

is unlikely that the German utopian knew the work of his French counterpart. But we can be sure that the image of the planet Mercury teaching the Harmonians their mother tongue would have delighted Paul Scheerbarth.

Written, in French, in the late 1930s or 1940; unpublished in Benjamin's lifetime. *Gesammelte Schriften*, II, 630-632. Translated by Edmund Jephcott.

## Notes

1. Paul Scheerbarth (1863-1915), German author, produced poetry and prose oriented toward a gently fantastic science fiction. In 1919, Benjamin had written an unpublished review of Scheerbarth's novel *Lesabéndio* (1913). *Zeit-Echo: Ein Kriegs-Tagebuch der Künstler* (Time-Echo: An Artists' War Diary) was published from 1914 to 1917. Two pieces by Scheerbarth appeared in the journal. Benjamin's quotation here is actually a very free paraphrase of at least two separate passages from Scheerbarth's short story (not an article) "In einem Privatirkele" (A Private Gathering).
2. Designed by the noted bridge engineer Alexandre-Gustave Eiffel (1832-1923), the Eiffel Tower was built for the International Exposition of 1889. When the exhibition concession expired in 1909, the tower escaped demolition only because its value as an antenna for the new radio technology was demonstrated.
3. Georg Christoph Lichtenberg (1742-1799), German author and experimental psychologist, was a feared satirist in his time. Yet he is best remembered today as the first great German aphorist. More than 1,500 pages of his notes were published posthumously; along with jokes, linguistic paradoxes, puns, metaphors, and excerpts from other writers, they contain thousands of memorable aphorisms. Jean Paul Richter (pen name Jean Paul; 1763-1825) wrote a series of wildly extravagant, humorous novels that, with their blend of fantasy and realism, continue to defy categorization.
4. Charles Fourier (1772-1837), French social theorist and reformer, called for a reorganization of society based on communal agrarian associations known as "phalansteries." He devoted a series of books, written in a bizarre style, to the minute elaboration of his utopian vision as set in an ideal realm which he called Harmony. The inhabitants of this realm, the Harmonians, would continually change roles within different systems of production.

## On the Concept of History

There was once, we know, an automaton constructed in such a way that it could respond to every move by a chess player with a countermove that would ensure the winning of the game.<sup>1</sup> A puppet wearing Turkish attire and with a hookah in its mouth sat before a chessboard placed on a large table. A system of mirrors created the illusion that this table was transparent on all sides. Actually, a hunchbacked dwarf—a master at chess—sat inside and guided the puppet's hand by means of strings. One can imagine a philosophic counterpart to this apparatus. The puppet, called "historical materialism,"<sup>2</sup> is to win all the time. It can easily be a match for anyone if it enlists the services of theology, which today, as we know, is small and ugly and has to keep out of sight.

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"It is one of the most noteworthy peculiarities of the human heart," writes Lotze, "that so much selfishness in individuals coexists with the general lack of envy which every present day feels toward its future."<sup>3</sup> This observation indicates that the image of happiness we cherish is thoroughly colored by the time to which the course of our own existence has assigned us. There is happiness—such as could arouse envy in us—only in the air we have breathed, among people we could have talked to, women who could have given themselves to us. In other words, the idea of happiness is indissolubly bound up with the idea of redemption. The same applies to the idea of the

past, which is the concern of history. The past carries with it a secret index by which it is referred to redemption. Doesn't a breath of the air that pervaded earlier days caress us as well? In the voices we hear, isn't there an echo of now silent ones? Don't the women we court have sisters they no longer recognize? If so, then there is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one. Then our coming was expected on earth. Then, like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a *weak* messianic power, a power on which the past has a claim. Such a claim cannot be settled cheaply. The historical materialist is aware of this.

## III

The chronicler who narrates events without distinguishing between major and minor ones acts in accord with the following truth: nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost to history. Of course only a redeemed mankind is granted the fullness of its past—which is to say, only for a redeemed mankind has its past become citable in all its moments. Each moment it has lived becomes a *citation à l'ordre du jour*.<sup>4</sup> And that day is Judgment Day.

## IV

Seek for food and clothing first; then shall the Kingdom of God be granted to you.

