

INTRODUCTION

to the Revised Edition

In Memory of Leo Lowenthal

It is safe to say that *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption* was written in the afterglow of the political and cultural upheavals associated with the New Left. It is also of sorts a *Jugendschrift*: my first attempt to come to grips with the emancipatory promise of that “warm current” (E. Bloch) of central European, philosophical Marxism that blossomed during the interwar years.¹

It comes, therefore, as no small source of satisfaction that the work has remained serviceable for scholars and students in their efforts to come to terms with Benjamin’s fascinating, yet inordinately demanding, *oeuvre*. At the time of composition, I thought it superfluous to proceed mimetically vis-à-vis Benjamin’s prose—to be sure, always a great temptation—in order to produce a “virtuoso” study of a writer who was himself a virtuoso. Instead, I felt strongly that my goal would be accomplished were I to engage in a critical reconstruction of the broad outlines of Benjamin’s circuitous and hermetic intellectual path. Convinced that more specialized, scholarly investigations of his work would soon follow (they have in great numbers), I felt that an English-speaking public would be best served by a book that focused on the central themes of Benjamin’s work: from his Kabbalistically derived philosophy of history to his later self-understanding of a historical materialist. I am extremely grateful to my editor at the University of California Press, Edward Dimendberg, for his consistent support and enthusiasm for a new edition of the present book. I would also like to acknowledge the generous financial support of the German Marshall Fund of the U.S.

I dedicate this edition to the memory of the great Frankfurt School sociologist of literature, Leo Lowenthal (1900–1993). In ad-

dition to having been an associate of Benjamin's at the Institute for Social Research in the late 1930s, Leo put up a spirited defense of Benjamin's ill-fated Baudelaire essay, "Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire." Our friendship began in the late 1970s in Berkeley as my own labors on Benjamin had just begun. As a representative of that unique generation of utopia-inspired, central European Jewish thinkers that came of age circa World War I, Leo was much more than an intellectual model; he was the living embodiment of an entire theoretical tradition. I consider it a privilege to have known him. He was a unique spirit in the annals of critical thought. His intellectual tenacity, which he maintained until the end, will be sorely missed by many.

I

One of the key concepts in the thought of the later Benjamin is that of *Aktualität* or (cumbersomely translated into English) "contemporary relevance." The first collection of essays devoted to an understanding of his work, *Zur Aktualität Walter Benjamins*, highlighted precisely this dimension of his thought.² Like the truth content of the work of art, on which Benjamin reflects in his essay on Goethe's *Elective Affinities*, the relevance of his thought is not something that is simply *vorhanden* or immediately available. In Benjamin's case, too, "truth content" comes only by way of an outer veneer, a "material content" (*Sachgehalt*). Here, material content refers to the fact that his *oeuvre* was conceived under a very precise set of historical circumstances: the tumultuous years spanning the outbreak of two catastrophic world wars; a period in whose aftermath many of the self-evidences of European civilization were seemingly left hanging by a thread; an era dominated by the political extremes of communism and fascism, in which the survival of democracy seemed at best remote.

Is it, then, any wonder that, from Benjamin's very earliest intellectual stirrings, eschatological motifs occupied a position of prominence in his thought? Indeed, a profound spirit of apocalyptic imminence pervades both his youthful and mature writings.

Ours, conversely, is an epoch that has seen too much of apocalypse—world war, death camps, the Soviet Gulag, Hiroshima, Vietnam. It is an age that is understandably weary of fanciful, eschatological political claims. It is an era that has become enlightened—or so one would like to believe—about the folly and zeal of political theology: the notion that the kingdom of ends might be realized on earth via secular political means. We have become properly mistrustful of redemptory political paradigms.³ In Kantian terms, the excesses of political messianism have taught us to be wary of all attempts to fuse the noumenal and phenomenal realms. Indeed, the idea that what is foremost at issue in the domain of secular political life are considerations of justice or fairness, and that questions of salvation must be relegated to the private sphere as the province of individual conscience, seems to be one of the quintessential legacies of political modernity.⁴

