

CONTRIBUTIONS TOWARD A THEORY OF STORMS: HISTORICAL KNOWING AND HISTORICAL PROGRESS IN KANT AND BENJAMIN

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There is a picture by Klee called *Angelus Novus*. It shows an angel who seems about to move away from something he stares at. His eyes are wide, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how the angel of history must look. His face is turned toward the past. Where a chain of events appears before *us*, *he* sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise and has got caught in his wings; it is so strong that the angel can no longer close them. This storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows toward the sky. What we call progress is *this* storm.¹

Benjamin's famous Ninth Thesis on the Philosophy of History presents a historical sublime. Written in Parisian hiding shortly before he was consumed in the storm he describes, the allegorical passage has by now attained the status of an allegory for Benjamin himself, and for a particularly emphatic rejection of the very idea of moral progress over historical time. Benjamin's *Theses on the Philosophy of History* can certainly be read as a sustained, reasoned rejection of a conception of historical progress whose final, fatal stages Benjamin saw in the fatuousness and political paralysis of the German social-democratic politics of the Weimar period; a conception that Benjamin strongly associated with neo-Kantian philosophy and, ultimately, Kant himself.

Benjamin's rejection of the ideology of historical progress thus has a concrete political aspect as well as a latent philosophical argument regarding progress, both of which, as arguments, should be defensible through reasons. But—if we read the allegory of history in the way it seems intended—the rejection of progress also

¹ Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," *Selected Writings Volume 4: 1938–1940*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 392–3.

puts forward a theological, or better a religious messianic dimension that for itself seems more or less immune from reasoning: How does one justify an allegory, or argue against the claim that a storm is blowing from paradise?

The very complexity of Benjamin's allegory contributes to its ambivalent afterlife. It is safe to say that among the kind of persons who read Benjamin, the particular secular Enlightenment vision of "guaranteed" moral progress of the human species, supposedly evident in and through the span of recorded history, will have few takers. It is not obvious that such a vision needs further criticism. Neither an inductive inference from the collected experiences of empirical history, nor a moral judgment regarding what view of collective agency over time our human duties demand, seems to warrant such a vision. Indeed, on moral terms alone, it is plausible that we now—given the kinds of storms that consumed Benjamin, and continue to howl—experience what Adorno described as a new, historical categorical imperative (no more Auschwitz), which by implication turns the category of progress on its head and forbids the affirmative version of historical progress as a violation of the rights of the dead.

But there are a number of motives for the desire to complicate this neat reversal of the claim of moral progress in history. For one thing, the very complexity of Benjamin's allegory discourages it, and invites the attempt to understand progress differently, rather than to reject its very possibility. For another, notwithstanding the weight of a moral injunction to reject a fatuous ideology of progress, thinkers should not casually enter into self-contradictions. There is something facially self-contradictory and unreflective in the attitudes we assume toward historical proponents of moral progress, surely, once we regard ourselves as having progressed, morally speaking, beyond the moral concepts they employed in order to justify moral progress in the first place. Moral progress, in its various guises, is not so easy to strip off and may be better thought of in dialectical terms as the subject of repeated sublations. And, finally, as I hope to show here, even a cursory reading of theories of moral progress in the period of European Enlightenment from Voltaire to Kant is enough to refute the view that their understanding of moral progress in history was empirically fatuous and morally insensitive. In fact it was neither. In many important respects, for instance, the views of moral progress of the French *philosophes* resemble Benjamin's own. It is no accident that one of Benjamin's major sources for a critique of the ideology of progress in both the Theses and the Arcades Project is Turgot.

In the far more complex case of Kant, a brief reading of portions of the late and profoundly odd text on "An Old Question Raised Again" from the *Conflict of the Faculties* is intended to show how thoroughly Kant took to heart the lessons he learned from the *philosophes* regarding the idea of progress, its normative significance, its relation to empirical evidence, and, crucially, its attendant affective

dimension, as Kant attempted to formulate a definitive philosophical response to the events of the French Revolution. The text performs the final act of a long process of the internalization of moral progress: its transformation from an empirical induction combined with a claim of practical reason, into something quite different. For Kant, moral progress in history is a reflective teleological historical judgment in which the historical event is no longer available to empirical experience at all. The singular historical event becomes an allegory for the reformed relation between cognition and affect characteristic of the self-improving (European) species. In this way, Kant exchanges the experience of the historical sublime for the experience of the historically teleological progress. But it is precisely the experience of the historical sublime that Benjamin's allegory of progress as storm wants to reassert.

Like Kant, Benjamin is concerned about the dangers of affective disorders (*acedia*, paralysis, depression) that the historical sublime can provoke. Kant understands a kind of obstinate contentment in the face of historical ruin to be morally and pragmatically demanded as part of the philosophical historian's task. By contrast, Benjamin prefers to use the historical sublime as a mechanism for transmuting *acedia* into rage. Like Kant, finally, Benjamin also effectively internalizes the experience of history, turning its various empirical events into allegories to be held under the subjective control of the theorist. Benjamin asserts the historical sublime in the face of Kant's historical teleology. Among his own contemporaries, he diagnoses the fatuous return of Kant's original claim in the neo-Kantianism and social democratic political philosophy of his time, above all in the disastrous effects of Cohen's doctrine of morality in history as an *unendliche Aufgabe*. But his final view of the core claims of historical progress is much closer to Kant than a simple pro-progress/anti-progress reading would suggest.

This essay cannot realistically hope to explore adequately all the questions I have tried to raise in the preceding few paragraphs. That would require a book-length treatment. The stages to follow therefore are sketches. The hope is that they will be clear enough to sustain the argument. I proceed in three steps: in the first, a reading of the Enlightenment *philosophes* (and their splenetic and often resentment-laden reader, Voltaire) establishes the normative claim of species-wide moral progress in history. In the second, Kant's final reflections on "the old question" of the possibility of moral progress in history shows his simultaneous movements toward internalization of history in the form of the reflective teleological judgment, and his definitive resolution of the problem of affective control in confrontation with the historical sublime. In the third, a reading of Benjamin's Theses emphasizes their pragmatic and political valence over their messianism. This reading shows that the Theses are not at all a rejection of the possibility of moral progress.

I. ENLIGHTENMENT, BLOOD, AND RUIN

Let us begin with the sign and the instance: the French Revolution, the singular event that marks the effective end philosophical history. Here is the Marquis de Condorcet, writing on the eve of the revolution, describing the implications of the event for the prospects of the moral perfectibility of the species. He has titled the piece a “Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Human Mind,” and he takes the extraordinary political present as the pinion-point that transforms the historical past, radically rewriting the chronicle of historical time into prologue. The politics of the present both demand and make possible a transformation of historical chronicle into a resource medium both fitting for and intelligible to a recast present. History answers a practical need, but does so only once that need asserts itself over the historical material itself, taking the undifferentiated mass of historical calamities and refocusing until they appear as both encouragements and cautionary tales to embolden present-day actors to do their political duty:

Everything tells us that we are approaching the era of the grand revolutions of the human race. What can better enlighten us as to what we may expect, what can be a surer guide to us, amidst its commotions, than the picture of the revolutions that have preceded and prepared the way for it? The present state of knowledge assures us that it will be happy. But is it not upon condition that we know how to assist it with all our strength? And, that the happiness it promises may be less dearly bought, that it may spread with more rapidity over a greater space, that it may be more complete in its effects, is it not requisite to study, in the history of the human mind, what obstacles remain to be feared, and by what means those obstacles are to be surmounted?²

Everything tells us? Remarkably upbeat, especially considering that as he wrote Condorcet was suspected of undue Girondist sympathies and as a result found himself in a situation strikingly similar to Benjamin’s in 1940: hiding in a Parisian bolt-hole, rightly fearing for his life from Montagnard agents. And shortly after this passage was written, Condorcet was arrested and jailed while attempting to flee from France. Awaiting the guillotine, he took poison provided by friends and died in his cell.