—Hegel, 1807<sup>5</sup>

Class struggle, which for a historian schooled in Marx is always in evidence, is a fight for the crude and material things without which no refined and spiritual things could exist. But these latter things, which are present in class struggle, are not present as a vision of spoils that fall to the victor. They are alive in this struggle as confidence, courage, humor, cunning, and fortitude, and have effects that reach far back into the past. They constantly call into question every victory, past and present, of the rulers. As flowers turn toward the sun, what has been strives to turn—by dint of a secret heliotropism—toward that sun which is rising in the sky of history. The historical materialist must be aware of this most inconspicuous of all transformations.

## V

The true image of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image that flashes up at the moment of its recognizability, and is never seen again. "The truth will not run away from us": this statement by Gottfried Keller

indicates exactly that point in historicism's image of history where the image is pierced by historical materialism.<sup>6</sup> For it is an irretrievable image of the past which threatens to disappear in any present that does not recognize itself as intended in that image.

## VI

Articulating the past historically does not mean recognizing it "the way it really was."<sup>7</sup> It means appropriating a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger. Historical materialism wishes to hold fast that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to the historical subject in a moment of danger. The danger threatens both the content of the tradition and those who inherit it. For both, it is one and the same thing: the danger of becoming a tool of the ruling classes. Every age must strive anew to wrest tradition away from the conformism that is working to overpower it. The Messiah comes not only as the redeemer; he comes as the victor over the Antichrist. The only historian capable of fanning the spark of hope in the past is the one who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he is victorious. And this enemy has never ceased to be victorious.

## VII

Consider the darkness and the great cold  
In this vale resounding with mystery.

—Brecht, *The Threepenny Opera*<sup>8</sup>

Addressing himself to the historian who wishes to relive an era, Fustel de Coulanges recommends that he blot out everything he knows about the later course of history.<sup>9</sup> There is no better way of characterizing the method which historical materialism has broken with. It is a process of empathy. Its origin is indolence of the heart, that *acedia* which despairs of appropriating the genuine historical image as it briefly flashes up. Among medieval theologians, *acedia* was regarded as the root cause of sadness. Flaubert, who was familiar with it, wrote: "Peu de gens devineront combien il a fallu être triste pour ressusciter Carthage!"<sup>10</sup> The nature of this sadness becomes clearer if we ask: With whom does historicism actually sympathize? The answer is inevitable: with the victor. And all rulers are the heirs of prior conquerors. Hence, empathizing with the victor invariably benefits the current rulers. The historical materialist knows what this means. Whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which current rulers step over those who are lying prostrate. According to traditional practice, the spoils are carried in the procession. They are called "cultural treasures," and a historical materialist views them with cautious detach-

ment. For in every case these treasures have a lineage which he cannot contemplate without horror. They owe their existence not only to the efforts of the great geniuses who created them, but also to the anonymous toil of others who lived in the same period. There is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is never free of barbarism, so barbarism taints the manner in which it was transmitted from one hand to another. The historical materialist therefore dissociates himself from this process of transmission as far as possible. He regards it as his task to brush history against the grain.

## VIII

The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the "state of emergency" in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that accords with this insight. Then we will clearly see that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency, and this will improve our position in the struggle against fascism. One reason fascism has a chance is that, in the name of progress, its opponents treat it as a historical norm.—The current amazement that the things we are experiencing are "still" possible in the twentieth century is *not* philosophical. This amazement is not the beginning of knowledge<sup>11</sup>—unless it is the knowledge that the view of history which gives rise to it is untenable.

## IX

My wing is ready for flight,  
I would like to turn back.  
If I stayed everliving time,  
I'd still have little luck.

—Gerhard Scholem, "Greetings from the Angelus"<sup>12</sup>

There is a picture by Klee called *Angelus Novus*. It shows an angel who seems about to move away from something he stares at.<sup>13</sup> 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.

## X

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 their "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 those politicians still adhere.

## XI

The conformism which has marked the Social Democrats<sup>14</sup> from the beginning attaches not only to their political tactics but to their economic views as well. It is one reason for the eventual breakdown of their party. Nothing has so corrupted the German working class as the notion that it was moving with the current. It regarded technological development as the driving force of the stream with which it thought it was moving. From there it was but a step to the illusion that the factory work ostensibly furthering technological progress constituted a political achievement. The old Protestant work ethic was resurrected among German workers in secularized form. The Gotha Program already bears traces of this confusion, defining labor as "the source of all wealth and all culture."<sup>15</sup> Smelling a rat, Marx countered that "the man who possesses no other property than his labor power" must of necessity become "the slave of other men who have made themselves owners." Yet the confusion spread, and soon thereafter Josef Dietzgen proclaimed: "The savior of modern times is called work. The . . . perfecting . . . of the labor process constitutes the wealth which can now do what no redeemer has ever been able to accomplish."<sup>16</sup> This vulgar-Marxist conception of the nature of labor scarcely considers the question of how its products could ever benefit the workers when they are beyond the means of those workers. It recognizes only the progress in mastering nature, not the retrogression of society; it already displays the technocratic features that later emerge in fascism. Among these is a conception of nature which differs ominously from the one advocated by socialist utopias prior to the Revolution of 1848. The new conception of labor is tantamount to the exploitation of nature, which, with naive complacency, is contrasted with the ex-