As Irving Wohlfarth has pointed out: “To apply Benjaminian categories to the present without also trying to rethink them in the light of intervening history is . . . not merely to remain trapped within the coordinates of his thought, but to arrest the recasting process that it sought to initiate.”⁵ His caveat is directed to those who succumb to an ever-present danger of Benjamin scholarship: the danger of overidentification. For those who seek to follow in Benjamin’s footsteps run the risk of becoming mesmerized by the aura of his life and thought. Before they can be appropriated, his ideas must be subjected to an alienation-effect—their spell must be broken, they must be deauratized. To this end, they must be unflinchingly brought into contact with other intellectual traditions, as well as new historical circumstances. Only through such a confrontation might they prove their worth. The greatest disservice one could do to his theoretical initiatives would be to accord them the status of received wisdom, to assimilate them uncritically or wholesale. His mode of thinking, both alluring and elusive, invites commentary and exegesis, which must not be confused with adulation.

For all of these reasons, the attempt to appropriate Benjamin’s intellectual legacy under dramatically different historical circumstances is a far from simple matter. To begin with, one would have to do justice to the fact that his interpretation of history remains inalienably wedded to a problematic of unremitting cataclysm and catastrophe, as the following observations indicate:

That things have gone this far *is* the catastrophe. Catastrophe is not what threatens to occur at any given moment but what is given at any given moment.⁶

If the abolition of the bourgeoisie is not completed by an almost calculable moment in economic and technical development (a moment signaled by inflation and poison-gas warfare), all is lost. Before the spark reaches the dynamite, the lighted fuse must be cut.⁷

Counterpart to [Auguste] Blanqui's worldview; the universe is a locus of perpetual catastrophe.⁸

And in his legendary discussion of the "angel of history"—perhaps the defining image of his entire work—Benjamin affirms that, "Where we perceive a chain of events [the angel] sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet."⁹ He identifies the storm responsible for this catastrophe simply with "progress." Hence, for Benjamin, it is the responsibility of the critic to "brush history against the grain." For if left to itself, the immanent course of history will never produce redemption. That is why the historical materialist must "blast open the continuum of history." Only in this way can he or she activate its veiled redemptory potentials, which Benjamin (in a clear allusion to the mystical *nunc stans*) associates with *Jetztzeit* or the "time of the now."

To be sure, there are certain strains of postmodernist thought which approximate Benjamin's bleak understanding of history as a *Verfallsgeschichte* or a "history of decline"—e.g., Foucault's cheerless image of a "carceral society" or Baudrillard's concept of the omnipresence of "simulacra." But often they purvey inordinately dispirited images of contemporary society which, for their part, are wholly denuded of the utopian sensibility that infuses Benjamin's work.¹⁰

For Benjamin at least tried to uphold a vision of utopian possibility that resides beyond the fallen and desolate landscape of the historical present. Postmodernism, conversely, by fetishizing the notion of *posthistoire*, conveys a sense that all attempts to actualize elements of the past for the sake of an emancipated future are a priori consigned to failure. For example, the concept of "historicism," proper to postmodern architectural theory, intends less a meaningful actualization of the past than an avowedly random historical pillag-

ing of it. In Benjaminian terms, the past is less cited as a now-time (“a sign of messianic cessation of happening”)¹¹ than as a purely ornamental adornment. The end result in most cases is a reaesthetized version of the modern.

