

# Becoming Significant: Walter Benjamin's Angel of History

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Paul Klee Angelus Novus Watercolor on Paper 1920

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How might I be able to start this presentation on Walter Benjamin? How can I try to grab the energy right off the bat of a person who began his renowned article on the collection of books as “I am unpacking my library. Yes, I am” (Benjamin, Walter 59). I wonder how many times scholars, critics, and Benjaminians have tried to use his witty words to jump into a conversation of their own. (Just researching this paper I have found more than enough.) What might I do to add to the conversation without adding to the heap of waste Benjamin himself commented on in his “Theses on the Philosophy of History?”

Walter Benjamin, since his death in 1940, has remained a cultural and literary champion. Scholars, critics, dialecticians, and historians have used Benjamin’s words, formats and concepts to define and describe a vast array of seemingly unrelated ideas: weather patterns, environmental destruction, book reviews, religious iconography and even criticism against or justifications for war. There are immeasurable numbers of responses to Benjamin’s writings.

This presentation, however, will focus directly on the definitions and descriptions that Benjamin himself struggled with in his own writing, in response to contemporary conditions and contexts, using as a primary example his idea of *Angelus Novus*, which ultimately appears as text IX of “Theses on the Philosophy of History.” A historical analysis of the metamorphosis of this idea illustrates the contradictory character of Benjamin’s philosophy. The strength of Benjamin is that we find ourselves in him; his

angel becomes a history we use to define our own angels. But that is also the problem. Reading Benjamin's text we see the dialectic process at work. The problem for us is that we know, through the misappropriations, the crossing of terms, and the parallels that become circular there is no way out of the dialectic. Why then, are we fine in it?

In Benjamin's dialectic, he consistently negates his own definitions—but at the same time, they are presented with an underlining stitch of certainty. Benjamin's fragmentary format, especially seen in "Theses on the Philosophy of History," reveals how definitions of terms, concepts and critiques are contradicted throughout his body of work. Take for example Benjamin's discussion on the subject of History in his 1940 text "Theses on the Philosophy of History." In this text we see Benjamin, who is commenting to his friends Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer on the recent publication of his book on Charles Pierre Baudelaire, describe drastic changes to the term "History" and changes in the way historians should do their job. Furthermore, throughout the "Theses on the Philosophy of History," contradictions that Benjamin presents in this text allow an open-endedness that anyone may misinterpreted as places Benjamin left open to explore the work further. This false leap into the text, which is accomplished in numerous ways, makes having a solid hold on the subject difficult. Yet, interestingly enough, it is Benjamin's work, not other Frankfurt School texts, which stand as the strong symbol of the Frankfurt School. Benjamin's texts argue with each other in a way that makes it easy to find a sort of personal comfort with the work and at the same time discover discrepancies that cannot be understood or answered easily. Benjamin's overlapping and densely written text allows sides to be taken but no victory to be made. "Any attempt to establish a unity from a series of texts as clearly diverse as Benjamin's will always be

thwarted from the start. Benjamin will never be canonical but has rather emerged as the site of different canons. Canons wage war. One is condemned to choose and hence to stand by a particular canon. The complete works are the site of an irretrievable difference” (Benjamin, Andrew 30). In this statement we see the ways in which it is easy to pick parts of Benjamin’s texts and use them as personal markers. With the myriad subjects Benjamin covers in his texts, along with the strength of his dialectic, the idea of taking sides seems pretty simple. But, do we really know what sides we are taking when reading through the Benjamin texts?

Benjamin’s most famous, and most appropriated, anti-canonical symbol is *Angelus Novus*, the Angel of History. While Benjamin’s own idea of the Angel of History was influenced and altered by a number of sources and functions differently in each text, it was a watercolor by Paul Klee, which Benjamin owned, that served as a catalyst for the development of the wide range of metaphors attached to the idea of the Angel of History. The metamorphosis of Benjamin’s Angel of History is a changing of history; it tells of how Benjamin grew over time and found that in growing the world seemed to become acquiescent. Yet this text, written in various forms in the later years of Benjamin’s life, has become a symbol of the modern historical dialectic, a revolutionary corpus, and a warning from the future. *Angelus Novus*, the ninth text fragment in “The Theses on the Philosophy of History,” has been used as a metaphor and allegory for a wide range of concepts and ideas. In large part this wide appeal is due to the increasing open-endedness of Benjamin’s concepts, along with his undefined positions. The play that is to be found in Benjamin’s text, especially in the “The Theses on the Philosophy of History,” enables appropriation and bolsters significance:

Benjamin's interpretation of a 'modern' artwork as a mirror of autobiographical self-assurance and as a fantasy of political dissent has been turned into a foundation text for a theoretically abbreviated and metaphorically stylized alternative historical idea bent on reflecting on its own inconclusiveness. As an icon of the left, *Angelus Novus* has seemed to hold out an elusive formula for making sense of the senseless, for reversing the irreversible, while being subject to a kind of political brooding all the more protracted the less promising the prospects for political practice appear to be. Thus Benjamin's suggestive visual allegory has become a meditative image- an *Andachtbild*- for a dissident mentality vacillating between historical abstraction and political projection, between despondency and defiance, between assault and retreat. The image keeps the aggressive tension inherent in such a mentality in abeyance so that the tension stays put within the politically disenfranchised, and hence ideologically overcharged, realm of culture. (Werckmeister 242)