plotation of the proletariat. Compared to this positivistic view, Fourier's fantasies, which have so often been ridiculed, prove surprisingly sound.<sup>17</sup> According to Fourier, cooperative labor would increase efficiency to such an extent that four moons would illuminate the sky at night, the polar ice caps would recede, seawater would no longer taste salty, and beasts of prey would do man's bidding. All this illustrates a kind of labor which, far from exploiting nature, would help her give birth to the creations that now lie dormant in her womb. The sort of nature that (as Dietzgen puts it) "exists gratis" is a complement to the corrupted conception of labor.

#### XII

We need history, but our need for it differs from that of the jaded idlers in the garden of knowledge.

—Nietzsche, *On the Advantages and Disadvantages of History for Life*<sup>18</sup>

The subject of historical knowledge is the struggling, oppressed class itself. Marx presents it as the last enslaved class—the avenger that completes the task of liberation in the name of generations of the downtrodden. This conviction, which had a brief resurgence in the Spartacus League,<sup>19</sup> has always been objectionable to Social Democrats. Within three decades they managed to erase the name of Blanqui almost entirely, though at the sound of that name the preceding century had quaked.<sup>20</sup> The Social Democrats preferred to cast the working class in the role of a redeemer of *future* generations, in this way cutting the sinews of its greatest strength. This indoctrination made the working class forget both its hatred and its spirit of sacrifice, for both are nourished by the image of enslaved ancestors rather than by the ideal of liberated grandchildren.

#### XIII

Every day, our cause becomes clearer and people get smarter.

—Josef Dietzgen, *Social Democratic Philosophy*<sup>21</sup>

Social Democratic theory 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. Progress as pictured in the minds of the Social Democrats was, first of all, progress of humankind itself (and not just advances in human ability and knowledge). Second, it was something boundless (in keeping with an infinite perfectibility of humanity). Third, it was considered inevitable—something that automatically pursued a straight or spiral course. Each of these assumptions is controversial and open to criticism. But when the chips are down, criticism must penetrate beyond these assumptions and focus on what they have in common. The concept of man-

kind's historical progress cannot be sundered from the concept of its progression through a homogeneous, empty time. A critique of the concept of such a progression must underlie any criticism of the concept of progress itself.

#### XIV

Origin is the goal.

—Karl Kraus, *Words in Verse*, vol. 122

History is the subject of a construction whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled full by now-time [*Jetztzeit*]. Thus, to Robespierre ancient Rome was a past charged with now-time, a past which he blasted out of the continuum of history. The French Revolution viewed itself as Rome reincarnate. It cited ancient Rome exactly the way fashion cites a by-gone mode of dress. Fashion has a nose for the topical, no matter where it stirs in the thickets of long ago; it is the tiger's leap into the past.<sup>23</sup> Such a leap, however, takes place in an arena where the ruling class gives the commands. The same leap in the open air of history is the dialectical leap Marx understood as revolution.

#### XV

What characterizes revolutionary classes at their moment of action is the awareness that they are about to make the continuum of history explode. The Great Revolution introduced a new calendar. The initial day of a calendar presents history in time-lapse mode. And basically it is this same day that keeps recurring in the guise of holidays, which are days of remembrance [*Tage des Eingedenkens*]. Thus, calendars do not measure time the way clocks do; they are monuments of a historical consciousness of which not the slightest trace has been apparent in Europe, it would seem, for the past hundred years. In the July Revolution an incident occurred in which this consciousness came into its own.<sup>24</sup> On the first evening of fighting, it so happened that the dials on clocktowers were being fired at simultaneously and independently from several locations in Paris. An eyewitness, who may have owed his insight to the rhyme, wrote as follows:

Qui le croirait! on dit, qu'irrités contre l'heure,  
De nouveaux Josués, au pied de chaque tour,  
Tiraient sur les cadrans pour arrêter le jour.