With postmodernism, moreover, the very concept of emancipation is relegated to the dustbin of unserviceable metaphysical concepts. But thereby, too, the crucial philosophical distinction between essence and appearance is abandoned. Once these terms are relinquished, one risks surrendering the capacity to make significant conceptual distinctions. For postmodernism, as was already true in Nietzsche, appearance is all there is. For Benjamin, conversely, appearance is the realm of *phantasmagoria*—it bespeaks the spell of commodity fetishism, that degenerate utopia of perpetual consumption that must be demystified and surmounted. But then, since Benjamin never made a secret of his predilection for metaphysical, even theological modes of thought, the attempt to reconcile his thinking with the antimetaphysical stance of postmodernism has always been somewhat strained.¹²

Since Benjamin was engaged in some of the pivotal aesthetic controversies of our time, he is at present a logical candidate for inclusion in the burgeoning cultural studies canon. Yet, it may be that the attempt to understand contemporary culture in accordance with Benjamin’s eschatological theory of history—which is predicated on the notion of the present as a perpetual “state of emergency”—obfuscates more than it clarifies. For while in 1940, following Nazism’s initial successes, Benjamin could with some plausibility characterize “the ‘state of emergency’ in which we live [as] not the exception but the rule,”¹³ this claim can at best have metaphorical meaning when applied to the historical present.¹⁴ Conversely, if today the “state of emergency” is understood literally rather than metaphorically, one risks systematically underestimating the existing possibilities for political intervention and criticism. The result can be—and often is—a paralysis and marginalization of left-wing oppositional practice. A position that proceeds from the assumption that the capitalist state is inherently fascist or totalitarian is predestined to inefficacy. Moreover, it commits the mistake of generalizing such concepts to the point where they are rendered both trivial and meaningless—precisely the opposite effect that an understanding of totalitarian political forms should strive to promote.

If Benjamin's eschatological temperament places him at odds with the modest political aims of contemporary democratic practice, it nevertheless serves as an important corrective to the postmodernist embrace of *posthistoire*.¹⁵ Postmodernism has not only abandoned "metanarratives." In its anti-Hegelianism, it has also rejected one of the basic premises of dialectical thought: the idea that, despite its apparent indigence, the contemporary social situation might yield something qualitatively better. The desire to perceive hope beyond despair—a central feature of Benjamin's redemptory approach to cultural history—is a sentiment that is alien to the disillusioned mood of postmodernity. For the very concept of *posthistoire* suggests that the Enlightenment project of reconciling history and reason—a project that still finds a prominent echo in Hegel's thought—is illusory if not dystopian. Yet not even Benjamin, for all his reservations about "progress," was so antagonistically disposed toward Enlightenment ideals. He went so far as to provide himself with the following methodological watchword for the *Passagenwerk*, one that would have been worthy of Kant or Condorcet:

To make arable fields where previously only madness grew. Going forward with the sharp axe of reason, refusing to look left or right, in order not to succumb to the horror that beckons from the depths of the primeval forest. The entire ground must be made arable by reason in order to be purified from the jungle of delusion and myth. That is what I would like to accomplish for the nineteenth century.¹⁶

II

Because Benjamin's intellectual sensibility was profoundly shaped by the experience of the interwar years, it was conditioned by an acute sense of historical collapse that parallels Nietzsche's no less apocalyptic diagnosis of "European nihilism" in *The Will to Power*. "What does nihilism mean?" inquires Nietzsche. "*That the highest values devalue themselves*. The aim is lacking; 'why?' finds no answer."¹⁷ And with this summary pronouncement on the utter untenability of inherited European values, Nietzsche initiated a line of radical *Kulturkritik* that would often prove as influential for those on the left as on the right.¹⁸

It is far from surprising, therefore, that in the notes and drafts to the *Passagenwerk*, Benjamin betrays a fascination for Nietzsche's doctrine of eternal recurrence. It was an idea he thought he could make serviceable for his critique of nineteenth-century historical consciousness: in it he found an appropriate antidote to the bourgeois belief in progress in an epoch—the era of imperialism or high capitalism—where there was no longer anything “progressive” about the rule of this class. Moreover, it was an idea that seemed to accord with Benjamin's own conception of the nineteenth century as the site of a mythic proliferation of commodity fetishism—a *phantasmagoria*. Like Benjamin, Nietzsche was a staunch critic of historicism. Yet, for this reason (and due to the *archaicizing* predilections of his thought), he glorified the mythological implications of eternal recurrence. Conversely, although Benjamin believed that the concept expressed a fundamental truth about the nature of bourgeois society—as a society that, owing to the inescapable compulsions of the commodity form, remained essentially indebted to myth—for him it was a truth from which humanity needed to be freed. Hence, the great methodological emphasis in the Arcades Project on the idea of awakening—awakening from a dream or from the compulsions of myth.