Given these facts, Condorcet’s tone here should be read less as fatuousness than as a kind of obstinacy, a clear-eyed resolve regarding the attitude and measures that his objective situation required. The project of philosophical history as a whole was in many important respects a course in obstinacy. It was an obstinate exercise in denying the empirical matter of large-scale history in order to counter the paralyzing effects that its perception provoked; of committing oneself to the surreality of historical progress in contradiction to the weight of empirical

² Marquis de Condorcet, “Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Human Mind,” *The Enlightenment Reader*, ed. Isaac Kramnick (New York: Penguin, 1995) 26.

evidence that the *philosophes*, so keen to out-Locke Locke, had always prized so dearly; insisting on progress as a self-fulfilling prophecy by an Odysseus-like self-disciplining, a refusal to *behold* an image of the past as catastrophe in permanence.

At the other end of this project, Voltaire's work on the life of nations and the Lisbon earthquake from the 1750s is no less definitive. The poem on the Lisbon earthquake reads in one sense like a counter-Reformation *Trauerspiel* in its repetition of destruction but is in fact a kind of antidepressant screed. Voltaire describes a meaningless history—one without intrinsic narrative direction and purpose, a simple duration without development or culmination—as the only possible interpretation of the earthquake's visions of catastrophe: piles of corpses and shattered cities. Still, in its performative aspect, the reversal the poem performs is remarkable, since Voltaire's aim is less to riddle out the meaning of the ruins, the brooder's drive to interpret big things out of small pieces, but rather the reverse. The poem rescues meaning as preestablished, insofar as the very sublimity of the disaster is the empirical documentation of a supervenient thesis, namely the refutation of Pope's claim that what is, is right. Wrongness of existence here is taken not as the draining of meaning from history but as the meaning of the human situation, a species which, given empirical proof of the radical absence of God's justice and mercy, will henceforth have to depend only on itself to take control of its own fate, including the interpretation of its own failures.

The poem thereby reconfigures the catastrophic dimension of history into a resource for the requisite obstinacy and resolve in the face of disaster—provided of course that the correct moral lesson is derived from looking at historical catastrophe straight on. The full comprehension of Godforsakenness, once the paralyzing affect of it is drained dry, can also be a spark for humanism. The *external*, that is, historically empirical source of a melancholy response is necessarily reinterpreted as a kind of moral-political catechism. Its very status as empirical is both denied and preserved in the name of the rational control of otherwise sublimely overpowering events. Tens of thousands of people died miserably, corpses were piled in mountains, cities lay ruined, *and therefore* a particular metaphysical error now stands revealed, to be replaced by a newer and better cognitive commitment. But Voltaire takes the further step of supplementing this inveterate mistrust of the affective side of historical knowledge—grief—with a philosophical antidote: a universal history that bends the empirical to its aims, and provides a kind of wall of pragmatic reasons to stand against the rising tide of depression.

History itself yields up its place to a philosophical argument. For Voltaire, this is only fitting, as he argues that history itself is the lowest of the scholarly arts. It mobilizes memory, the least respectable of the intellectual powers. Worse still, compared with its successor genres, *belles lettres* and philosophy, history is a

study that compels endless and pointless erudition, a known risk factor in depressive withdrawal and narcissistic reflection, and one that the Italian humanists had largely succumbed to in the 16th century. Voltaire voiced a consistent disdain, bordering on disgust, for historical knowledge, which he saw as a degenerate and toxic form of erudition, without practical applicability and liable to produce pathological effects if overindulged.³

While predating Voltaire, this revulsion at historical knowing, the suspicion that its requisite erudition is potentially infectious and at least unwholesome, found in him its most effective advocate for Enlightenment empiricism. Even Hume the historian was aware of this occupational hazard, warning of the melancholy risks both of “abstruse” philosophy and of involved erudition regarding historical events;⁴ and most of the *philosophes* would come to share it to one degree or another. Voltaire’s Lisbon poem hints at the proper attitude not just toward calamitous historical events but toward the backward discipline of history too: do not escape its risk of crippling grief but attack it, master it, and turn both the specter of meaningless history and the risk of paralytic affect into tools for the construction of their opposites. The historical sublime—a set of empirical images that produces the melancholic specter of a Godforsaken and meaningless human experience in history—is mastered and re-signified by philosophy as a stratagem, and calm obstinacy as its correlative affect.

Grief or paralytic affect can afflict the historically minded person *both* through the very practice of generating and poring over empirical historical knowledge (excessive erudition and the risk of pathological allegorizing) *and* by the content of that knowledge: the repetition of violence and vainglory, stupidity, calamity, and disappointment and the repeated frustration of perfectly reasonable human hopes for a bit of alleviation. Voltaire’s condemnation of the *practice* of scholarly history as unwholesome thus also stands as the philosophical antidote to the *content* of empirical history as more or less consistently violent and horrible, and conducive to despair. As he had argued in the “Essay on the Manners and Spirits of Nations” in 1754, considered as an assemblage of remembered facts history was little more than the “immense scene of [. . .] desolation and the loss of millions of lives.”

³ For an excellent discussion see Mark Hulliung, *The Autocritique of Enlightenment: Rousseau and the Philosophes* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998) ch. 2.

⁴ David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999), 89ff, where nature warns the human mind to avoid overindulgence in metaphysics under the threat of Hamlet’s disorder: “Abstruse thought and profound researches I prohibit, and will severely punish, by the pensive melancholy which they introduce, by the endless uncertainty in which they involve you, and by the cold reception which your pretended discoveries will meet with, when communicated.” On Hume’s theory of affect and philosophy see also Donald Livingston, *Philosophical Melancholia and Delirium: Hume’s Pathology of Philosophy* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

Every great event has been a capital misfortune. History has kept no account of times of peace and tranquility; it relates only ravages and disasters. [. . .] What have been the fruits of the blood of so many millions of men shed in battle and the sacking of so many great cities? Nothing great or considerable [. . .] All history is little else than a long succession of useless cruelties; and if there happens any great revolution, it will bury the remembrance of past disputes, wars, and fraudulent treaties, which have produced so many transitory miseries.⁵

The sea of blood; the ruined city: in mid-century, Voltaire adopted the two tropes that recur so frequently in the Enlightenment project of philosophical history that they are worth pointing out, not just because of their ubiquity but also because of their productively anachronistic character for the jargon of Enlightenment, and their evocation of the historically sublime itself as a sort of conventional shorthand. Anachronistic, for these are of course also 17th-century Christian allegories, stock images of the central European counterreformation denoting human fallenness and its attendant vanity.

Blood and ruin convey the creaturely aspect of natural history and the specter of the withdrawal of God's saving gift of significance to the span of a human life or many lives, without which the distinction between the human and the animal is effaced, our great cities tumble and vanish, and we die, like dogs, awash in blood. In hindsight, it was probably a fairly short step from the lakes of blood of the counterreformation authors of the 17th century to the great re-signification of the image of democratic soil soaked in the blood of both revolutionaries and tyrants in the European and American Enlightenment: the sacrificial aspect of republican governance, the fructifying function of tyrant's blood for the tree of liberty and the blood sacrifice that continues to nourish abstract right. This transfiguration was a longer process, however, whose midpoint, here, is the redescription of the soaking of blood as an empirical history whose toxicity requires the refusal or at least the control of affect, which renders the historian incapable of redescrining bloody history as its other.