Benjamin's Angel of History first appeared when Benjamin proposed a titled for a literary journal in 1922. The title, *Angelus Novus*, came directly from the 1920 Paul Klee watercolor that Benjamin had owned since 1921. The thinly layered watercolor depicts a linear figure that seems to have the bodily features of a bird with a man's head. The figure floats in the washed halo of the paper. The hands are in an upward fashion, suggesting a call to prayer or a taking off from the ground, a type of flight. The form of the arms and body meet in a way as to suggest a thin set of wings that not only coat the back of the figure but stress the individuals center, or soul. The birdlike talons of the feet, only showing three appendages per foot, appear to suggest a type of claw. Yet, when looking for more definition of these toes we are lead to believe that they have been cut off, only revealing the circular ends and not the sharp blades. The bottom of the body also appears to be dressed in a tail like structure. It is not evident if this structure is clothing or is part of the body itself. The head of the figure does not move. The stare from the eyes are rigid and at the same time wanting. The open mouth of the figure is aggressive, scowling, showing fang-like teeth and is in direct line with the center or soul

of the body. The rest of the face is connected by a maze of color, line, and shape reminiscent of cubism.

The second time the Benjamin's Angelus Novus appeared was an article Benjamin wrote about Karl Kraus, published in 1931. During this interview Benjamin used the image to suggest that Kraus was a type of spoken prophet of the times. Karl Kraus, the Austrian essayist, playwright, and poet was commonly called the "foremost satirists of the 20th century in German language" (Liukkonen). Kraus calls on his fellow Jews to relieve themselves from the hold of their Jewish heritage and look at their community for other reasons, including production of goods. For his views Kraus became known as a vocal advocate for Jewish anti-Semitism. Benjamin heard Kraus' plea to the Jewish community and responded in the 1931 article referring to Kraus as a type of prophet who is standing up with words all Jews should be hearing. "In calling his projected journal Angelus Novus and in addressing the journalist Kraus as a winged "messenger" of the "latest news" prompting a radical protest, Benjamin transfigured the exalted literary ambitions of his own journalism, with its claims of absolute topicality, into nothing less than a religious metaphor. In neither text did he descriptively elaborate upon the watercolor or the legend" (Werckmeister 244).

Benjamin's, along with others from the Frankfurt School, main concerns were the place of religion within Marxist discussions and the historian that would record reality. "He [Benjamin] talks of the historian as 'kindling a spark of hope in the past.'" (Hartman 345) The most important step Benjamin makes in his 1940 "Theses" is the progress of the historian into this new function that Karl Marx formulates, the material historian. This new material historian is not dependent on religion. He is not dependent on

supernatural powers that are in control of all past, present, and future events. In fact, the Marxian material historian understands all history; although his understanding is gleaned by looking at what man makes as a product of the time. Production becomes the focus of history-- not religion. In Karl Kraus, Benjamin found a like mind informing him of the importance in looking outside of the “erotic” nature of religion to the newly scientific nature of the production of goods and trade. Kraus too believed in the resignation of religion and asked the Jewish community to relieve themselves from the needs of the church. “Kraus attacked the ‘ghetto-mentality’ and urged all Jews to jettison their beliefs, rituals and manners for the assimilation into the dominant society. In *Eine Krone für Zion* (1898) Kraus mocked the views of Theodor Herzl, the propagandist and founder of the Zionist movement. As a result, Kraus was described as ‘an exquisitely Jewish anti-Semite.’” (Liukkonen, Petri)

Benjamin continued to wrestle with his own religious past until his death. It was his Jewish tradition, religion, and practice that left countless individuals fleeing their homes during the 1930s and 1940s. The increasingly powerful German National Socialist Party, with right-wing political views on race and nationalism, proved to be a threat to the identity of the Jewish community. But it was Kraus who also commented on the role of religion within the Jewish identity, that the Jewish community should find something greater than the association with God. This is why Kraus became a vocal profit for Benjamin. Kraus satirical caricatures, used in a way to describe certain historical persons by using their characteristics in a way that inevitably destroyed their identity, was an approach that Benjamin found very appealing. “Benjamin admired the caricatures of Karl Kraus for ‘creeping into those he impersonates in order to annihilate

them” (Benjamin, A 162). The Kraus characters would be changed and attacked by the virtues they possessed. Kraus, for Benjamin, became associated with the angel of history for reasons of Kraus’ vocal position on the importance that the Jewish community unites together under a banner of community production, not under the identity of religion.



**Oskar Kokoschka** (1886–1980)  
 Karl Kraus (1909)  
 Pen and Ink  
 Walter M. Feilchenfeldt, Zurich  
<http://www.btinternet.com/~j.p1/kokoschka/gallery.htm>

In the introduction to *Illumination*, Hannah Arendt explains that the discussion of the role and identities of the Jewish community was not at all widespread but only consisted inside the intellectual conversation. This is one reason why Benjamin calls Kraus as a messenger for Germany. For Benjamin, Kraus spoke to the people about their religious identity to the whole of the German Jewish community, whereas other intellectuals were only speaking about the subject in their own circles. In the introduction Arendt discusses how the Jewish identity was being called into question as early as 1870 to 1880 and that this conflict between Germany and German Jews was in large part the direction of many political and intellectual dialogues and not the dialogue of average Jewish Germans.



