discussion in the political realm.'<sup>57</sup> In brief, Schmitt's essay sees *Hamlet* as a world-historical play, in which Hamlet, the traditional man of action, the avenger, is distorted into the indecisive man of contemplation by the scale of the historical 'emergency' choice that he faces in the England of that time, caught between Catholicism and Protestantism. The choice is between the Europe of the new State, the system that puts an end to religious wars and creates the 'political' as the new form of dominant power, on the one hand, and, on the other, the Protestant English turn away from the Continent towards the maritime empire, from land to sea. This was the 'barbaric' political system that chose the reformed faith, got rid of the Stuarts, and, in the century between 1588, the defeat of the Armada, and 1688, the date of the Glorious Revolution, became a world power. It is part of Schmitt's general theory of the tragic that it must have a dimension in historical reality, that as a dramatic form it must operate in the public sphere in relation to an audience (and thereby refuse the subjectivity of the lyric and the opportunity that gives for the declaration of the aesthetic as an autonomous realm). Without that historical dimension, tragedy cannot be achieved; this was the defect in the German *Trauerspiel*. Thus the sea that whispers around the base of the castle of

Elsinore is the imperial sea that will be ceded to England in the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713, when the Stuarts are finally written out of English history; *Hamlet* is the play in which the prince detaches himself from a feudal past and brings about the future, the time that is implicit in that past but which can only be realized in him and in the form of art that is tragedy. Hamlet himself becomes a mythical figure, but precisely as the embodiment of a historical transition, not as the hero of romantic subjectivity which he became in German romanticism first and later everywhere.

This reading is strongly marked by Benjamin's work, although its political direction is evidently different. Both readings emphasize the importance of the allegorical features of the play; Schmitt approvingly quotes:

Every elemental utterance of the creature acquires significance from its allegorical existence, and everything allegorical acquires emphasis from the elemental aspect of the world of the senses. ... the drama of fate flares up in the conclusion of the *Trauerspiel* as something that is contained, but of course overcome, in it.<sup>58</sup>

This is the element that Benjamin says is no more than glimpsed in the *Sturm und Drang* period and that remains important in Baudelaire (A 352, J69a, 4).<sup>59</sup> But Schmitt misses a crucial nuance in Benjamin's analysis, although his essay helps to illuminate it. Benjamin does not correlate the 'elemental' with the 'reality' of the world, as Schmitt sees it. For Schmitt — and in his view this had to be true of any Marxist — the dominant category of everything was a political 'real', according to which, in this instance, the maritime empire of England is the implicit future of Shakespeare's play. This is actually to say that there is an ordained fate in human affairs and the peculiar power of art is to in some way

embody that — perhaps this is how it becomes timeless — whereas German plays of mourning of this period did not have that capacity and are therefore not ‘art’ in the same sense. This seems close to Benjamin, even though in retrospect it seems clear that Schmitt was in effect writing an apologia for the oncoming German Empire in 1930s Europe, legitimating it as part of the fate of history and also indicating a certain shared world destiny with the Teutonic English cousins. But this is not the main ground for distancing Schmitt from Benjamin.

That ground is their different conceptions of allegory. For Benjamin, it is the counterweight to that subjectivity (Schmitt would say ‘individualism’) which he regards as one of the cultural achievements of bourgeois civilization and, because it became (or always was) so Faustian, its central disaster. The arcades in Paris were the hell it created and the whole gallery of figures of the damned, those in whom the nature of damnation was distilled in most identifiable form and who also still had in them some fading pinpoint of recognition about their fate, were the figures from the modern emblem book. Their sojourn through the arcades was a sojourn in a world of objects in which they had become automatons, while being perfectly assured of their autonomy. Theirs was a diabolic possession. This is a theological equivalent of commodity fetishism, the process in which the person as subject becomes the object of his own desire, the desired object becoming inevitably the stimulant of further desire, in an endless acceleration (A 207, H2, 6). Even the emancipatory element that could be perceived in the collection of objects, whereby they were acquired for something other than their use function, has its sinister side. Toys, robots, children in gothic tales, objects in which a ‘time’ was entrapped — like childhood, for instance — all share in this quality of petrification; they are all allegorical subjects and, therefore, it is only in the recovery of their innocence

as objects, rather than as items in a register, list, treasure hoard, that freedom is possible. Then the reign of Satan in the world comes to an end.

As the condition of subjectivity intensifies, it becomes more, not less, susceptible to allegorical description. In more modern idiom, it becomes the stereotype. In earlier literature it was the avenger, the courtier, the tyrant, the intriguer, the favourite son, the enchanted princess, etcetera. In Benjamin’s Paris the allegorical figures are now new stereotypes — the collector, gambler, forger, dandy, man of the crowd, the flâneur. Subjectivity culminates in the stereotype and its culmination is announced by technology, in the arcades of Paris, in the endless self-repetition of the halls of mirrors. ‘One encounters an abundance of stereotypes in Baudelaire, as in the Baroque poets’ (A 337, J60a, 3). Typically, it must have seemed, this world signed its death certificate in the treaty that ended the First World War in the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles.

But there was the ‘turn-about’, the moment after allegory, when the world of objects would be freed of its satanic domination, and the creaturely world again become mute, no longer obliged to represent something not itself. Subjectivity would incandesce into the collective. The nineteenth century would awake from its dream.