The ruined city is one of many allegorical representations of *vanitas*, the folly of pretensions to the permanence of meaning. That the anticlerical Voltaire reappropriates and recasts these baroque Catholic allegories in the name of a project of denying the facticity of history is noteworthy. For now, neither God's saving grace nor occult knowledge gained by endless erudition will transmute the images of lakes of blood and ruined cities into their opposites. This is possibly only through the rational decision to turn one's back on the weight of the factual in history and *regard history differently*, accepting with clear eyes the specter of meaningless time and rejecting the melancholia that the contemplation of meaningless time threatens.

⁵ Voltaire, "Essay on the Manners and Spirits of Nations," *The Enlightenment Reader*, ed. Isaac Kramnick (New York: Penguin, 1995) 371.

Here, for example, is the very young Turgot, again from mid-century, lecturing “On the Successive Advances of the Human Mind” at the Sorbonne:

We see societies establishing themselves, nations forming themselves, which in turn dominate over other nations or become subject to them. Empires rise and fall; laws, forms of government, one succeeding the other; the arts, the sciences, are discovered and are cultivated; sometimes retarded and sometimes accelerated in their progress, they pass from one region to another. Self-interest, ambition, vainglory, perpetually change the scene of the world, inundate the earth with blood. Yet in the midst of their ravages manners are gradually softened, the human mind takes enlightenment, separate nations draw nearer to each other, commerce and policy connect at last all parts of the globe, and the total mass of the human race, by the alterations of calm and agitation, of good conditions and of bad, marches away, although slowly, toward still higher perfection [. . .].⁶

The project of presenting a universal history was accordingly divided into two interrelated projects.⁷ On one side, there is a *cultural* history, that is, a history perched atop the empirical ruins that would find the narrative key to time as the story of the human spirit in the natural world. Universal cultural history would thereby recreate (and modestly contribute to) the fragile progress of repeated European Enlightenments, each one ultimately succumbing in the end to blood and ruin, its achievements nearly fading to oblivion but at the very least leaving inconspicuous traces behind that could serve as preparations for the next *recorso*, provided there were men left able to read them. (In this sense, as we will see, virtually all of the *philosophes*, like Voltaire, were squarely in the camp of what Kant in *Conflict of the Faculties* would shortly call “Abderitism”: the view that *moral* efforts were necessary to stave off, or at least compensate for, the *empirical* reality that human progress was subject to periodic but irregular and highly unpredictable relapses.)⁸

This explains the strong (indeed nearly literal) “message in a bottle” aspect of Diderot’s *Encyclopedia*. In a roundabout way, it also shows how fully committed virtually all the *philosophes* were to what Benjamin would later dismiss as the collective effort to continue the transmission of documents of barbarism. Yet, as both D’Alembert and Turgot argued at length, “reading” historical documents, or preserving their legibility both out of pragmatic and antiquarian interests, had to depart entirely from the corrosive erudition of the Renaissance humanists, to find a more expansive sense in reading events as meaning their own opposite.

⁶ Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot, “On the Successive Advances of the Human Mind,” *The Enlightenment Reader*, ed. Isaac Kramnick (New York: Penguin, 1995) 362.

⁷ I borrow this distinction from Hulliung (1998): 45–55.

⁸ Immanuel Kant, “An Old Question Raised Again: Is the Human Race Constantly Progressing?: Conflict of the Faculties,” *Religion and Rational Theology*, trans. and ed. Allen W. Wood and George Di Giovanni (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 298ff.

D'Alembert, for instance, appropriated Voltaire's vision of recursive stages of lost Enlightenments, clarifying the status of Enlightenment as the momentary and ephemeral collective, highly fragile victory over persistent error, superstition, and catastrophic violence. But traditional history writing counted as one of those same idols of the mind. Narrative accounts of battles, the rise and fall of empires and the brilliance of generals and statesmen, are boring—not (or not only) in the sense of their failure to capture the human spirit but in their risk of infecting the mind with *acedia*, boring holes in the mind through which the infection of the *tedium vitae* can get in. In itself history is pointless. Philosophers transmute it from base to refined and ethereal by subjecting it to guiding ideas, and these ideas cannot simply suffer the facts but must assert control over them. They must see the expansive present Enlightenment as the pinion-point or hinge by which the past is corrected, its facts realigned and focused with the correct emphasis, its otherwise hidden currents of development made visible from the perspective of the present.⁹

History writing makes history, just as old history unmakes the present. Progress is at least in part the artifact of its own description, a claim that would of course come to its fullest expression in Hegel's idea (in the Preface to the *Philosophy of Right*) that philosophy was its own time "captured" in thought, but which was in many respects more radical at mid-century, where the present is not so much captured but brought into being by the wresting of its components from out of the depressing chronicle of incessant and repetitive failure.

This constructive aspect was even more prominent in the second dimension of universal history, the *conjectural* history of the human species. Here the emphasis shifts from the repetitive stages of European Enlightenment to a universal historical narrative of the species, borrowing from the new discipline of embryology and from Buffon's natural history the basic interpretive strategy of a homology between individual ontogenesis and the phylogenetic development of a single intelligent species. This strategy fit nicely with the *philosophes'* overriding

⁹ See Diderot's own entry for "encyclopedia" in the *Encyclopedia* as an example of this message-in-a-bottle aspect. (Denis Diderot, "Encyclopedie," in Kramnick, 17–21.). An example of this entirely non-metaphysical technique of refocusing was Diderot's and D'Alembert's decision to include very little in the way of narrative history in the *Encyclopedia*, but quite a lot—an astonishing amount—of technological history, the origins and workings of machines, engines and devices of all kinds. Not only did this choice consolidate the status of the *Encyclopedia* as a message in a bottle meant to save time in the eventuality of yet another future fall from Enlightenment. It also, perhaps not entirely consistently, documented that the medieval period could not be interpreted entirely as a period of decline, since its spiritual backwardness was largely an artifact of clerical folly, even as its progress in the mechanical and technological arts progressed nicely along. Progress, the *Encyclopedia* wanted to show, is never entirely missing; but it takes a mind steeled against the enticements of erudition to find this out. In this sense, the *Encyclopedia* did not record history. It manufactured it, not just by de-emphasizing depressing facts and discovering or cataloguing newer and better ones, but by proposing that this very process was definitive for the high-cultural institution of new history.

interest in reconstructing the history of error. The species grows up; its early history is marked by just those persistent cognitive mistakes that are typical of infants and small children. Hence, the very old in historical time aligns cognitively with the very young. The present, suspended between the great age and/or gullible youth of the species and the fullness of maturity, is the young adult whose survival of the crisis of adolescence is still in doubt, but will now have to be decided by its own resources, free from illusions.

The parallel between the development of a human being and that of the species was an attractive strategy for speculation not least because it appeared grounded empirically in the most up-to-date science, but it nevertheless was to a large extent immune from empirical refutation simply due to its status as conjecture. Voltaire never could quite warm up to it for this reason. It mandated speculative claims concerning things about which by virtual definition we do not know; specifically the proximate future. But as a wholly metaphysically disenchanted claim, the ontogeny–phylogeny parallel was obliged to take on the form of an allegory as well. The image of the infant species, whether in the form of the bloody minded noble savage or the childlike, docile Islander, is a history-less subject, far from the bloodbath and ruined cities that continued to allegorize “world history” from the European point of view.