What was involved, then, was what had...been called the Jewish Question and existed in that form only in the German-speaking Central Europe of those decades...it never was anything but the concern of the Jewish intelligentsia and had no significance for the majority of Central European Jewry. For the intellectuals, however, it was of great importance, for their own Jewishness, which played hardly any role in their spiritual household, determined their social life to an extraordinary degree and therefore presents itself to them as a moral question of the first order. In this moral form the Jewish question marked, in Kafka's work, 'the terrible inner condition of these generations'...the problem as it appeared to the Jewish intelligentsia has a dual aspect, the non-Jewish environment and assimilated Jewish society...It was the failure to realize this that was felt to be unbearable about Jewish society, whose representatives, on the one hand, wished to remain Jews and, on the other, did not want to acknowledge their Jewishness." (Benjamin, W 29, 30)

Arendt continues to explain in this introduction that the discussions being debated between Jewish anti-Semitism and Zionist ideologies were very much lead by Moritz Goldstein, who penned an article in 1912 entitled "German-Jewish Mt. Parnassus" (Deutsch-judischer Parnass). This article expounded on the then placement of the Intellectual Jewish Community within German society and called for the Jewish community to understand their place in the German mindset. "With respect to the Non-Jewish environment, 'We Jews administer the intellectual property of a people which denies us the right and the ability to do so...it is easy to show the absurdity of our adversaries' arguments and prove that their enmity is unfounded.'" Goldstein continues to suggest that even after all is done, and after all Jewish identities be validated, the Germans will remain "antipathetic" to the Jews. While the earlier Angelus Novus texts recount connections to the Jewish tradition, the final 1940 version jettisons these questions and focuses in on the responsibility of the material historian. Unlike the third text that parallels Jewish doctrine, the final 1940 text remains removed. Is this the move from the theologian to the material historian that we see Benjamin making? Is Benjamin moving away from theology to construct a history on production instead?

“Agesilaus Santander”  
(Two passages, second version)

In the room I inhabited in Berlin, that [name], before it stepped forth into the light out of my [current] name in full armor, has attached its image to the wall: New Angel...In short, nothing could weaken the man's patience. And the wings of that patience resembled the angel's wings in that very few strokes were sufficient [for it] to maintain itself immovably in the face of the one whom he had decided never to let go...For even [the angel] himself, who has claws and wings that are pointed, or even sharp as knives, does not reveal any intent to pounce upon the one whom he has sighted. He holds him firmly in his gaze—for a long time, and then recedes stroke after stroke, but inexorably. Why? In order to pull him along behind himself, on that path into the future on which he came and that he knows so well that he traverses it without turning back, and without turning his glance away from the one he has chosen.  
(Werckmeister 246)

The third text concerning the Angel of History was written after Benjamin's emigration from Germany to Ibiza, Spain in 1933. This text, titled “Agesilaus Santander,” is a more elaborate version of the final and describes the interactions between a man and a woman, who some have believe is a symbol between the political historian and the materialist historian. It is believed that part of this version was written because a Benjamin was involved in a romance with a woman who was already married. In the “Agesilaus Santander” text we see a transfiguration or mutation of the angel from one that is active to one that is motionless. “In short, nothing could weaken the man's patience. And the wings of that patience resembled the angel's wings in that very few strokes were sufficient [for it] to maintain itself immovably in the face of the one whom he had decided never to let go...For even [the angel] himself, who has claws and wings that are pointed, or even sharp as knives, does nor reveal any intent to pounce upon the one whom he has sighted” (Werckmeister 246). While the text suggests Benjamin's angel as a sort of prize for its prey, Werckmeister believes that the hesitant anguish in the

lines of this text is Benjamin's reluctance to act. "Benjamin pictures the viewer's encounter with the hovering angel as the equivalent of the lasting erotic fixation of a man-himself-on a woman... Benjamin conceived of the woman as his twin identity, his double. Rather than seizing her by force, he lies in wait until she voluntarily surrenders to his steady attraction" (Werckmeister 246). Yet, this angel lies in waiting, only watching the movement of the female double move toward him. Its politics have been laid aside. The historian becomes unmoved and barren, only able to witness. The decision of the historian to only witness is complete. Here the angel is motionless, even lost to advancing, and reluctant to pounce. The reluctance in the angel's movements is an important change for the Benjamin's angel of history. In this third text the angel moves from an angel of action to an angel of resignation, disinclination. Werckmeister believes that that change or resignation symbolized Benjamin's own progression to put aside the struggle of the "erotic" political historian, which Werckmeister likens to the female double, to become the male dominated materialist historian. The difference between the political historian and the materialist historian stems from the introduction of the Materialist historian by Karl Marx. Marx felt that history should be judged by causes that inevitably must produce the necessities that further life instead of the historical account of supernatural beings or events that were at that point the forces for which history was recorded. For example the historian must take into account the social situation, the products, and the relationship to production when looking toward the historical subject. For Marx, and likewise for Benjamin, this new historian steps out of an age which dealt with a type of mysticism, with an "erotic" fixation to the thought that man was not in control of his or her daily practice but only directed by a higher being, and begins a new

understanding that all things, even production is a cause for historical reasoning. In fact, before Marx's materialist historicism it was commonly believed that all events were created not out of the production of needs and means but through external accidents or profits.

