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THE SUCCESS OF FAILURE: WALTER BENJAMIN'S PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY

In "The Success of Failure: Walter Benjamin's Philosophy of History" Sanja Bahun offers a new reading of one of the most influential and most controversial philosophies of history in contemporary thought. This project is premised on the Benjaminian conviction that the "state of emergency" is a philosophical-historical given, a condition which demands a constant reconfiguration of our perception of and practice in history. Bahun probes the relevance of Benjamin's thought for contemporary social and historical practice through an overarching reinterpretation of Benjamin's late writings such as "On the Concept of History" ("Über den Begriff der Geschichte," 1940), the texts comprising *The Arcades Project* (*Passagenwerk*), and the corresponding fragments from diaries and archives. Out of this reassessment, the concept of "unsuccess" or "failure" emerges as the structural and contentual crux of Benjamin's philosophy of history.

Key words: Walter Benjamin, philosophy of history, historiography, Marxism, Messianism, historical interpretation

"Read what was never written," runs a line in Hofmannsthal.
The reader one should think of here is the true historian.
Walter Benjamin, *Paralipomena to On the Concept of History*

Writing in that paradoxical interstice of historical time at the beginning of the Second World War, the period in between his incarceration in the French internment camp (as a German), and his tragic flight from the Vichy militiamen (as a Jew),[1] Walter Benjamin urged our conceptual vigilance: "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."[2]

1 I refer here to the period marked by the French transition from a Fascism-opposing to a collaborationist nation. On Benjamin's last years in France, see, Ingrid Scheurmann, "Als Deutscher in Frankreich: Walter Benjamins Exil, 1933–1940," *Für Walter Benjamin*, eds. Ingrid Scheurmann and Konrad Scheurman (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1992) 96 et passim.

2 Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History" ("Über den Begriff der Geschichte," 1940), *Selected Writings*, vol. IV: 1938–1940, trans. Edmund Jephcott et al., ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003) 392; subsequent references to this work will appear in the text as "Concept" followed by a page number; other citations from the same edition will be referenced as *SW*. The citations of the German original in the present essay are from: Walter Benjamin, "Über den Begriff der Geschichte,"

Benjamin, of course, could choose "the time to which the course of our own existence has once assigned/exiled [*verwissen*] us" ("Concept" 389) no more than anyone else. Yet, this call and Benjamin's prolific writing activity in his last years indicate that the thinker did choose to perceive the state of emergency in which he lived as a unique opportunity to illuminate political and cultural history. The mature Benjamin never tired of repeating that the true nature of history may be disclosed precisely in an exilic moment fraught with danger—the moment of standstill that congeals the dynamics of history in a usurpation of complacency (391).

The alternative model of historiography which Benjamin proposed has enduring significance. For, the warning that the state of emergency "is not the exception but the rule" and that this condition demands a constant reconfiguration of our perception of and practice in history, has lost nothing of its relevance. It is in the light of the current "stage of emergency" that this article revisits Benjamin's theory of history and history-writing. My focus on Benjamin's mature writings, in particular his last known work, "On the Concept of History" (1940), bespeaks the specific intentions of the present text: to propose a constellation of present and past, a constellation which might crystallize and activate in the present the materiality of a (hidden, unknown, alternate, subjugated) moment in the past. For only by grasping "the constellation into which [her] own era has entered, along with a very specific earlier one" can the historian relinquish antiquarian and escapist tendencies and conceptualise the present as the Now-time [*Jetztzeit*]—active, responsible, specific, yet "shot through with splinters of messianic time" ("Concept" 397).

Problematic Prelude

I shall start this consideration of Benjamin's philosophy of history by presenting some common problems in the assessment of Benjamin's thought. As it will be made evident, my decision to start with "negativity" rather than by a positivist definitional exercise is informed by the

Gesammelte Schriften (*GS*), eds. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1974–1989), vol. I/2, 693–703. The reader interested in consulting the Serbo-Croatian translation of Benjamin's theses should be cautious: Milan Tabaković's translation of the text is frequently imprecise (cf. Valter Benjamin, "Istorijsko-filozofske teze," *Eseji*, trans. Milan Tabaković [Beograd: Nolit, 1974] 79–90). Tellingly for the time when it was published, Tabaković's translation offers a particularly vague rendition of Thesis I, the fragment in which Benjamin proposes a new alliance between theology and historical materialism. "On the Concept of History" remained unpublished in Benjamin's lifetime because Benjamin believed that a premature publication would open the door to "enthusiastic misunderstanding" (Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Briefe* (*GB*), ed. Christoph Gödde and Henri Lonitz [Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2000], vol. VI, 436).

inner structure of Benjamin's thought and the critical practice which it necessitates.