Conjectural history could also operate in this cleared-out horizon as a history of consciousness, and thus provide powerful confirmation of Lockean epistemology by demonstrating the historical (fallen) origins of supposedly innate ideas. In this sense, conjectural history could indeed perfect the faulty memory of scholarly or erudite history by discarding texts and reconstructing the true account of human spirit entirely from the perspective of the present, since the recovery of the true genesis narrative of metaphysical idols of all kinds was just the kind of debunking that the *philosophes* loved most, a way of perfecting the otherwise base faculty of memory with secular and disenchanted scientific reasoning.¹⁰

¹⁰ No wonder that they reacted so predictably badly to their internal enemy, the secret agent of melancholia who had somehow crept into their camp. Rousseau’s *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*, after all, had argued precisely against the methodological basis of enlightenment conjectural history in the context of a history of his own. Not only did the *Discourse* argue powerfully that early humans were profoundly and irredeemably *unlike* their modern counterparts, implying that only a history of decline, or perhaps no progress was legible in the long duration of the species. What is more, that long duration itself—longer than any of the *philosophes* were willing or able to comprehend—implied the real possibility that *no human history at all* could be recovered from the history of the species. If the great majority of human time has been spent with a consciousness and a form of living radically different than anything we can hope to comprehend, then one entailment is that human time cannot bear the needs of significance that we impose on it. Human time is in its great majority natural time, a time without historical events and therefore a continuum of empty time. Those human specimens involved in this ninety-five percent period,

II. KANT AND PROPHETIC HISTORY

Universal history, whether as cultural or conjectural history, arose in the context of a war of affects. It reached its high-water mark and conclusion in the European enlightenment with Kant, who perceived that the victory over affect was only to be had by a transformation of the cognitive foundation regarding judgments of historical progress. This transformation, the reflective teleological judgment applied to the singular event, solved both dimensions of the affective disorder associated with historical knowledge at one and the same time. As a mode of *a priori* history, certainly, Kant's reflective teleological judgment transforms the status of empirical history into a medium of possible signs of progress, defanging history and rendering it dependent on the interpretive power of the disinterested but rationally motivated onlooker. In this way, Kant definitively solved the threat of a loss of moral nerve when faced with blood and ruin or the image-basis of the idea of historical catastrophe.

At the same time, the capacity to judge the singular historical event as a sign of universal moral progress also definitively solves the risk of negative affect arising from the activity of historical knowing as such, for there is no longer any possibility of erudition and its characteristic pathologies. Erudition implies the almost erotic surrender to the sheer power of the empirical. But the reflective judgment transforms the empirical into just so many signs or allegories for the moral interests of the observer. Before I can reconstruct this transformation in the "Old Question Raised Again" in Kant's *Conflict of the Faculties*, though, it is important to remind ourselves of the earlier position regarding universal history and affect that Kant saw himself obliged to correct in the late work.

Kant's speculative historical essays from the 1780s, above all the essay on the "Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Intent," involve complex problems in their relation to the critical philosophy that cannot concern us here. But the project of the universal history essay is familiar enough. How can human history be interpreted in such a way that it can appear to us as *capable* of sustaining and furthering our own rational moral interest? Kant's reading of Rousseau had

Rousseau regarded as lucky—they lived out of time and were, as Voltaire would sneer, not quite human. But the advent of consciousness in its fully tragic sense inaugurates its own "progress" of misery, about which Rousseau is very clear: philosophical history, in the *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*, takes the form of "the eulogy of your first ancestors, criticism of your contemporaries, and the dread of those who will have the unhappiness to live after you." Hardly words to comfort the Marquis de Condorcet in his Paris bolt-hole, but the real treason, I would suggest, lay less in the dispute over the methodological parameters of a conjectural history of the human species than by the perception that Rousseau had used the *philosophes'* own tools against them, to bore a hole in the dam against spleen that they had worked so hard to erect.

inoculated him against the more unproblematic approach that the *philosophes* had taken to this question, and even in the 1780s he recognized that a satisfactory answer to the question would only be possible as part of a reconfigured relationship between human and natural history, since a simple identification of moral with technological progress was perhaps a necessary but far from a sufficient component of the overall position.

Kant's conjectural history therefore had to include just what Voltaire rejected. Providence remains wholly inaccessible as the object of a possible cognition, but nevertheless ends up in a seemingly interminable search for some rational function of its own as a constitutive idea of practical reason. For it is the idea of divine providence that obliges us to understand natural history as the playing-out of just that limited number of possible moves that the natural provision of characteristically human predispositions and faculties has made possible. Providence serves as a guarantee that any interpretation of natural history incompatible with our larger moral ends in the world will appear *at least to us* to be nugatory. Finally, providence emerges as an ideal of reason over whose application we must acknowledge only limited control.

This discloses the paradoxical nature of insight into the providential history of the species. Nature has a hidden plan for us, meaning that the plan is, for just this reason, *not* hidden to us. At some point in its very early history, the species has undergone a wholesale abandonment of biological drives and instincts as the origins of predictable voluntary behavior. Practical reason is their replacement as our governing faculty. But empirically speaking, reason has done such a spectacularly poor job in satisfying our most basic needs, and such a good job in covering the earth with blood and ruined cities, that we are obliged to assume that neither animal contentment nor political peace and security are the objectives of this new species-wide constant.

Nature molds us to reason through history, against our empirical wills, into just that political arrangement of persons and institutions in which a political basis for genuine moral progress emerges as a historical possibility. Nature is making us *exceptionally miserable*. But providence provides the cognitive switching station in which the otherwise natural consequences of this insight—indignation, despair, misogyny—transmute into their opposite, as Kant at perhaps his most Pietist tells us:

One cannot resist a certain indignation when one sees men's actions placed on the great stage of the world and finds that, despite some individuals' seeming wisdom, in the large everything is finally woven together from folly and childish vanity and often even childish malice and destructiveness. In the end, one does not know what concept one should have of a species so taken with its own superiority. Here, since the philosopher cannot assume that in the great human drama mankind has a rational *end of its own*, his only point of departure is to try to discover whether there is some *natural objective* in this senseless course of human affairs, from which it may be possible to

produce a history of creatures who proceed without a plan of their own but in conformity to some definite plan of nature's.¹¹

Like his recent predecessors, Kant appealed to Buffon and the emergent natural sciences to affirm the homology of onto- and phylogenesis.¹² But here, he appeals to the equally new science of political economy, specifically to Adam Smith, to borrow the image of the invisible hand; the cunning of nature in which a system whose output is, so far as we can tell, neither optimal nor especially desirable, turns out, at least from the perspective of philosophy, to be both of these.¹³ And already here the invisible hand stages a diorama of historical events, intelligible only from the perspective of the observer. The observer perspective has won security and serenity less by its physical safety and detachment, as by its capacity to internalize—to experience historical dynamics as the external signs for the internal play of just those distinctly human predispositions and faculties.

As a possible aesthetic judgment, certainly, the universality of blood and ruin in history suggests the possibility of the historical sublime. The task of the universal historian is to refuse the empirical source of the image, and to transform it by force of moral will into an internally staged relation between reason and imagination. A teleological judgment must arise in its place. Doing anything less—reflecting on the empirical basis of the long duration of history itself—invites a morally unacceptable risk of pathology, as Kant makes very clear in the “Speculative Beginnings of Human History:”

The reflective person feels a grief [*Trauer*] that the unreflective do not know, a grief that can well lead to moral ruination: this is a discontentedness with the providence that governs the entire course of the world; and he feels it when he thinks about the evil that so greatly oppresses the human race, leaving it without (apparent) hope for something better. It is of the greatest importance, however, *to be content with providence* (even though it has marked out for us so toilsome a road through this earthly world), partly so that we can always take courage under our burdens and—since we push guilt for those burdens off on fate and not ourselves, who may perhaps be the sole cause of these evils—fix our eyes on that fact and not neglect our own obligation to contribute to the betterment of ourselves.¹⁴

¹¹ Immanuel Kant, “Idea for a Universal History with Cosmopolitan Intent,” *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays*, trans. Ted Humphrey (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1983) 29–30.