Many writers note that historical materialism represented a revolution in human thought, and a break from previous ways of understanding the underlying basis of change within various human societies. The theory shows what Marx called a "coherence" in human history, because each generation inherits the productive forces developed previously and in turn further develops them before passing them on to the next generation. Further that this coherence increasingly involves more of humanity the more the productive forces develop and expand to bind people together in production and exchange... This understanding counters the notion that human history is simply a series of accidents, either without any underlying cause or caused by supernatural beings or forces exerting their will on society. This posits that history is made as a result of struggle between different social classes rooted in the underlying economic base. (Wikipedia Contributors)

While the ninth text in Benjamin's 1940 "Theses" speaks of an angel that has turned away from the erotic historicism, it is in the earlier third text that we see the angel wrestling with the both historical schemata. In the earlier text we see a male figure, which is donned with the glow of the materialist historian waiting for a female figure, which we associate with the earlier historian. "In 'Agesilaus Santander' Benjamin still sides with this ideal by making the angel with his 'claws' and 'wings...sharp as knives' refrain from pouncing on the beloved. Now he let go of humanized political eroticism. While the angel of history, a sexless ideal, wishes to awaken the dead, the materialists historian, a fierce male, is still brooding on sexual murder" (Werckmeister 263). While it is not clear why these analogies between gender and historical movements take effect for Benjamin's final "Theses" it is believed that the female/s for which is spoken about in the third text come from Benjamin's own life and romances. It is believed that he was in

relationship with three women, all of whom were married. Further comparison between the later “female” historian and the new “male” material historian seems to only be a blurring of the third and fourth texts. But, with more girth into the political history of Benjamin, along with close reading Werckmeister believes that the “erotic” nature for which is written about can be traced to what Werckmeister suggests is Benjamin’s “radicalized relationship between love and politics.” (Werckmeister 252) Furthermore, in the third text Werckmeister believes that Benjamin wants his radical “leftist” past to be justified but by the final 1940 text this desire no longer appears. “In ‘Agesilaus Santander,’ Benjamin envisaged a resolution of this conflict.” In the same year Benjamin wrote “Agesilaus Santander,” he wrote two further texts that also include associations to Angelus Novus. These other texts, “Experience and Poverty,” and “About the Present Social Positions of the French Writer,” are continued discussions about the political roles for which Benjamin continued to work out in his writings.

All Three texts that Benjamin wrote at Ibiza in the summer of 1933 appear animated by a similar autobiographical reflection suggested in the recurrent motifs of the angels, new names, barbarism, and destruction. In ‘Agesilaus Santander’ Benjamin reassured himself about the erotic continuity of his leftward ‘path.’ In ‘Experience and poverty’ he ascertained the lasting pertinence of his pre-1933 cultural critique. And in ‘About the Present Social Position of the French Writer’ he set the terms for a political engagement of his work in the antifascist struggle for the time of his exile in France. (Werckmeister 253)

The forth, and final text about Angelus Novus that Benjamin wrote was part of his “The Theses on the Philosophy of History” (text IX), which was completed in 1940. While this version is only a couple of lines long, it completes years of revision. Like the earlier text, “Agesilaus Santander,” Benjamin did not intend for it to be published. The Angel of History, which has changed through Benjamin’s works, becomes, in the end, an angel who lacks action, surviving only through reflection and memory. “In the final

“Theses” he [the angel] gave up on the option to determine what ought to perish and what was worth saving. The angel of history has no more ‘burning interest’ in the catastrophes he sees” (Werckmeister 262). In this statement from Werckmeister we see an angel that has lost interest in the terrible events taking place around its motionless stance. If we were to follow Benjamin’s conversation on the materialist historian we see Benjamin commenting on the transformation of the political historian to the material historian. While the political historian remains interested in the “catastrophes he sees” it is this material historian who much go further by seeking full understanding of the events and not fixate on what Benjamin calls the “Erotic.”

At the beginning of Benjamin’s 1940 “Theses on the Philosophy of History” two main figures, a puppet and a dwarf, are playing chess. The two figures, one controlled by a grouping of strings and external movements, the other prone to mischief may be analogies to the “erotic” historian/theologian, and the material historian. The puppet, linked directly by Benjamin’s text as the carrier for material history, is said to be the victorious opponent during the chess game. The second figure, the hunchback or trickster, assumes the role of theology in the allegory. In her introduction to Benjamin’s collection of texts, Hannah Arendt traces the Benjamin’s hunchback back to his childhood when he learned a German fairy-tale. In the tale this hunchback was very mischievous and was the cause for many misfortunes for the children of Germany. “The mother (Benjamin’s) referred to the ‘little hunchback,’ who caused the objects to play their mischievous tricks upon children.” (Benjamin 7) By the end of the first fragment in Benjamin’s “Theses” the puppet is not completely against the Dwarf in the chess game. At the end of the first fragment Benjamin suggests that the two chess players may

help each other in the chess game. “The puppet called ‘historical materialism’ is to win all the time. It can easily be a match for anyone if it enlists the services of theology” (Benjamin 253). One is to wonder at this point if the game itself is the second player while the puppet and the hunchback dwarf are the first. While the puppet and the dwarf are to be linked to the historical debate taking place throughout the “Theses” they may also be linked to Hegel as Iam Balfour suggests in the essay “Reversal, Quotation” (*Benjamin’s History*).