Benjamin's fascination with the concept of nihilism helps us account for the peculiar relationship in his thinking between periods of decline and redemption—an association suggestive of the doctrines of negative theology. One of the first to perceive the import of these two poles in his thought was Scholem, who observes that:

an apocalyptic element of destructiveness is preserved in the metamorphosis undergone in his writing by the messianic idea. . . . The noble and positive power of destruction—too long (in his view) denied due recognition thanks to the one-sided, undialectical, and dilettantish apotheosis of ‘creativity’—now becomes an aspect of redemption.¹⁹

The relation between these two concepts, moreover, goes far toward explaining the—at first glance peculiar—link he always emphasized between his theologically oriented 1925 *Origin of German Tragic Drama* and the quasi-Marxist Arcades Project.²⁰ For both works seek to highlight manifestations of cultural decline (mourning-plays and arcades) in order to cull from them dormant potentials for transcendence.

One might say that, in a Nietzschean spirit, Benjamin identifies with the doctrines of “active nihilism”: the conviction that if something is falling, it should be given a final push.²¹ For only at the point where the process of cultural decay is consummated might a dialectical reversal occur—something, moreover, that is never a certainty.

Already in his surrealism essay (1929), Benjamin speaks rhapsodically of “the Satanism of a Rimbaud and a Lautréamont.” Along with Dostoyevsky, their writings give birth to “the cult of evil as a political device . . . to disinfect and isolate against all moralizing dilettantism.”²² Their work represents a thoroughgoing renunciation of the “affirmative character of culture” (Marcuse) as practiced by bourgeois aestheticism. It breaks definitively with a cultural practice, from romanticism to art for art’s sake, that provides the literary precipitate of experience in recompense for the experience itself. It stands as a subterranean, nonliterary literary complement (insofar as their works have ceased to be “literature”) to the wave of anarchism that first made its appearance in mid-nineteenth-century Europe. For it was the anarchists who first initiated a concept of radical freedom that expressed a total refusal to compromise with the blandishments of the existing social regime. In sum, their work signifies the advent of a spirit of *intransigent cultural nihilism*, as a consequence of which bourgeois art begins to divest itself of its “aura”: the idea that the beautiful illusion of art is meant to provide aesthetic compensation for society’s failings. Their attitude would culminate in the tradition-shattering ethos of the twentieth-century avant-gardes, dadaism, futurism, and, of course, surrealism. Of Breton and company Benjamin famously observes: “No one before these visionaries and augurs perceived how destitution—not only social but architectonic, the poverty of interiors, enslaved and enslaving objects—can be suddenly transformed into *revolutionary nihilism*”²³—that is, into an attitude of thoroughgoing and uncompromising cultural radicalism.

It is the same sensibility that provokes Benjamin’s profound identification with the “destructive character” who appreciates “how immensely the world is simplified when tested for its worthiness for destruction.” The destructive character is anything but goal-oriented and devoid of an overarching vision of the way the world should be. “He has few needs, and the least of them is to know what will re-

place what has been destroyed.”²⁴ It was in the same spirit that he enthusiastically cited a remark of Adolf Loos: “If human work consists only of destruction, it is truly human, natural, noble work.”²⁵

These sentiments also account for what Benjamin found attractive about communist politics. From the very beginning, he acknowledged his profound disinterest in communist goals. Nor was he at all moved by its crude epistemological stance. On one occasion he openly mocks the “inadequate materialist metaphysic” of *diamat*, which, needless to say, remained incompatible with Benjamin’s abiding interest in the relationship between politics and theology.²⁶ Instead, communism attracted him as an approach to political radicalism, as a form of “activism,” which valued action for its own sake. Moreover, in Benjamin’s eyes it was a politics that viewed the totality of inherited social forms nihilistically, with a view to their imminent destruction.