¹² See Robert Loudon, *Kant's Impure Ethics: From Rational Beings to Human Beings* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000) 96ff.

¹³ On the trope of the invisible hand in both the *philosophes* and later Kant see Hans-Dieter Kittsteiner, *Naturabsicht und Unsichtbare Hand. Zur Kritik des Geschichtsphilosophischen Denkens* (Frankfurt am Main: Ullstein Verlag, 1980) 134ff.

¹⁴ “Speculative Beginnings of Human History” in Kant (1983): 57–58.

Kant speculates that the present age is seeded with empirical clues to support the suspicion that the hidden plan of nature undergoes a shift in the invisible causal mechanism for visible historical events, from the invisible hand of nature to the voluntary cooperative efforts of a small number of cultures and political agents. The work of a universal history is in part to identify these otherwise subtle and easily overlooked clues. Philosophy's indwelling "chiliastic vision" permits a distinctive relationship to the relevant empirical facts of historical experience. The span of historical time, here understood as a special mode of a larger natural history (Kant's parallel is the inhumanly slow paths of astronomical bodies) is so mind-bogglingly long that where a pre-philosophical perspective would lapse into deep pessimism or despair at the ubiquity of violence and the fragility of human purposes, philosophy sees just this *longue duree* as a field for the emergence of new modes of historicity—primarily in institutional history—that reveal "a little" of nature's hidden plans.

Hidden clues of nature's purpose are thus also clues transformed by their very observation into evidence for the great shift in historical time, from natural to practical causation in the development of institutions that correspond with the species' own highest practical purposes. Universal history therefore is both a theory about collective moral progress and also a part of what it theorizes. The publicity of the Enlightenment's philosophical history both names and promotes the progressive tendencies and potentials in the heart of the present. The "faintest signs" of the approach of an enlightened political era, movements toward constitutional establishment of citizens' rights and systems of legal restraint of sovereigns and mutual, reciprocal restraint among republics, thus have a double reading that becomes distinctive for philosophical history in this present. They are clues of a natural purpose, but for this very reason also signs that natural and practical agency have entered into a period of productive derangement where a mixed causality is discernible, and where committed and uncensored public intellectuals have for the first time the chance for a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy.

Kant's philosophical history thus requires a distinctive, even a peculiar relationship to the body of empirical data comprising historical knowing. There is a distinctive form of cognitive hygiene required if one is to adapt this historical knowledge into a philosophical history. That body of knowledge both offers the material for a history of institutional progress, but also the opposite: the collapse of historical narrative, the repetition of catastrophe. Kant is acutely aware of the toxic potential of historical knowing to freeze into the image of the eternal repetition of violent failure. A careful protocol is necessary to remain focused on the relevant institutional details of historical knowing. One must learn to "fix one's eyes" on a providential refraction of historical events; one must train in the Odyssean skill of ignoring both the promise of material happiness and the reality of material, historical suffering.

By focusing everywhere *only* on civil constitutions and their laws and on the relations among nations [. . .] one will, I believe, discover a guiding thread that can serve not only to clarify the thoroughly confused play of human affairs, or to aid in the political art of prophesying future changes in and among nations [. . .] It will also clear the way for (what, without presupposing a plan of nature, one cannot reasonably hope for) a comforting view of the future, one in which we represent from afar how the human species finally works its way up to that state where all the seeds nature has planted in it can be developed fully and in which the species' vocation here on earth can be fulfilled.¹⁵

The connection Kant makes here between the necessity of a schema of historical time as a thread, and the demand for comfort, will return later in Benjamin's response to both the cognitive and affective dimensions of universal history. For now, though, we should note that the cognitive filtering process that Kant's practical-methodological view requires is extreme, and it is fair to ask whether "history" in any relevant sense of the term remains relevant for this view. The ban on empirical history is not limited to the negative experience of suffering and failure but extends to everything but that thin thread of institutional change whose driving force has been, but must not remain, violence.

If universal history is not in fact historical, and if Kant places severe prohibitions concerning the kind of empirical knowledge even permitted to enter into philosophical history's ambit, then this sort of methodological *cordon sanitaire* has both a manifest and a hidden implication for our purposes.

Manifestly, Kant's view of universal history demands practical choices that effectively trump the status of the empirical. On this point, he could not be clearer. Empirical history, he concludes, is a distinct form of knowledge with its own internal criteria for validity and coherence, and its own relative independence from political and moral ends. There is no reason to suppose that the dross of historical facts stands in any special need for philosophy to alchemically change it into something else. Philosophical history is thus a mere means to a larger practical commitment that cannot be proved or disproved by, and is thus effectively immune from, the empirical in general.¹⁶

¹⁵ Kant (1983): 38–39.

¹⁶ See Kant's "Theory and Practice" for a typical example: "I will thus permit myself to assume that since the human race's natural end is to make steady cultural progress, its moral end is to be conceived as progressing toward the better. And this progress may well be occasionally *interrupted*, but it will never be *broken off*. It is not necessary for me to prove this assumption; the burden of proof is on its opponents. For I rest my case on my innate duty—a duty belonging to everyone in the sequence of generations to which (as man in general) I belong [. . .]—the duty so to affect posterity that it will become continually better (something that must be assumed to be possible). And this duty can rightfully be passed on from one generation to another. Now history may well give rise to so many doubts concerning my hopes that, were they demonstrable, they could move me to give up an apparently futile task; yet as long as this futility cannot be shown to be completely

In “The Old Question Raised Again,” in *The Conflict of the Faculties*, Kant famously begins by clarifying that a definitive answer to the question of moral progress in history is only to be had once we acquire a “fragment of human history” wrested not from the past but from the present, or of some liminal zone separating the present from the very proximate future. A universal historian must turn her back on the very past in order to discharge her moral duties. A prophetic history such as this takes as an exemplary event the proximate future considered, as it were, as a proximate past by a distant future: what *ought* to happen in the proximate future, at any rate, is the only cognitive category an *a priori* history is capable of confronting.

As a form of practice, historiography is ultimately intended to provoke and invite, rather than to explain or preserve, the proximate future of its own times. Kant runs through the three modes of self-fulfilling or practical prophecy available: The prediction of an ongoing decline into wickedness, a form of moral terrorism, is dismissed as overheated *Schwärmerei* and not to be taken seriously. The Abderist view of an infinitely repeatable cycle of progression and regression is, as Kant grants, the majority position—indeed not just the French *philosophes* but most of Kant’s philosophical contemporaries (Mendelssohn being only the best-remembered) were certainly Abderists on Kant’s own terms. And it is Abderism, not terrorism, that Kant sees as the likely outcome of the unfiltered confrontation with the historical sublime and its attendant derangement of the affects. Kant’s “argument” against Abderism—if it can be called that—is of course nothing other than the rejection of its crippling affective implications. We have a moral obligation not to subscribe to conceptions of historical time that may likely render us incapable of discharging our individual and collective duties toward promoting the highest moral ends for the species. This is the pure practical postulate of obligatory hope. As Theodor Adorno put it, the “unthinkability of despair is the secret of Kant’s philosophy.”¹⁷

The answer for Kant was, again, to recast the question of cognition as such and to ask what sort of relation to the empirical would suit given the moral constraints we acknowledge. The search for a suitable object of a reflexive teleological historical judgment is in this sense spurred by moral need—even if it is the need not to become desperate: “There must be some experience in the human race which, as an event, points to the disposition and capacity of the human race to be

certain, I cannot exchange my duty [. . .] for the rule of expediency not to undertake the unattainable [. . .] Faced with the sorry sight not so much of the evil to which the human race is subjected by natural causes, but rather of those that men themselves inflict on one another, the mind is nonetheless cheered by the prospect of a better future.” See “Theory and Practice” in Kant (1983): 86–87.