The relation of the puppet and dwarf bespeaks something of a master/slave dialectic, as played out in Hegel’s narrative of a moment—that is to say a movement—of consciousness, when the slave paradoxically comes to be recognized as the master of the master and the master as slave of the slave. So in Benjamin’s text the puppet overturns his subservient role to become the puppeteer of the hunchback dwarf. In this scenario, the puppet and dwarf, ‘historical materialism’ and theology, have to combine forces, and it is the cooperation of the two that guarantees victory in the chess game of history. Or at least this is the case for theology and what is called ‘historical materialism.’” (Balfour 627)

Balfour too is suggesting that the puppet and dwarf work together to win the chess game but that the relationship between master and slave, as Hegel writes about, also involves the combination of the two. In order for the master to understand that he himself has become subservient to the slave, he has to understand the roles the slave plays. The same goes for the slave. Both working in unison make the transition or transformation. Both master and slave must work together for a fully complete dialectic. These two dialectics, the master/slave dialectic and the material historian/theologian dialectic set up the scenario for Benjamin’s 1940 “Theses”. The two running dialectical analogies further establish the setting for Benjamin’s Angel of History to come in to announce a new transformational consciousness.

Benjamin begins his fourth fragment of the 1940 “Theses” with a quote from Hegel. “Seek for goods and clothing first, then the Kingdom of God shall be added unto you” (Benjamin 254). This quote is crucial to Benjamin’s argument to Adorno and Horkheimer. It alludes to the goal of the text, that the principal concern should first rest with production, with goods, and then religion may enter into the equation. Yet, while this quote suggest a biblical attribution it is a misquote of Hegel that Balfour speaks about in the article “Reversal, Quotation” (*Benjamin’s History*). Balfour suggests that Hegel took the saying from Christ about living for god first and then the materials of man will come, Mathew 6:33, and reversed it alluding to the fact that materials are first.

“One need not decide whether Hegel is serious or not at every turn in this passage, nor whether Hegel, as a former theology student and author even of a life of Jesus, in intentionally misquoting a text which he should have know backwards and forwards...Hegel’s ‘citation’ of the Gospel surfaces in Benjamin’s text wrenched from the context that might help provisionally determined its tone and intent. This strange passage...comes to stand for the whole of Hegel as presented in Benjamin’s theses. Given this passage as cited by Benjamin, there is no need for Marx to stand Hegel on his head, because Hegel, a materialist before Marx, has already done a somersault.” Balfour 631).

What Balfour is alluding to in this section, and does so throughout the article, is that Benjamin continues to use reversal to bring us conflicting characteristics and does so to seek some sort of destruction of the subject for which he is talking about. By using the Hegelian misquote from the Biblical Jesus we see that Hegel is starting a dialectic that posits materialism against religion, one that Marx was very agreeable and understanding of when he began his cultural critique. By placing Hegel in line with Marx, and against religion in such a way that “wrenching” the quote away from Hegel removes the context of the quote for Hegel shows Benjamin’s carefully carelessness to comment on the dialectic. This reversal of contexts has never been new to Benjamin and will continue



through the 1940 “Theses.” The degree of reversed structure is the same degree taken by the earlier Kraus to write satires of his subjects. It is that same concept, taking a subject and destroying it with the same language that we see at play through the latter part of Benjamin’s life, especially in “The Theses on the Philosophy of History.”

The full transformation of the master to the slave and the theologian to the material historian is completed by the ninth text in Benjamin’s “The Theses on the Philosophy of History. It is in this final 1940 text, which many have taken to use as an analogy for various forms that Benjamin constructs an angel that does nothing, has no power, and is left resigned. This angel is frozen in time, only to be a witness. This angel is also in fear of forever being removed or wiped away. Therefore, the angel continues to remain powerless and defunct. How, then, could this angel become such a symbol, analogy, metaphor, for historical action and reaction? What are the steps that brought Benjamin to this final, submissive place? Furthermore, can this angel become a light that shines upon, and reveals, the problems with Benjamin’s shifting ideas?

There are many differences between the earlier “Agesilaus Santander” and the later “Theses on the Philosophy of History;” among them are the depictions of the image itself. While the final 1940 version speaks of the image there are no direct descriptions of the watercolor. The 1922 “Agesilaus Santander” text does go so far to describe various parts of the image, but does so that reveals the liberties Benjamin takes in his parallel. Furthermore, Benjamin takes further liberties in describing scenes in the final 1940 version that are not present in the image at all. “Klee’s figure display neither ‘claws’ nor ‘wings...sharp as knives’ like the angel’s in “Agesilaus Santander” and the pictorial field of the watercolor offers no suggestion of a ‘catastrophe which keeps piling

wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet” (Werckmeister O.K. p 245). In any of the Benjamin texts the true nature of the Klee watercolor is not revealed, only dithering ascriptions toward particular characteristics that may or may not convey emotional representation. It is in these written liberties that we see a history growing from Benjamin that are not fully documented by his four versions. The only links to historical and qualitative information that the four Benjamin versions leave are historical references to revolutionary thinkers and violent apocalyptic notions.