Benjamin would employ the theme of “anthropological nihilism” as one of the subheadings for the *Arcades Project*. He was aware, however, that by flirting with this problematic, his thought had entered into dangerous proximity with a fascist sensibility that in Germany and Italy had already triumphed, and which threatened to engulf Europe. Fascism, too, placed great emphasis on the need to destroy: an avowedly nihilistic “aesthetics of horror” formed a key component of the fascist worldview.²⁷ Hence, Benjamin saw the need to distance his own “conservative revolutionary” tendencies—his inclination to view radical destruction as a necessary prerequisite for cultural renewal—from those of his proto-fascist contemporaries, such as Gottfried Benn, C. J. Jung, Ernst Jünger, Ludwig Klages, and Carl Schmitt.

Thus, to the anthropological nihilism of the conservative revolutionaries, Benjamin counterposes his own notion of “anthropological materialism.” Not only was this theory intended as a counterweight to the “aesthetics of horror” purveyed by Benn, Jünger, et al.; it was also meant as a forceful rejoinder to the values of Western humanism as propagated by the representatives of German idealism. For the events leading up to World War I had shown how readily the German idealist tradition could be chauvinistically reinterpreted—for example, in the concept of Germany qua *Kulturnation*, which the mandarin intelligentsia employed as a justification for Germany’s entitlement to geopolitical hegemony within Europe.²⁸

Anthropological materialism was Benjamin's way of attempting to substitute, as he put it, a "more real humanism" for the bankrupt, sham humanism, whose ineffectuality under present historical circumstances seemed self-evident. It was a way of denigrating humanity in its current, degraded state in order better to prepare the ground for its final, eschatological renewal—just as, according to Benjamin, in order "to understand a humanity that proves itself by destruction," one must appreciate Klee's *Angelus Novus*, "who preferred to free men by taking from them, rather than make them happy by giving to them."²⁹ These remarks, from Benjamin's essay on Karl Kraus, represent an essential complement to his discussion of the angel of history in the "Theses" and demonstrate how integral the relationship between destruction and renewal was for his thought.

As a basis for real humanism, anthropological materialism differed from the scientific materialism of orthodox Marxism. Benjamin had already introduced the concept in his surrealism essay, the fount of so much of his later thought. He associates it with the "nihilistic poetics" of Büchner, Nietzsche, Rimbaud, and, of course, the surrealists themselves. As such, it bears an essential relation to the key concept of that essay, profane illumination. It expresses Benjamin's "revisionist" conclusion that revolution is less a question of socializing the means of production than a matter of bodily-collective exaltation; in essence, society must become "surrealized," it must become a *collective locus of profane illumination*. As Benjamin concludes his essay: "Only when in technology body and image so interpenetrate that all revolutionary tension becomes bodily collective innervation, and all the bodily innervations of the collective become revolutionary discharge, has reality transcended itself to the extent demanded by the *Communist Manifesto*." It is the tradition of anthropological materialism, culminating in the surrealist effort to efface the boundaries separating art and life, that alone has realized concretely what it might mean "to win the energies of intoxication for the revolution."³⁰

An interest in the relation between revolution and intoxication gets to the very heart of Benjamin's cultural-revolutionary program for the Arcades Project. It also goes far toward explaining why his momentous encounter with surrealism in the 1920s would become the key influence in defining that program.