¹⁷ Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1990) 385.

the cause of its own advance toward the better, and [. . .] toward the human race as being the author of this advance.”

Therefore, an event must be sought which points to the existence of such a cause and to its effectiveness in the human race, undetermined with regard to time, and which would allow progress toward the better to be concluded as an inevitable consequence. This conclusion then could also be extended to the history of the past (that it has always been in progress) in such a way that that event would have to be considered not itself as the cause of history, but only as an imitation, a historical sign (*signum rememorativum, demonstrativum, prognostikon*) demonstrating the tendency of the human race viewed in its entirety, that is, seen not as [a sum of] individuals (for that would yield an interminable enumeration and computation), but rather as divided into nations and states (as it is encountered on earth).¹⁸

It is crucial that such an “event” on Kant’s terms *not* resemble the familiar schema of historical happening that tends to lure the mind toward the rocky shoal of Abderitism, so no event in the standard sense of bloody battles, collapsing cities, or vanished empires. No “momentous deeds” or infamous crimes, or “ancient and splendid political structures which vanish as if by magic while others come forth in their place as from the depths of the earth.” The “event” then is not—cannot be—the Revolution itself, for this with all its “misery and atrocities” is merely the delivery platform, so to speak, of the authentic historical sign: the “mode of thinking of the spectator, which reveals itself publicly in this game of great revolutions,” a specific mode of contented thinking which exhibits a “universal, yet disinterested sympathy for the players on one side against those on the other,” a clear solidarity and partisanship from a distance.

It is this distinctive combination of universality and disinterestedness that signals the advent of a genuinely progressive mode of thinking, that is, a mode that not only thinks but in fact comprises the moral progress that Kant seeks. What provokes that mode of thinking may be—will be—bloody and gruesome. But the storm of historical events provokes moral faculties for the appreciation of progressive tendencies. The French Revolution, however bloody or even catastrophic, “finds in the hearts of all spectators (who are not engaged in the game themselves) a wishful participation that borders closely on enthusiasm, the very expression of which is fraught with danger; this sympathy, therefore, can have no other cause than a moral predisposition in the human race.”¹⁹

¹⁸ Kant (1986): 301.

¹⁹ Ibid, 159: “Now I claim to be able to predict to the human race—even without prophetic insight—according to the aspects and omens of our day, the attainment of this goal. That is, I predict its progress toward the better which, from now on, turns out to be no longer completely retrogressive. For such a phenomenon in human history *is not to be forgotten*, because it has revealed a tendency and faculty in human nature . . .”.

III. BENJAMIN'S STORM

Kant concludes that there is a historical sublime that one has a moral duty not to experience. Benjamin stages just this experience—history as storm—in order to mobilize an entirely different affect from Kant's obstinate complacency in the face of paralytic *acedia*. That affect is anger, or better rage, since the latter implies a destructive force of its own.

It would be an oversimplifying mistake to conclude that Benjamin's "Theses on History" reject the complex balance of cognition, moral necessitation and control of affect that Kant musters in his notion of moral progress in history. In fact, Benjamin's odd, fractured insights on the idea of historical progress are profoundly Kantian, in a dialectical sense, even as Benjamin orients himself against the meliorism and progressivism of the neo-Kantian orthodoxy that educated him.

Regarding Benjamin and Kantianism one could do worse than recall Adorno's observation that "one must have internalized the force of a tradition thoroughly in order to truly hate it."²⁰ He trained in philosophy at the Freiburg school of Heinrich Rickert, whose seminars on Kant and epistemology Benjamin and Heidegger attended together in 1912. For Benjamin—and for so many other aspiring philosophers in the years leading up to World War I—that experience, like his readings of Natorp, Cohen, Stumpf, Riehl, Vaihinger, and Vorländer, was one of profound disappointment, bordering on revulsion. Benjamin's formal philosophical education led to a kind of global resentment of the worldview that made neo-Kantianism possible. He was appalled at what he experienced as the starchy, lifeless catechism that Rickert had made of Kant's critical philosophy, and above all at the incurious and needlessly truncated account of the range of possible experience that the neo-Kantians contented themselves with.²¹ And like many of his generation, Benjamin found his own way back to Kant, reading the critical philosophy and the historical essays outside of the academic setting, and seeing contemporary neo-Kantianism more as a symptom of a broader crisis in philosophy to be overcome by a transformation of the bases of academic philosophy overall.

This negative engagement with neo-Kantian had more than just epistemological stakes. A secular Jew from a highly assimilated upper-middle-class Berlin family, Benjamin also was member of that generation that saw the great war and the subsequent series of social and economic crises as a devastating refutation of that whole social, economic cultural consensus that had as its basis some sort of tacit

²⁰ Theodor W. Adorno, "Minima Moralia," *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 4 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1997) 58.

²¹ See Benjamin's letters to Gershom Scholem from October to December 1917 in Walter Benjamin, *Briefe*, ed. Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1978), 151–63.

connection between neo-Kantian philosophy, a model of German–Jewish assimilation based on a rational religion, a commitment to social democracy, and above all, the Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (SPD) after its split with the Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands (KPD), and finally a particular vision of guaranteed historical progress.

For Benjamin as for so many others in his generation, this formed a sort of cultural whole. Therefore, his rejection of neo-Kantianism and his demand for an expanded and radicalized basis for epistemology was for him part and parcel of the diagnosis of an all encompassing crisis: The failure of his parent’s cultural consensus regarding assimilation, the failure of the SPD to broker a kind of constitutional compromise, and above all the utter failure of a particular kind of progressivism and reformism that the SPD, drawing on many German Jewish neo-Kantian writers like Hermann Cohen and Paul Natorp, had offered as the Kantianism that would save the SPD both from radical left and radical right and place it in a position of political authority in the new postwar German republic.²² It is this holistic response to the failure of a particular cultural consensus that we have to bear in mind if Benjamin’s Kantian, anti-Kantian philosophy of history is to resonate for us.

Having spent considerable time and creative energy in avoiding military service, Benjamin spent much of the war years in Basel, a time of intense engagement with Kant that culminated in a much-cited but rather muddled and grandiose essay from 1918, “On the Program of the Coming Philosophy,” a kind of epistemic manifesto calling for a mode of broadly inclusive, if not systematic philosophy that would accommodate the full range of cognition beyond the narrow scientific limits of Kantian, and above all neo-Kantian doctrine. That *Jugendschrift*, still much studied, contains numerous epistemological embarrassments. Its call for the pursuit of forms of absolute experience through the concrete and otherwise rejected fragments of the everyday licensed a lifelong experimentalism that included studies of ancient Mayan language, graphology, and later Benjamin’s physician-supervised hashish experiments, conducted under medical supervision and with an empirical precision that would have pleased any positivist. But these (often jejune and clumsy, usually inconclusive) epistemological sorties did have one remarkably consistent feature. Benjamin was convinced from very early in his intellectual career that an expanded theory of experience had its most important application in the field of historiography; specifically, in a “conception” of history that abandoned both the schema of guaranteed development and historical progress or narrative reconstructibility, as well as the focus on the high-visibility objects of historical interest. The expansion of historical knowing

²² For an insight into this constellation see Benjamin’s 1938 review of Richard Höningwald’s *Philosophie und Sprache* in Benjamin (2003): 138–42.

had to disclose insights into larger-scale structures and regularities in history via its most overlooked, reviled, marginalized, and trivialized objects.