Further differences lie in the action of the angel’s motion. In the final 1940 text the angel of history becomes passive, removed, and involuntary. This final version of an angel has given up. In the third text, “Agesilaus Santander” the angel actually goes through the process of resigning and thus becomes a fallen angel. In the third text it is here that the angel has decided that resigning to the fact that it is only a seer, one for which the female double comes to it instead of it “pouncing” on her, remains the only way. Yet, in this third version there is still hope that the angel will do his job. It is not until the 1940 text do we see a fully and completely resigned actor. The angel in “Agesilaus Santander” is the angel who is now turning away from his responsibility.

In his [Benjamin’s] 1921 and 1931, it was orthodox of Benjamin to relate Klee’s *Angelus Novus* to the throngs of angels of which the Talmud writes that they perish after singing God’s praise. But already in ‘Agesilaus Santander’ the angel has been disturbed in his chant, becomes derelict of his duty, and turns into an ‘Angelus Satanas’ In the ninth ‘Theses’, finally, he quits paradise along with humanity and turns from an enforcer of punishment into a witness for the defense. (Werckmeister 264)

In the final 1940 version, Benjamin states that this angel, as described by Scholem, “strives after ‘true actuality’; comparing it to the throng of angels created every moment to sing God’s praise and then disappear into nothing” (meem07). In

conversation with Scholem, Benjamin suggested that this Angelus Novus is constantly in danger of being wiped away at any moment, which is contradictory to the idea of history's permanence. In "The Theses on the Philosophy of History" Benjamin writes, "Nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history. To be sure only a redeemed mankind receives the fullness of its past which is to say, only for a redeemed mankind has its past become citable in all its moments" (Benjamin, Walter 254). Here Benjamin suggests here that the understanding of the past is a privilege for the redeemed. The fact that understanding history is a privilege indicates that he is attaching significance to the past and that the person who becomes a witness of the past, a watcher, is highly important, a revolutionary. One of Benjamin's first steps in the use of his Angelus Novus is to attach it to persons who stand above others, who see the past and who "speak the truth." Benjamin's first appointment was Karl Kraus, which was the main subject of Benjamin's second Angelus Novus in 1931. Other highly regarded thinkers whom Benjamin likened to his Angel of History were Karl Marx, Adolf Loos, Charles Baudelaire, Eduard Fuchs, German Writer/Revolutionary Carl Gustav Jockmann and even Marcel Proust. Benjamin goes on to say in the 1940 Angelus Novus text V "The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again" (Benjamin, Walter p 255). Here, Benjamin moves slightly away from the power of the past's significance, acknowledging that history is fleeting and cannot be held or given wonder. In the next text, VI, Benjamin writes "To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was' It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger. Historical materialism wishes to retain that image of the past which

unexpectedly appears to man singled out by history at a moment of danger” (Benjamin, Walter p 255). In this text Benjamin suggests that history’s only weight comes from the memory of an individual; the redeemed for whom he just wrote is nothing more than the fierce who grasps memory in the face of danger. In not more than two pages we have seen Benjamin’s concept of history change drastically from one of validity and privilege to one of a fleeting moment buried under fear.

For Benjamin, not only is this version of the angel being wiped away, the angel is also perpetually stuck fast in the painting. There is something wrong if Benjamin is to believe his angel is in danger of being wiped away at any moment as he mentions to Gershom Scholem. The problem comes when Benjamin knows that the angel he sees in Klee’s watercolor is not controlled by the wrath of god, and that it will live on in the multiple associations he, Benjamin, have given the Angel of History. Since its construction what is in danger of erasure in Benjamin’s Angel of History is the meaning behind the image, the meaning for which he himself is forging. Where the angel is bound by progress we see nothing more than place for manipulation and expanse in the ways that Benjamin leaves the angel’s description open for interpretation. In fact, Benjamin’s own alacrity to appropriate the identity of the angel to various revolutionary and historical characters points to the possible problems of Benjamin’s comment to Scholem: the angel’s character is in danger of being wiped away. By identifying the angel with Karl Krauss, Jockman, and others we see Benjamin defining what he himself sees as the role of the angel. This is a valid disputation with Benjamin’s allegory and the place where we can begin to understand what this image really meant to Benjamin. Furthermore, others who try to associate their own ideas to that of Benjamin’s angel will

only fail with these associations for as Werckmeister suggests, only Benjamin really understood the direction of the angel's identity. In fact, those who choose to misplace this image do not have the ability to understand what this image meant because they cannot understand the true nature of Benjamin's life.

Commentators on the 'Theses,' often academically secure but rarely engaged in cultural policy have usually tackled the pertinent questions of historical objectivity, moral judgment, and political action from the viewpoint of the individual subject. They posit a seemingly absolute subject, detached from Benjamin's situation in 1940, a historical situation different from theirs. On this assumption they have understood the angel's flight over the landscape of unfolding catastrophes as a straightforward allegory of subjective historical experience per se. (Werckmeister 242, 243)

Why does Benjamin leave open the identity of his angel in the final 1940 version? By continuing to build on the identity of the angel over time are we to believe that Benjamin means to suggest that the watercolor still had many more versions to? What is the progressing meaning behind Benjamin's own vision of Klee's watercolor? In these few questions regarding the changing historical references and progressive developments to "real-life" characters I find it significant enough to begin to construct links between Benjamin's concepts of history. Thus, it is in the identity of the angel that one may start to understand how "History" became an important model for Benjamin and others. While Benjamin constructed an idea out of the links to historical characters we see that Benjamin is also working with larger concepts for historians themselves. In fact, we see a type of guidebook for historians written in the lines of *Angelus Novus*. In these fragmented texts it is here that Benjamin discusses the roles of the historian, roles that define and suggest various types of historians. Yet, it is the historian Benjamin continues

to mention, and the historian that Benjamin builds as his model of the “Materialists Historian.”