[Who would believe it! It is said that, incensed at the hour,  
Latter-day Joshuas, at the foot of every clocktower,  
Were firing on clock faces to make the day stand still.]<sup>25</sup>

## XVI

The historical materialist cannot do without the notion of a present which is not a transition, but in which time takes a stand [*einsteht*] and has come to a standstill. For this notion defines the very present in which he himself is writing history. Historicism offers the "eternal" image of the past; historical materialism supplies a unique experience with the past.<sup>26</sup> The historical materialist leaves it to others to be drained by the whore called "Once upon a time" in historicism's bordello. He remains in control of his powers—man enough to blast open the continuum of history.

## XVII

Historicism rightly culminates in universal history. It may be that materialist historiography differs in method more clearly from universal history than from any other kind. Universal history has no theoretical armature. Its procedure is additive: it musters a mass of data to fill the homogeneous, empty time. Materialist historiography, on the other hand, is based on a constructive principle. Thinking involves not only the movement of thoughts, but their arrest as well. Where thinking suddenly comes to a stop in a constellation saturated with tensions, it gives that constellation a shock, by which thinking is crystallized as a monad. The historical materialist approaches a historical object only where it confronts him as a monad. In this structure he recognizes the sign of a messianic arrest of happening, or (to put it differently) a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past.<sup>27</sup> He takes cognizance of it in order to blast a specific era out of the homogeneous course of history; thus, he blasts a specific life out of the era, a specific work out of the lifework. As a result of this method, the lifework is both preserved and sublated in the work, the era in the lifework, and the entire course of history in the era. The nourishing fruit of what is historically understood contains time in its *interior* as a precious but tasteless seed.

## XVIII

"In relation to the history of all organic life on earth," writes a modern biologist, "the paltry fifty-millennia history of *homo sapiens* equates to something like two seconds at the close of a twenty-four-hour day. On this scale, the history of civilized mankind would take up one-fifth of the last second of the last hour." Now-time, which, as a model of messianic time, comprises the entire history of mankind in a tremendous abbreviation, coincides exactly with the figure which the history of mankind describes in the universe.

A<sup>28</sup>

Historicism contents itself with establishing a causal nexus among various moments in history. But no state of affairs having causal significance is for that very reason historical. It became historical posthumously, as it were, through events that may be separated from it by thousands of years. The historian who proceeds from this consideration ceases to tell the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary. He grasps the constellation into which his own era has entered, along with a very specific earlier one. Thus, he establishes a conception of the present as now-time shot through with splinters of messianic time.

## B

The soothsayers who queried time and learned what it had in store certainly did not experience it as either homogeneous or empty. Whoever keeps this in mind will perhaps get an idea of how past times were experienced in remembrance—namely, in just this way. We know that the Jews were prohibited from inquiring into the future: the Torah and the prayers instructed them in remembrance. This disenchanting the future, which holds sway over all those who turn to soothsayers for enlightenment. This does not imply, however, that for the Jews the future became homogeneous, empty time. For every second was the small gateway in time through which the Messiah might enter.<sup>29</sup>

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## Notes

1. The first documented chess-playing automaton, known as the Turk, was made in 1770 by the Hungarian polymath scholar and inventor Baron Wolfgang von Kempelen (1734–1804) to entertain his sovereign Maria Theresa and the Viennese court. Powered by clockwork and capable of a variety of expressive movements, the mustached mannequin, wearing a fur-trimmed cloak and a turban and holding a long Turkish pipe in his mouth, was seated atop a maplewood cabinet mounted on wheels, an inlaid chessboard before him; inside the cabinet, hidden in a cramped, stuffy space lit by candlelight, a very small man operated the controls and played the chess game. The automaton toured the great cities of Europe in 1783–1784, winning most of its matches. On Kempelen's death, it passed to the Viennese showman Johann Maelzel, under whose management it gained its greatest fame, becoming the subject of books, pamphlets, and articles, including a detailed eyewitness account and analysis by Edgar Allan Poe, "Maelzel's Chess