III

The proximity in which Benjamin's destructive-regenerative critique stands to analogous tendencies on the German right bears further examination. It is a proximity that has been widely noted but rarely analyzed in detail. Perhaps the first to detect its import was Scholem, who once observed that Benjamin

had an extraordinarily precise and delicate feel for the subversive elements in the *oeuvre* of great authors. He was able to perceive the subterranean rumbling of revolution even in the case of authors whose worldview bore reactionary traits; generally he was keenly aware of what he called "the strange interplay between reactionary theory and revolutionary practice."³¹

Habermas has pointed out a similar phenomenon: Benjamin's marked fascination with authors and ideas that had become standard points of reference for the right-wing critique of modern society: "Benjamin, who uncovered the prehistoric world by way of Bachofen, knew [Alfred] Schuler, appreciated Klages, and corresponded with Carl Schmitt—this Benjamin, as a Jewish intellectual in 1920s Berlin could still not ignore where his (and our) enemies stood." This leads him to conclude that Benjamin's theory of experience would be best described as a "conservative reactionary hermeneutic."³²

Like Bloch, Benjamin realized that the left's unreflective progressivism was in danger of neglecting the value of those "noncontemporaneous" elements whose revolutionary promise was being commandeered by the forces of political reaction: elements pertaining to the values of tradition, *Gemeinschaft*, myth, religiosity, and so forth; elements that had been brusquely marginalized by the rush toward modernity, which, in his view, left the world a disenchanting, impoverished, well-nigh meaningless place. It was, therefore, only natural that Benjamin would seek to mobilize potentials for the critique of modernity that had been provided by reactionary thinkers. They alone realized the latent capacity to heal the lacerated social totality of modernity. Such an alliance of convenience suggested itself to Benjamin insofar as the right-wing critique of *Zivilisation* (a characteristic term of disparagement for a generation that grew up under the tutelage of Nietzsche and Spengler, though, one which Benjamin carefully avoided) proved more intransigent, more thoroughgoing, and less willing to compromise with the normative pre-

suppositions of the modern world than left-wing criticism. In the last analysis, both social democrats and communists (let alone liberals and “mere” democrats, who, from the rarified standpoint of theological criticism, are hardly worth mentioning) proved overly enamored with the logic of “progress,” with which Benjamin believed one needed to break at all costs—even that of forming problematical theoretical alliances.

To be sure, Benjamin went to great lengths to transform elements of the conservative revolutionary critique of modernity in order to make them serviceable for a left-wing political agenda. But with the advantage of historical distance, one realizes just how much of an overlap exists between the cultural left and right in the case of the interwar generation. For critically minded German intellectuals of this period, the vitalistic critique of *Zivilisation* had become an obligatory intellectual rite of passage.

It is in this spirit that recent critics have justifiably tried to show the parallels between *Lebensphilosophie* and the philosophy of history adumbrated by Horkheimer and Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. It would be wrong to emphasize the similarities at the expense of the differences. For unless these differences, which are no less important, are taken into account, the two approaches risk becoming, in essence, “the same”—which is far from being the case.³³ But in fact both Klages and *Dialectic of Enlightenment* purvey an anthropologically rooted critique of civilization, in which the central culprit is *ratiocination*—a faculty that places humanity at odds with both inner and outer nature. In essence, contemporary civilization suffers from an excess of “intellect” over “life.” A reconciliation with nature—both inner and outer—is the telos that guides both approaches to *Kulturkritik*.³⁴

These sentiments, far from being alien to Benjamin, are among the central preoccupations of his work (see, for example, the important fragment, “On the Doctrine of the Similar”). I have argued elsewhere that the philosophy of history of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is, via the mediation of Adorno, a specifically Benjaminian inheritance.³⁵ The critique of progress and the understanding of history as loss and decline, as well as the central theme concerning the interrelationship between enlightenment and myth, would be inconceivable without the precedent of his “Theses on the Philosophy of History” and other texts.

But unless one specifies precisely what aspects of the vitalist critique Benjamin deemed worthy of appropriation, one risks proceeding by insinuation rather than sound argument. For example, we know that his theory of the “decline of the aura” was in part derived from a member of the George-circle, Alfred Schuler. Yet, in Benjamin’s work Schuler’s ideas appear radically transformed, to the point where Schuler’s predominantly mythological interpretation of it is barely visible.