Our picture of Benjamin's philosophy of history is, unfortunately, incomplete.[3] This state of affairs makes the material which *has* been handed down to us both precious and precarious. Observed from the position of this "incomplete record," the most prominent feature of Benjamin's thought on history is its remarkable eclecticism. The list of sources that contributed to the fruition of Benjamin's philosophy of history is long and contradictory, and includes figures such as Ernst Bloch, Bertolt Brecht, Jacob Burckhardt, Sigmund Freud, Martin Heidegger, Ernst Jünger, Georg Lukács, Karl Marx, Heinrich Rickert, Carl Schmitt, Georges Sorel, and others—to allot them no more than an alphabetized mention here. That these thinkers belonged to the opposing ends of the political spectrum should not surprise us—a curious prerogative of Benjamin's methodology is its capacity for fragmentary selection and refiguration.[4] Benjamin's call for a reconfiguration of our view of history which I used to begin this article suitably illustrates this dynamics. It utilizes, expands, and reverses Schmitt's terminology ("the state of emergency"), fusing the later with a properly Marxist attentiveness to the oppressed class, and neo-Hegelian drive to conceptualize history. The continuation of Thesis VIII develops a Nietzschean proposition "to bring about a real state of emergency" in order to battle fascism (an engagement with a counter-Schmitt line of argumentation); this philosophical fight is premised on the dismantling of progressivism and teleology which conceives of particular events as "norms" (and exercise in anti-Hegelianism and anti-mainstream Marxism). Benjamin proceeds to inflect all these conceptual threads through an Aristotle-trope ("The current amazement that the things we are experiencing are 'still' possible in the twentieth century is *not* philosophical. This amazement is not

3 There is a substantial evidence of the once-existence of texts containing Benjamin's further cogitations on literature, jurisprudence, politics, and theology and thus we need to acknowledge that many crucial texts—especially those texts explicating the distinction of the orders of the profane/political and the messianic—must be considered fragmentary or lost. The texts hidden behind various *noms de plume*, apocryphal titles, and Benjamin's own "surveys" of his political works in 1924/1925 (*GB* II: 54, 109, 11, 127, 177, and, in particular, *GB* III: 9), indicate the thinker's ambition to produce a large-scale study of politics and history.

4 For general discussions of Benjamin's interaction with intellectual currents in philosophy of history, see, Liselotte Wiesenthal, *Zur Wissenschaftstheorie Walter Benjamins* (Frankfurt: Vertelsmann, 1973); John McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993); and, Gérard Raulet, *Le caractére destructuer. Esthétique, théologie et politique chez Walter Benjamin* (Paris: Aubier, 1997). For a useful summary of the various influences on Benjamin's development as a political thinker and the hidden trajectory of his political thought, see, Uwe Steiner, "The True Politician: Walter Benjamin's Concept of the Political," *New German Critique* 83 (Spring-Summer 2001) 43–88.

the beginning of knowledge…"), and dialectically inverts them in a concluding blend of phenomenology and neo-Kantianism: the only knowledge that may ensue from the teleological conception of history is the knowledge of the untenable nature of the concept itself.[5] As this example shows, Benjamin's syncretism is deceptive, for he frequently deploys a thinker's discourse without real reference to the totality of his thought, or, even worse, in order to challenge or subvert the implied concept.

These inner fissures of thought are reflected in the astonishing variety of topics which Benjamin's life-long cogitations on culture and history yielded.[6] The subject-matter of his writings comprises the German baroque and contemporary film, Marcel Proust and Nikolai Leskov, Goethe's *Elective Affinities* and museums, collecting and hashish, ideology and aesthetics, political theory and children's books, mass-mediated modernity and urbanity, theory of perception and that of translation, and, above all, transient phenomena, fleeting impressions, glimpses of city-streets, wet and glimmering at the break of the day. Consequent to this topical interaction is Benjamin's habit to articulate his views on politics and/or history not only in the texts explicitly dealing history or historiography, but also (and frequently more eloquently) in his texts on culture, literature, and arts. Thus the markedly intertextual "On the Concept of History" should be read (as I will do herein) in tandem with the texts belonging to the Arcades Project, the essay on Eduard Fuchs, "The Work of Art in the Age of Reproducibility," and many others.