This was more of a norm searching for methodological validation than a method with normative implications, and Benjamin spent a quarter century attempting to put it into practice. At its very origin, though, in the years during and immediately following World War I, the project was conceived specifically as a corrective of Kant's philosophy of universal history.

Benjamin had apparently intended to write his philosophy dissertation on Kant's philosophy of history, and had drawn up elaborate plans for the structure and purpose of the argument. In typical fashion, he had done so in advance of reading the relevant Kantian texts. By the end of 1917, Benjamin wrote to Gershom Scholem to report his extreme disappointment with his confrontation with Kant's historical essays, remarking that the texts themselves—principally the "Universal History" essay and the essay on "Perpetual Peace"—had simultaneously documented the need for a revelation of the ethical dimension of historical time and had foreclosed the possibility of satisfying it. Kant himself, Benjamin wrote without elaboration, had come close, in the late essays and the third critique, to disclosing the ethical basis of historical experience and historical "being"—but had recoiled from just that disclosure, which threatened the unleashing of modes of cognition that could not be accommodated by the critical philosophy. This Benjamin would take on as his own project.²³

As a student of Kant, Benjamin had always defended Kant's systematic drive and the architectonic of the critical philosophy as Kant's greatest achievement. The attempt in the third Critique to encompass even historical time within the structures of possible judgments was for Benjamin a magnificent failure, and one that the (for Benjamin) diminished and timid systematic work of Hermann Cohen did nothing to further. Kant's systematizing drive led to an almost erotic surging-forth of critical philosophy toward historical experience, and hence the tension evident in Kant's late work, where political insight, historical knowing, and critical reason mutually contest each other's claims, was a reciprocal game of call-and-response. By contrast, Cohen and Natorp's epistemological timidity, so evident for Benjamin in their transformation of Kantian systematic Eros into the bland reliance on pre-given structure and constraint, manifested itself in their political writings as well, where the Kantian demand for border-crossing constitutional reform, and Marx's demand for massive political revolution in the proximate present lost both their strangeness and anger.

The "Theses on History" from 1940 thus can be read as the completion of a lifelong project of reformulating a conception of historical experience, an anti-universal history that would not only definitively reject the effects of neo-Kantian

²³ Benjamin (1978): 159.

theories of moral progress but also lay the foundation for a rereading of Kant's own philosophy. In an important sense, Benjamin's analysis of the conception of historical progress in the "Theses" thus takes up once again the Kantian problem of thinking historical time in practical terms, and this means, once again, thinking of historical time relation to a range of relevant enabling and disabling affects.

The Theses are often taken as a wholesale rejection of the possibility of progress in history, and its replacement with a messianism reflecting Benjamin's desperate circumstances—messianism in this case as the simple wish for the arrest, rather than the end of history, a position corresponding with objective despair. While it is true that the Theses appropriate a version of messianic wish for the cessation of history distinct from much of Benjamin's thinking in the 1930s, overemphasis on this messianism has obscured the Theses' treatment of historical progress itself, which Benjamin confronts less as an objective feature of historical time than as a historically specific mode of ideology, a discourse, whose prevalence foreshortens the experience of historical time, and by doing so rules out a form of memory of suffering, a mode of normative relation with past human beings that Benjamin regards both as morally significant in its own right and practically invaluable as a source of political motivating rage.

A mode of the historical sublime—catastrophe—relates cognition (of the minutia of historical memory) and rage (as the moral response to the frustrated expectations of past generations) in a neat complementarity to Kant's own synthesis of the reflexive teleological judgment and the obstinate contentment arising from the suppression of grief. And catastrophe—an idea whose content Benjamin at one point defines simply as "to have missed the opportunity"—is, as an Idea, provided an image foundation where no discursive analysis of the content is possible.²⁴ That image is storm, or, if one likes, the sea of blood, the ruined city.

Not progress, then, but "the *concept* [my emphasis] of progress must be grounded in the idea of catastrophe. That things are 'status quo' is the catastrophe."²⁵ If status and stasis are catastrophe, then Benjamin is equally clear that the Idea must be mobilized to focus the present as a moment of crisis—the moment where the preservation or the destruction of the status quo hangs in the balance, not at all in messianic terms but in the perfectly profane and pragmatic terms of contemporary political strategy and tactics. This capacity to declare crisis—the sovereignty of the proletariat—is just what the neo-Kantian discourse of progress makes impossible.

²⁴ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999) 474.

²⁵ *Ibid.*: 473.

Progress, then, quite distinct from the ideology or discourse of progress, consists in “the first revolutionary measure taken.”²⁶ Progress’s first step is the enraged destruction of the discourse of progress, and specifically the dialectical reversal of that concrete appropriation of the discourse of progress that progressives, taking their direction from a neo-Kantianism that had managed to conflate political progress with a purely anti-messianic, that is to say a mythical perpetuation of empty time. And here, in his readings of the concrete political implications of a specific combination of neo-Kantian philosophy and SPD progressivism, and the helplessness of this combination in the face of fascism, Benjamin gives his tactical rage full throat.

If Condorcet risks fatuousness to keep from losing his nerve at the end, then Josef Dietzgen’s “philosophy” of social democracy—“Every day our cause becomes clearer and people get smarter”—is for Benjamin a form of philosophy distilled to its fatuous and volatile essence: “Social democratic theory,” Benjamin writes in the Theses, “and to an even greater extent its practice, were shaped by a conception of progress which bore little relation to reality but made dogmatic claims.”²⁷ The theory dogmatically conflated technological development with political progress, thus aping the technophile features of fascism, confusing the availability of repetitive industrial work with the emancipation of the working class. Social democracy demanded universal progress even once the normative principle of species perfectibility had been thoroughly undermined. And fatally, social-democratic theory gradually lost sight of its best, most Kantian orientation by confusing Kant’s practical-prophetic judgment with an empirical one drawn from a blinkered reading of technological trends.

In the end, Benjamin sourly concludes, “when the chips are down [. . .] the concept of mankind’s historical progress cannot be separated from the concept of its progression through a homogenous, empty time. A critique of the concept of such a progression must underlie any criticism of the concept of progress itself.”²⁸ The discourse of progress, in other words, is nothing other than the dreamlike misinterpretation of historical experience as empty time. It is the illusion that repetition, whether in the form of recurring political failure and violence, or of the tedium of industrial work and consumption, or of gambling, weather, advertising, fashion, or philosophy itself, is its own other. But real progress would only become possible in the act of canceling out, annihilating the discourse of progress. That would require the affective control, the nerve, the attentiveness, and the presence of mind to behold the tradition of catastrophe, to internalize its force, in order to really hate it, and to hate it in order to negate it.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Benjamin (2003): 394.

²⁸ *Ibid.*: 394–95.