- Player" (1836). In 1809 it defeated Napoleon in a game, and from 1817 to 1837 it regularly toured England and America. The secret of the cabinet was exposed in 1834 by a former operator of the mechanism, but it continued to draw crowds. After Maelzel died in 1838, the Turk became an exhibit in a small museum in Philadelphia, where it was gradually forgotten. It was destroyed by a fire in 1854.
2. On Benjamin's concept of historical materialism, see in particular section I of his essay "Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian," in *Selected Writings*, Volume 3: 1935-1938 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002); and Convolute N in Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999).
  3. Hermann Lotze, *Mikrokosmos*, vol. 3 (Leipzig, 1864), p. 49. See Convolute N13a,1 in Benjamin's *Passagen-Werk* (Arcades Project). Lotze (1817-1881), German philosopher, is best known for his polemic against vitalism and for his religious philosophy, which attempted to delineate human values against the backdrop of a modern understanding of existence. He also helped found the science of physiological psychology.
  4. The French phrase *citation à l'ordre du jour* means "a citation to be taken up as (part of) the business of the day," a citation of pressing concern at a given moment." The phrase *à l'ordre du jour* can also refer, in a military context, to something mentioned in the day's dispatches.
  5. From a letter of Hegel to K. L. von Knebel, August 30, 1807, in K. L. von Knebel's *literarischer Nachlass und Briefwechsel*, vol. 2 (Leipzig, 1840), p. 446. "Granted" here translates *zufallen*—Hegel is literally saying that the kingdom of God will "fall to your share"—just as it does in the second sentence of section III above, where Benjamin is literally saying that, in the case of a redeemed humanity, its past abundantly "falls to its share."
  6. This sentence and the next are taken from Benjamin's essay "Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian." See Benjamin's *Selected Writings*, Volume 3: 1935-1938 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 262. Gottfried Keller (1819-1890) was one of the great German-language prose stylists of the nineteenth century, best known for his novel *Der grüne Heinrich* (Green Henry; 1854-1855, revised version 1879-1880) and the story collection *Die Leute von Seldwyla* (The People of Seldwyla; first volume 1856, second volume 1874). See Benjamin's essay "Gottfried Keller" in Volume 2 of this edition.
  7. This is the historian's task as defined by Leopold von Ranke (1795-1886), perhaps the leading German historian of the nineteenth century, whose scholarly method and way of teaching (he was the first to give seminars in history) had a great influence on Western historiography. His work, which for Benjamin epitomizes nineteenth-century historicism, exhibits a bias against political and social change.
  8. Act 3, scene 9 (the last words of the play).
  9. Numa Denis Fustel de Coulanges (1830-1889) was a French historian who specialized in ancient and medieval history.
  10. "Few will suspect how sad one had to be to undertake the resuscitation of Carthage." The line as Flaubert actually wrote it is: "Peu de gens devineront combien il a fallu être triste pour entreprendre de ressusciter Carthage!" Letter to Ernest Feydeau, November 29-30, 1859, in Gustave Flaubert, *Correspondance*, new enlarged edition (Paris: L. Conard, 1926-1933), Volume 4: 1854-1861, p. 348.
11. An allusion to Aristotle's dictum that philosophy begins in wonder (*Metaphysics*, 982b).
  12. Scholem composed his poem "Gruss vom Angelus" for Benjamin's twenty-ninth birthday, July 15, 1921. The text of the entire poem is printed in *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin*, trans. Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Ja-schson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 184-185. On Klee's *Angelus Novus*, which Scholem had hanging in his Munich apartment for a while, see note 13 below.
  13. The reference is to Paul Klee's ink-wash drawing *Angelus Novus* (1920), which Benjamin owned for a time.
  14. The Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (Social Democratic Party of Germany), or SPD, was founded by Wilhelm Liebknecht and August Bebel in 1863, originally as a Marxist revolutionary organization. In the course of the nineteenth century, partly in response to Chancellor Otto von Bismarck's anti-Socialist laws of the 1880s, its policy shifted from revolutionary to social-reformist. Becoming Germany's largest political party after World War I, it adopted a moderate reformist policy and participated in the government of the Weimar Republic. The party was banned by the Nazis in 1933.
  15. In 1875, the Thuringian town of Gotha was the scene of a congress that united the two leading German socialist groups as the Socialist Labor party. The new party adopted the so-called Gotha Program, drafted by Wilhelm Liebknecht and Ferdinand Lassalle. It was severely criticized by Marx in his "Randglossen zum Programm der deutschen Arbeiterpartei" (written 1875, first published 1891; translated as *Critique of the Gotha Program*).
  16. Josef Dietzgen, *Sämtliche Schriften* (Wiesbaden, 1911), vol. 1, p. 175 (*Sozialdemokratische Philosophie*). Dietzgen (1828-1888) was a self-educated German leatherworker who interpreted Marx for the workers and won fame as the "philosopher of the proletariat," later emigrating to the United States (1884), where he edited socialist newspapers in New York and Chicago. He set out his philosophy of democratic socialism in *Das Wesen der menschlichen Kopfarbeit* (The Nature of Man's Mental Labor; 1869). He sent the manuscript to Marx, who in turn forwarded it to Engels with the following comment: "My opinion is that J. Dietzgen would do better to condense all his ideas into two printer's sheets and have them published under his own name as a tanner. If he publishes them in the size he is proposing, he will discredit himself with his lack of dialectical development and his way of going round in circles." (Letter to Engels of October 4, 1868.)
  17. Charles Fourier (1772-1837), French social theorist and reformer, called for a reorganization of society based on communal agrarian associations which he called "phalansteries." In each community, the members would continually change roles within different systems of production.
  18. Nietzsche's *Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben* was written in