A similar claim can be made in the case of what Benjamin may have found of value in the work of Carl Schmitt. Schmitt’s work emphasizes the paramountcy of the “state of exception” (*Ausnahmezustand*) in determining sovereignty. It was an approach that Benjamin found methodologically suggestive for understanding the endemic political instability depicted in seventeenth-century tragic drama. Yet, the existence of a fairly ingratiating 1930 letter to Schmitt notwithstanding, to claim that Benjamin’s understanding of contemporary politics was substantively indebted to Schmitt (as indeed some have) is to exaggerate.³⁶

But in the case of Benjamin and Klages, there is something much more essential at stake. Benjamin was an enthusiast of Klages early on. In 1913 Klages delivered a famous lecture on “Man and Earth” at Hohe Meissner, a legendary German youth movement site. Because of its provocative anticivilizational and ecological themes, the lecture subsequently acquired canonical status among youth movement members. Benjamin visited Klages in Munich the next year and invited him to speak to the Berlin youth movement group (the Free Student Society) over which Benjamin presided.

Benjamin later developed a keen interest in Klages’ 1922 work, *On Cosmogonic Eros*, praising the book in a letter to Klages the following year. Moreover, his essay on Johann Jakob Bachofen (1935) is punctuated by a long discussion of Klages, whom he praises on a number of counts.³⁷ According to Benjamin, the chthonic theory of archaic images (*Urbilder*) that Klages develops in his 1922 work stands opposed to “representations” or the domain of the rational concept. Representations pertain to the “intellect” (*Geist*), which is characterized by “utilitarian views” and an interest in “usurpation.” The image, conversely, is a direct expression of the soul and relates to the domain of “symbolic intelligence.” As such, it stands opposed to the abstract intellectualism of the rational concept,

which, from the perspective of *Lebensphilosophie*, represents the basis of a mechanistic and soulless bourgeois *Zivilisation*. On all these points, it would seem, Benjamin could not be more in agreement with Klages.

It is not hard to discern what it was about the vitalistic critique of modern life he sought to appropriate for the ends of left-wing *Kulturkritik*. Despite his explicit reservations about Klages' perspective (he calls it a "system without issue that loses itself in a threatening prophecy addressed to a humanity that has allowed itself to be misled by the insinuations of the intellect"), he concludes his discussion with the following words of praise: "It is true that despite its provocative and sinister side, this philosophy, by virtue of the shrewdness of its analyses, the profundity of its views, and the level of its discussions, is infinitely superior to the appropriations of Bachofen that have been attempted by the official professors of German fascism."³⁸

Benjamin would remark to Adorno that the Bachofen manuscript, in which he attempts to work out in detail his relation to Klages, bore great relevance to their most intimate shared theoretical concerns ("Es liesse sich bei dieser Gelgegenheit viel zu unsern eigensten Dingen sagen").³⁹ And in an earlier letter, Adorno had already noted that Klages' "doctrine of the 'phenomenon' in the 'Reality of Images' [a chapter from volume 3 of *The Intellect as Antagonist of the Soul*] stands in the closest proximity to our questions."⁴⁰ He goes on to observe that: "it is precisely here that the boundary line between archaic and dialectical images lies, or, as I once stipulated against Brecht, a materialistic theory of ideas."

In essence, the success of their mutual philosophical project hinged on a successful materialist articulation of the doctrine of dialectical images. It was Klages who, as Adorno acknowledges in the lines just cited, had unquestionably gone the farthest in the direction of outlining a doctrine of images that was decidedly opposed to the predominant, rationalist approaches to the theory of knowledge—neo-Kantianism, positivism, and scientific Marxism. Yet, in his theory, such images appeared as eternal, timeless embodiments of the human soul. With Klages the image possessed an avowedly trans-historical, mythological status. For Benjamin and Adorno, therefore, the key to redeeming Klages' theory lay in *historicizing* the doctrine of images: to break decisively with their timeless, ahistorical, myth-

ological character by saturating them with historical content. Whereas Klages and other representatives of *Lebensphilosophie* viewed the contemporary cultural crisis as the manifestation of an eternal cosmological struggle between “reason” and “life,” Adorno and Benjamin sought to give the crisis historical definition and scope by revealing it as a crisis of capitalism. To the imagistic theory of truth per se, however, they had few specific objections. Instead, they viewed it as a valuable epistemological alternative to the fatal rational-scientific biases of late capitalist society.