According to Rolf Tiedemann, the image of the angel of history ‘stands for the ‘true’ historian, the historical ‘Materialist’ who has stripped himself of all illusions about human history.’ Benjamin’s historical materialists sees history not as a continuum in a homogeneous, linear, empty time...but as a structures whose site is ‘time filled by the presence of the now’...a mythical present marked by the remembrance of all the past dead and the possibility of their redemption. For the angel of history, progress is not a bondless, irresistible force working towards the greater advancement and happiness of humanity but a catastrophe that keeps expelling humans from the Lost Paradise, and although the angel would like to stop the course of history and mend what has been destroyed by past injustice, the force of progress prevents him from doing so. (Fernandez 103)

O. K. Werckmeister suggests that the metaphorical historian that Benjamin constructs in the final 1940 version of *Angelus Novus* is not an active historian who looks back with a mind to act, but instead one that has given up responsibility for his actions. This material historian is also an advantage for Marxist critique. According to Werckmeister Benjamin thinks of the materialist historian as a disrupter of the bourgeois culture, one that will come in and “blast” away from the fallacy of the bourgeois. “He [Benjamin] validates the advance of ‘materialist’ cultural historian as a gain in the class struggle. He depicts the context between both with a militant terminology, including expressions such as ‘smash,’ ‘pierce,’ ‘detonate,’ and ‘blast,’ that culminates in a ‘explosion’ of ‘bourgeois’ cultural history undermined by cultural critique” (Werckmeister 255). This disruption enables the historian to move from the hold on history based in theology and master/serfdom to one based on production, likened to the Hegel’s account of the realization between master and slave.

Many scholars who do not associate Benjamin’s angel of history with Hegel or with the dialectic of the historian are in jeopardy of attributing external information on

the Angel in History that Benjamin did not intend. The misplaced attribution of Benjamin's angel is a fatal flaw and one that needs careful attention. Werckmeister believes that the historians and critics who only see this final angel as a metaphor for action miss the point entirely. The tendency for many scholars who do not wish to discuss the importance of Hegel or the historical dialectic by projecting onto the angel what Benjamin has omitted leaves an opening too great in the importance and placement of Benjamin's angel of history. This misreading of Benjamin's final Angelus Novus started even among his own peers and associates, shortly after his death. Contemporaries like Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer appropriated the final 1940 version of Benjamin's Angel of History for their own proposed cultural critique. Werckmeister suggests that Adorno and Horkheimer's appropriation of Benjamin's angel even went so far to be the background reference source for the co-written 1947 book, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*:

Soon Horkheimer and Adorno promoted the dead Benjamin for the position of a closely watched, critically managed contributor to that of a 'guiding star' for their philosophy of history. Every since, the incorporation of the "[The] 'Theses' on the Philosophy of History" into the corpus of critical theory, a form of collective thought and debate to which a group of academics could subscribe and that they could make into the premise of an institutional program with public visibility, has steadily consolidated the authority of Benjamin's writings...The New York institute absorbed Benjamin's late philosophy of history at the moment when its director, Horkheimer, and its then-leading member, Adorno, abandoned their initial critical engagement with the cultural policies of their host country and moved to Los Angeles, where they attempted to shield themselves from, and hence polemicized against, any functional enactment of culture in society at large. It is from this individualist, elitist posture that Horkheimer and Adorno issued, in their jointly authored book *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* of 1947, a gloomy world-historical judgment surpassing even Benjamin's "'Theses' on the Philosophy of History" in apodictic severity, judgments all the more intense because they were aimed at the author's immediate living environment, with a maximum of vehemence making up for a minimum of observation. It was the private endowment of the institute, its funds secured in Switzerland, that afforded the authors their principled detachments not just from the intellectual culture but

from the social life of their county of refuge...For intellectuals free to operate with few, if any, existential risks of the kind that Benjamin faced when he wrote his 'The Theses of the Philosophy of History,' dissent has become a standard mode of operation...Benjamin's "Theses" about the angel of history has by now become such a template. (Werckmeister 243, 244)

What is important to realize here is that even his friends, who could be viewed as individuals who shaped his work and his thought, took this image, the image of angel who is capable of seeing what is happening in the world, and changed it for their own interest. Angelus Novus, the removed, defeated, weak presence that has the chance to witness but is only a fleeting moment in time, is nothing more than a resigned being. Angelus Novus has progressed through a process of becoming. What is left is only that word, progress, the historical account of how the angel got where it is now. How fitting for Benjamin to construct the process through progress and then reveal to us that within the important of seeing, witnessing history, the only thing we have to view is progress itself. This is what I think he refers to as the materialist historian, one who documents through the witnessing of becoming. What the angel leaves us is the knowledge that it, the angel, has nothing to offer us. It is only part of a larger series of externally orchestrated events and even then can only stand and watch. Can one find hope in these events or in the Angel of History? Do we see Benjamin yearning for a better day?