Every age must strive anew to wrest tradition away from the conformism that is working to overpower it. The Messiah comes not only as the redeemer; he comes as the victor over the Antichrist. The only historian capable of fanning the spark of hope in the past is the one who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he is victorious. And this enemy has never ceased to be victorious.<sup>60</sup>

60 ‘On the Concept of History’, SW, 4.391



the engraving represents the collision of two forces, Saturn and Jove. Saturn's is the realm of melancholy, and its various emblems, from the polyhedron to the stone to the dog, are dispersed within it; for in sadness, everything is dispersed. Jove can be read as the other, triumphant force here, human energy and intelligence overcoming a world disheartened by absurd but potent beliefs. Humanism dismisses the *disjecta membra* of the religious tradition and the apparent senselessness of the world subject to it. So, *Melencolia I* shows a historical transition taking place. The old world of Saturn comes to an end: the reign of Jove has begun. In the Jovian dispensation, human will and intelligence take over. Benjamin doubles this reading, accepting it at one level, cancelling it at another, folding each into the other. For if reason triumphs over magic, still the signs or effects of ancient petrification have not gone away; the engraving allows us to see the two worlds, not according to the logic of an inevitable progress in which one surpasses the other, but in a dialectical relation wherein the triumph of Saturn and the triumph of Jove are both present. This Angel is not merely disheartened by the limitations of the technology or the belief system (allegory) available to her. She is disheartened by the future. The great project of modernity that began in the Renaissance became modern capitalism and led to the construction of hell, a brilliant and appalling achievement. Alternatively, the angel in this engraving is earthbound by melancholy, a humour associated with the earth and with stone, and is stricken by the realization that this reveals the reality of a creaturely condition we cannot fly beyond.<sup>62</sup> All wings, like all such transformative hopes, are wax.

Is this an occasion, though, when Benjamin obliquely addresses the question of what went wrong with the greatest of all opportunities for human emancipation in Russia? Like all at the Frankfurt Institute, he was so intellectually and morally

convulsed by the coarseness of Fascism as a political philosophy, that he read it only as a pathology. But then, they read capitalism as one too, both in its structure and in its effects. The failure of socialism/communism in Russia offered a rich harvest of pathologies, but it was never gathered into any Frankfurt granary. In Benjamin's interpretation of the Dürer engraving, perhaps the October Revolution is coded as the Renaissance. In each case, a brilliant achievement and hope turned to nightmare. Jove's triumph is a delusion, for it does not abolish the world of Saturn. It restores it, *through Jove's own success*. This is the more disheartening because the bogus enchantments have now become more effective, for they have absorbed technology, the product of reason. Similarly, reaction absorbs revolution and becomes correspondingly more powerful; could anything truly revolutionary be retrieved, ever?

Benjamin had said yes to this question, long before he became a Marxist. Part of the hidden history of the allegorical object becoming a commodity fetish is embedded in the transition from Christianity to capitalism, which Benjamin sees, in a Nietzschean light, as a passage from a religion to a cult. In the sketch or fragment that he wrote in 1921, 'Capitalism as Religion', he says: 'Capitalism is a religion of pure cult, without dogma. Capitalism has developed as a parasite of Christianity in the West ... until it reached the point where Christianity's history is essentially that of its parasite — that is to say, of capitalism.'<sup>63</sup>

The fetish is a characteristic product of a parasite; that is, parasitism is in the nature of capitalism; it gradually reproduces, as what it calls natural, the digested replica of the world that it feeds on. This is phantasmagoria. It is a mystification that is successful because it claims it is the consequence of demystification. What made the October Revolution different was the ambition it had to recover the real world. In

62 For an interesting variation on these readings, see Beatrice Hanssen, *Walter Benjamin's Other History: Of Stones, Animals, Human Beings and Angels* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 2000), 159–62.

63 SW, 1.289

64 Jacques Derrida, 'Force of Law: The "Mystical Foundation of Authority"', in Drucilla Cornwell, Michael Rosenfeld and David Gray Carlson, eds., *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice* (New York, 1992), 3–67; see also Eleanor Kaufman, "To Cut too Deeply and Not Enough": Violence and the Incorporeal', in Creston Davis, John Milbank and Slavoj Žižek, eds., *Theology and the Political: The New Debate* (Durham and London, 2005), 350–65.

65 SW, 1.251

66 Benjamin's status as tragic victim of Fascism, culminating in his suicide in the border village of Pau in the Pyrenees, has inevitably been treated as a gift to fiction by at least two novelists: Jay Parini, *Benjamin's Crossing* (New York, 1997) and Bruno Arpaia, *L'Angelo della Storia* (Torino, 2001), *The Angel of History*, trans. Minna Proctor (Edinburgh, 2006).

his celebrated essay, also of 1921, 'Critique of Violence' (which was subject to an almost equally celebrated reading by Derrida in 1992), Benjamin distinguishes between 'mythic violence' and 'divine violence'.<sup>64</sup> The first serves law and the state, the notion of sheer survival under certain conditions, as when the state demands of its subjects that they sacrifice their lives for it. The second serves life, not as survival alone, but as an adventure in realizing possibility. It does not demand sacrifice, it accepts it.

The proposition that existence stands higher than a just existence, is false and ignominious, if existence is to mean nothing other than mere life ... if the proposition is intended to mean that the non-existence of man is something more terrible than the (admittedly subordinate) not-yet-attained condition of the just man.<sup>65</sup>

Benjamin repudiated that proposition when he committed suicide.<sup>66</sup> ■