In this approach, one sees *in nuce* the methodological plan for both Benjamin’s Arcades Project and Adorno’s own mature theory of knowledge—which, following Benjamin’s lead, he would characterize as thinking in “constellations.”⁴¹ It should come as little surprise, then, if Benjamin, in one of the more revealing (if characteristically terse) methodological directives for the Arcades Project, remarks: “to link heightened visibility [*Anschaulichkeit*] with the Marxist method” (V, 578). Here, “visuality” signifies a clear reference to the theory of images.

And thus, one of the conceptual keys to the project’s completion lay in a risky merger of Marx and Klages. Because of their nondiscursive nature, Benjamin viewed images as potentially superior to rational theories of cognition, which only aggravate the post-Enlightenment march of “disenchantment.” Yet, the important twist added by Benjamin’s theory of modernity suggests that, contra Weber and Marx, the disenchantment of the world is accompanied by a *reenchantment*: by a resurgence of mythological forces in modern garb. This reenchantment of the world was integrally related to the quasi-utopian wish-images that pervaded the phenomenal manifestations, the cultural superstructure, of modern capitalism: manifestations such as world-exhibitions, iron constructions, panoramas, interiors, museums, lighting, photography—not to mention the arcades themselves, the consummate dream-images of nineteenth-century commodity culture.

In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno would explicitly adopt Benjamin’s view concerning the entwinement of myth and Enlightenment, arguing that in the modern era Enlightenment degenerates into myth (e.g., the myth of “scientific progress”), just as myth is already a form of Enlightenment (an early form of world-demystification). Yet, in Benjamin’s case, the idea of

a recrudescence of mythical elements in the modern era was a concept of distinctly Klagean provenance. For Klages the archaic images corresponded to a primeval soul-world that stood opposed to the progressive disintegration of experience in modernity. However, owing to this atrophy of experience, under present social conditions these images were only accessible once the conscious mind was caught off guard: in day-dreams, trances, or when confronted with experiences that disrupted the normal patterns of rational thought. In his essay "On Dream-Consciousness," a work that Benjamin admired,⁴² Klages sought to provide a phenomenological account of the everyday circumstances that could lead to renewed contact with archaic images:

if in the stillness of the night we hear an automobile pass by and the sound gradually trails off into the distance; when viewing fireworks from afar or noiseless sheet-lightning; when returning to one's native surroundings after a several year interim marked by a perhaps stormy life; or, conversely, when visiting places of uncommon strangeness; . . . often when traveling by train, assuming that one has a compartment to oneself; occasionally in moments of great exhaustion, of hopeless despondency, of unbearable pain, as well as usually after taking whatever type of narcotic.⁴³

Here, moreover, the parallel with Jünger's theory of experience, as developed in books such as *The Adventurous Heart*, is quite relevant. All three, Benjamin, Klages, and Jünger, were concerned with the diminution of the potential for qualitative experience following the world-historical transition from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft*. Like Benjamin, Jünger feared that an increasingly mechanized modern cosmos and the progressive industrialization of the *lifeworld* would banish prospects for superior, self-transformative experiences. In a similar vein, Karl-Heinz Bohrer has convincingly shown how Benjamin's identification with the shock-aesthetics of the twentieth century avant-garde resembles Jünger's attraction to extreme situations (*Grenzfälle*), rapture, and transgression—whose paramount instance was proximity to death in war.

In a recent essay, Axel Honneth has commented on the parallels between Benjamin and Jünger and the "anthropological materialism" on which their theories of experience are based:

Jünger's anthropological materialism seized on extraordinary states, which, as in Benjamin, are circumscribed with the help of categories casually adopted from Bergson: in situations of danger, which originate from the