Some Benjamin critics and scholars have written about the hope, the loss, the destruction, or the history in Benjamin's words. In Geoffrey Hartman's 1999 *Critical Inquiry* article, the author asks what I think is a very important question for our own discussion. Hartman writes, "I admire the speculative vigor of the later Benjamin. I have suggested that for him art is not transcended; indeed, it may still be overestimated by him. His worried engagement with the status of art, exploited by politics and alter by



technology, could be a desperate gesture of hope, a defense against his own dispersion” (345). Hartman’s worry with hope in Benjamin allows us the ability to start understand what is going on in his works. It is Benjamin’s notion of history, played out in his “The Theses on the Philosophy of History,” that allows for us to understand that hope is not needed. In fact, hope is far removed in the final version of *Angelus Novus*. What is left is the only presence. The need to find hope is a western modern construction, especially built out of religious fervor, where one understands good and bad through right and wrong. In Benjamin’s *Angelus Novus*, good and bad become negations of each other and are removed from the notion of hope. Yet, hope stands in for some sort of resolution between the two opposites. In fact, instead of hope one sees that there is neither good nor bad. What the final version of Benjamin’s *Angelus Novus* tells us is that if there is any hope left that hope is unjust and passive. Hope is a spiritual term; it is brought and built out of the religious with the church being the chief announcer. Hope is not scientific and cannot be logged by the production of goods. In this place hope is a concern that the material historian cannot log therefore should be removed from the critique. Hartman, on the other hand continues to look for the hope in Benjamin’s work. “His [Benjamin’s] turning to the past, to that underground of stars, is a utopian form of hope—the dead must be saved from the enemy by flashing into the present with a different light, by escaping their equivalence as the dead and so their indifference to memory. Benjamin’s materialistic commentary ...reactivated the inertial mythic dimension” (Hartman 349, 350). While, there seems to be some sort of looking for guidance in Benjamin’s texts it is clear that in his final 1940 “The Theses on the Philosophy of History” Benjamin’s yearning is removed. “The Angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole

what has been smashed.” (Benjamin, W. 257) In the Benjamin text the angel cannot stay. It knows that its presence is inevitably inconsequential to the events going on for which the angel sees. The angel of history cannot hope for if it does it will be disappointed. The angel understands that by hoping it relies on the supernatural, the religious, and not the material. Hope is non-material and has no place in the final 1940 *Angelus Novus*. What stands in for Benjamin’s hope in this “Theses” is “Significance.”

To define significance simply is to say that an object that has become significant has gone through of process of ownership and has come out remaining important. An object may in fact be a produced good or may be a virtue, emotion, artwork, political idea, theory, text, etc. In fact anything may achieve a significant being as long as it is collectable and embraced. When something become significant the thing’s being has been through a place of devotion. The being of the object becomes something with meaning. With significance that meaning lives on, whether it shares the original value or is given further import throughout its life. Andrew Benjamin suggests that significance can be boiled down to survival and that the survival of an object, or its meaning, is what remains important.

*Significance* is a primordial presence occasioning, if not grounding, the possibility of the continuity of interpretation and hence of reinterpretation. Furthermore, it is a presence that can never be included within the temporality of the instant and therefore the ontology of place, both of which involve the conception of time and being proper to the context...*Significance* is linked therefore to the survival and the capacity of the object of interpretation to live on. The explanatory exhaustion made possible by the first two levels of meaning, and which the cultural historian often demands, is made impossible by the continual presence of *Significance*. (Benjamin, A. 31)

For Andrew Benjamin, the survival found in Walter Benjamin’s work allows the object a place of devotion or locality but that it also allows for continued “interpretation” and

“reinterpretation.” Survival gives the object substance but its survival across time that makes it significant. The concept of significance is important to understand with Benjamin’s Angelus Novus for more than one reason. Benjamin’s historical materialism allows the historian the ability to look outside of theology to find reasons past the supernatural. The material historian engages his or her time throughout the production of goods, the means, and then maybe, the religion that might play importance in its structure. As Hegel remarks, “Seek for goods and clothing first, then the Kingdom of God shall be added unto you” the material historian must first look at the life in order to see the place of men. How significance plays a role in this is through the process of realization. For the man, the master or the slave, to understand where they stand they must themselves find significance in what they do, not what they believe. The material historian engages the significance of men through their production not through their religious beliefs or dogma. Significance at this point is not deciphered from the supernatural but can be found in the individual; the master and the slave.

The legacy and significance of Angelus Novus is easy to document and to talk about. This one symbolic allegory from Walter Benjamin engages on more than one level and has, over time, allowed more than one interpretation. The significance of Benjamin’s “The Theses on the Philosophy of History” will continue to unfold and transform into further characters. What should be remembered over these transformations is that in order for Benjamin’s Angelus Novus to remain as Benjamin intended, we must hold his own history as central to the progression of his own angel. The angel of history for which Benjamin observed in the Paul Klee watercolor was an angel that Benjamin knew very well. That angel was Benjamin’s own progression of

history and his own being becoming significant. But, the last laugh is with the angel for as we have seen in the 1940 “The Theses on the Philosophy of History” that angel is nothing more than a present, yet resigned, being. In fact, in the role reversal that is ever so at hand through Benjamin’s work we see in one moment the posit and the negation, the birth and the destruction. The angel becomes alive as soon as it is removed. Significance continues.

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