1873 and published in 1874 as the second part of his *Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen* (Untimely Meditations). Benjamin quotes from the opening paragraph of Nietzsche's preface.

19. The Spartacus League was a radical leftist group founded by Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg during World War I. In 1918 it became the German Communist party.
20. Louis-Auguste Blanqui (1805–1881), French revolutionary socialist and militant anticlerical, was active in all three major upheavals in nineteenth-century France—the revolutions of 1830 and 1848 and the Paris Commune—and was imprisoned following each series of events. Quotations from Blanqui and Benjamin's commentary on him play a key role in *The Arcades Project*.
21. Dietzgen, *Sämtliche Schriften*, vol. 1, p. 176.
22. Karl Kraus, *Worte in Versen*, vol. 1, 2nd ed. (Leipzig, 1919), p. 69, "Der sterbende Mensch" (The Dying Man). Kraus (1874–1936) was an Austrian journalist, critic, playwright, and poet. His *Worte in Versen* was published in nine volumes from 1916 to 1930. See Benjamin's essay "Karl Kraus" (1931) in Volume 2 of this edition.
23. "Thickets of long ago" translates "Dickicht des Einst." "Tiger's leap into the past" translates "Tigersprung ins Vergangene."
24. The July Revolution took place July 27–29, 1830. It toppled the government of Charles X and led to the proclamation of Louis Philippe as "Citizen King" (July Monarchy).
25. See Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, Convolute a21a.2.
26. "A unique experience with the past" translates "eine Erfahrung mit [der Vergangenheit], die einzig dasteht." The last word chimes with *einsteht* in the first sentence of this section.
27. "Messianic arrest of happening" translates "messianische Stillstellung des Geschehens." "Oppressed past" translates "unterdrückte Vergangenheit," which also suggests "suppressed past."
28. These last two sections, which appear under the separate headings "A" and "B" at the end of an early, untitled draft of the theses on history, were dropped in Benjamin's later drafts of the text. On account of their intrinsic interest, they are printed as a supplement to the text in the *Gesammelte Schriften*.
29. "The small gateway" translates "Die kleine Pforte," an echo perhaps of Martin Luther's phrase "die enge Pforte" ("the narrow gate"), in his rendering of Matthew 7:13–14 in the New Testament: "Enter by the narrow gate. . . . For the gate is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to life."

## Paralipomena to "On the Concept of History"

Empathy with the past serves not least to make the past seem present. It is no coincidence that this tendency accords very well with a positivist conception of history (as seen in Eduard Meyer).<sup>1</sup> In the field of history, the projection of the past into the present is analogous to the substitution of homogeneous configurations for changes in the physical world [*Körperwelt*]. The latter process has been identified by Meyerson as the basis of the natural sciences (*De l'explication dans les sciences*).<sup>2</sup> The former is the quintessence of the "scientific" character of history, as defined by positivism. It is secured at the cost of completely eradicating every vestige of history's original role as remembrance [*Eingedenken*]. The false aliveness of the past-made-present, the elimination of every echo of a "lament" from history, marks history's final subjection to the modern concept of science.

In other words, the project of discovering "laws" for the course of historical events is not the only means—and hardly the most subtle—of assimilating historiography to natural science. The notion that the historian's task is to make the past "present" [*das Vergangne zu "vergegenwärtigen"*] is guilty of the same fraudulence, and is far less transparent.

### XVIIa

In the idea of classless society, Marx secularized the idea of messianic time. And that was a good thing. It was only when the Social Democrats elevated this idea to an "ideal" that the trouble began. The ideal was defined in Neokantian doctrine as an "infinite [*unendlich*] task." And this doctrine was