Such qualities are hard to find in actors in the thick of political struggle. Committed intellectuals may thus be of some use. But for engaged political actors themselves, the awareness of a doubling of time perception, of being fully present in a historical moment that reorganizes historical memory and expectation in ways that disclose previously occluded possibilities for change, is just the participant-perspective insight into temporality that Benjamin associates with revolutionary chances, and that chooses the historical sublime over the historical teleological judgment. Revolutionary time consciousness is thus genuinely progressive precisely because it cannot accommodate itself to a discourse or schema of historical progression—the temporality of which it is conscious forbids the application of just such a schema. It expresses a schematism of time as full/empty, rather than progressive/non-progressive.

By shifting the debate from progressive/non-progressive history to empty/full time, Benjamin brings the discussion back to the structure of historical experience of the present for those in the role of participant. The fullness of time, the moment of crisis or of perceptible opening for significant political transformation, cannot ultimately be ascribed to the position of the observer and the future-anterior-subjunctive tense. History, as Benjamin argues in the Theses, is “the subject of a construction whose site is not homogenous, empty time, but time full by now-time.”²⁹

Whatever else this orphic observation means, for Benjamin at least, it has a direct practical application at the level of political strategy: “What characterizes revolutionary classes at their moment of action is the awareness that they are about to make the continuum of history explode.”³⁰ Benjamin follows this claim by quoting a contemporary poem describing July revolutionaries in 1830 spontaneously aiming their artillery at clock-towers. But the point of that anecdote, as Benjamin tells it, is not merely an insight into a peculiar phenomenology of internal time-consciousness and external agency. It is that time itself, as an ongoing social act, is sensitive to, and to a small but crucial degree malleable by, sufficiently committed and organized political actors.

Part of the awareness of the revolutionary fullness of time is purely tactical. But another part is moral, provoked by the release of, rather than the control of, affect. Along with the recognition of full, revolutionary time comes rage, which as Marx had insisted would manifest itself as revenge for the injustice suffered by uncounted generations of the oppressed past. Social democracy defuses this unstable concoction of temporal awareness and anger by transposing the moral debt to the abstract and indefinitely deferred happiness of future generations, a concession that Benjamin claims “cut the sinews of their greatest strength. This

²⁹ Ibid: 395.

³⁰ Ibid.

indoctrination made the working class forget both its hatred and its spirit of sacrifice, for both are nourished more by the image of enslaved ancestors than by the ideal of liberated grandchildren.”³¹

Historians are thus also purveyors of affect. The “tiger leap into the past” distinctive of the revolutionary moment—Robespierre’s compulsive quoting of ancient Rome—marks the precise counterpart of that prophetic history that Kant had summoned from the observer perspective.

“It may be,” Benjamin observes, “that materialist historiography differs in method more clearly from universal history than from any other kind. Universal history is additive: it musters a mass of data to full the homogenous, empty time.” This secret also underlies the commitment to narration and narratability that is so distinctive for the empathetic method of historicism, where “empathy” requires the tacit acceptance of the course of historical events, a solidarity with those remembered victors of historical violence, and the adoption of that same melancholia—*acedia*, *tedium vitae*—that Benjamin understood all too well, and saw as a perennial threat to the very possibility of political practice. That kind of alchemical brew of gentle sadness, passivity, and uncritical acceptance of a general progressive trend also links universal history and the historicist model to what Benjamin labels a social-democratic “theory” of politics and history. In another of the best-known (or at least most-often quoted) theses, Benjamin makes this explicit.

Citing the 19th-century ancient historian Numa Denis Fustel de Coulanges, Benjamin castigates the historicist principle of “blotting out” everything the historian may know about the subsequent history of her period of study. “There is no better way of characterizing the method which historical materialism has broken with,” Benjamin writes. Historicist empathy—imagining one’s way into a past present—is precisely the translation of the older, early-modern practice of intense erudition. It focuses on loss, and is motivated by a specific form of sorrow. Empathy overall, Benjamin insists, has this specific affect as its single enabling condition. “[Empathy’s] origin is indolence of the heart, that *acedia* which despairs of appropriating the genuine historical image as it briefly flashes up.” *Acedia*, weariness with the spectacle of the world and with the course of history, is linked theologically to sloth. It is political sadness, and Benjamin insists that its overall effect is not just empathy with the victors of history but collusion—indeed collaboration—with those victors by treating the historical process that anoints them as the object of mere melancholy contemplation: “[E]mpathizing with the victor invariably benefits the current rulers.”³²

³¹ Ibid: 394.

³² Ibid: 391–92.

Thus, historicist methodology merges with neo-Kantian philosophy of history and social-democratic political ideology: a historical constellation not nearly as far-fetched as it may seem. Under the influence of the neo-Kantian moralizing of moral progress—Benjamin is clearly thinking of Hermann Cohen here—the conflation of empty time with a mass of “progressive trends” crystallizes into the historical version of the “*unendliche Aufgabe*” a task that is mythically endless, rather than merely of indeterminate length, which serves to express perfectly the ultimate fate of progressivism as nihilism. And progressivism, once taken as a mythically endless task, is precisely the counterpart of the slow sadness of the contemplation of the past as a warehouse of superseded cultural goods.

Marx could still conceive of the classless society as the advent of a different temporality in the *suddenness* of its advent, a suddenness that is both unexpected and urgently awaited for thousands of years. Benjamin’s notion of messianism as the arrest, rather than the culmination of historical expectation, is nowhere more clear than here, in the claim that “classless society is not the final goal of historical progress but its frequently miscarried, ultimately achieved interruption.”³³

To restore “a genuinely messianic face” to the concept of the classless society, the discourse of progress has to be confronted by the image of the historical sublime. The dead, trampled face of Klee’s angel stands in for this “genuinely messianic face,” provided that it can be used as an inspiration of rage rather than grief. History writing should assume as a methodological principle, rather than confirm as an empirical hypothesis, a heuristic model of historical happening where events no longer “run through the historian’s hand smoothly, like thread” but are taken against grain, as “a frayed bundle unraveling into a thousand different strands that hand down like unplaited hair.”³⁴ Like Klee’s angel—and again in a neat reversal both of Kant’s prophetic historian or Schlegel’s backward-facing prophet—the proper normative and methodological orientation for the historian *from out of* angry commitment to present politics is a tactical turn of the back to that very present, on the historian’s own times, to gather affective strength from the “peaks of earlier generations as they sink further and further into the past.” Benjamin concludes: “A conception of history that has liberated itself from the schema of progression within an empty and homogenous time would finally unleash the destructive energies of historical materialism that have been held in check for so long.”³⁵

In this sense, Benjamin’s famous description of the “angel of history” whose wings are caught in the “storm blowing from paradise,” in the ninth of the Theses on History, becomes both clearer and more powerful if we read it together with the

³³ Ibid: 395.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid: 396.

far less lapidary but equally trenchant tenth thesis, where Benjamin's angel, its face turned toward the past, transmogrifies into a very angry cadre of politically motivated actors, whose *turning away* from the political present is not remotely a depressed rejection of the present, but rather a turn toward historical experience in order to fill their wings with the gale of sublime rage powerful enough to begin to smash things:

The themes which monastic discipline assigned to friars for meditation were designed to turn them away from the world and its affairs. The thoughts we are developing here have a similar aim. At a moment when the politicians in whom the opponents of fascism had placed their hopes are prostrate, and confirm their defeat by betraying their own cause, these observations are intended to extricate the political worldlings from the snares in which the traitors have entangled them. The assumption here is that those politicians' stubborn faith in progress, their confidence in the "base in the masses," and, finally, their servile integration in an uncontrollable apparatus are three aspects of the same thing. This consideration is meant to suggest the high price our customary mode of thought will have to pay for a conception of history that avoids any complicity with the concept of history to which these politicians still adhere.³⁶

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³⁶ Ibid: 393.