For a scholar intent on detecting and recording the active outcomes of Benjamin's philosophy on history, the most problematic aspect of Ben-

5 All citations, "Concept" 392. For Aristotle's dictum that philosophy begins in wonder, see *Metaphysics*, 982b.

6 Benjamin has been alternatively described as an aesthetician, literary critic, (cultural) historian, theoretician of technology, collector, translator, theologian, philosopher, creative writer, or—neither of those. As if to voice this classificatory conundrum, the latest edition of Encyclopaedia Britannica describes Benjamin as a "man of letters" ("Benjamin, Walter," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 2007, Encyclopaedia Britannica Online. 20 May 2007. <http: //www.britannica.com/eb/article-9078625>). Hannah Arendt's sketch of Benjamin and his work is, however, still the most eloquent description of the thinker:

> To describe adequately his work and him as an author within our usual frame of reference, one should have to make a great many negative statements, such as: his erudition was great, but he was no scholar; his subject matter comprised texts and their interpretation, but he was no philologist; he was greatly attracted not by religion but by theology and the theological type of interpretation for which the text itself is sacred (…) but he was no theologian (…); he was a born writer, but his greatest ambition was to produce a work consisting entirely of quotations; he was the first German to translate Proust (…), St.-John Perse, and (…) Baudelaire (…), but he was no translator; he reviewed books and wrote a number of essays on living and dead writers, but he was no literary critic; he wrote a book about the German baroque and left behind a huge unfinished study of the French nineteenth century, but he was no historian, literary or otherwise (…) he was neither poet nor philosopher (Hannah Arendt, "Introduction," *Illuminations* [New York: Schocken Books, 1988] 3–4).

jamin's thought is, however, the unorthodox nature of his writings: these are characterized by deliberate unfinalisability, prelude-like presentation, and manifest fragmentation. The appropriateness of this methodological and discursive idiosyncrasy was questioned first by Theodor Adorno. In his famous letter-critique of Benjamin's essay "The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire," Adorno offers a cursory editorial treatment of the piece.[7] Giving a mainly accurate description of both Benjamin's presentation and the problems which such an exposé entails, Adorno calls attention to Benjamin's omission of "all the crucial theoretical answers," to the invisibility of the subject-matter and the under-treatment of motifs, and he asks "whether such abstinence can be maintained toward this subject, and in context which makes such imperious inner demands" (*SW* IV: 99–100). Whereas he acknowledges the subversive potentials of Benjamin's style, Adorno nevertheless finds the text a "prelude" rather than a coherent product of sustained research. In effect, what Adorno objects to Benjamin is the lack of rigour and thoroughness which we customarily associate with serious research and its adequate presentation. Similarly, a scholar interested in social and political repercussions of Benjamin's thought is tempted to question or even to dismiss Benjamin as an inconsistent, sketch-oriented, ineloquent, and thus "unsuccessful" thinker. While there are many reasons to claim the opposite, I would nevertheless ask the reader to retain the notion of Benjamin's "unsuccess"/failure.

In fact, the idea (if not the structure) of failure has reached mythic proportions in Benjamin-scholarship. Benjamin's propensity to act against his personal interest, exemplified by some frequently related, mythic moments in his life—his failure to pass the *Habilitation*, his hardly successful love-affair with the Latvian-Jewish communist and playwright Asja Lacis, his suicide after crossing the Pyrenees on foot, and others—, has relegated the thinker and his work into the realm of secular saints. Thus sanctified by the use and abuse of history, Benjamin's text has incited a vast number of scholarly debates. Among those, the appropriation of Benjamin's thought by both Marxism and Jewish mysticism is arguably the most important.[8] Yet, Benjamin's thought defies such an

7 Adorno's most important objection to Benjamin's text deals with its conceptual immediacy and undialectical nature (the letter of 10 November 1938, *SW* IV: 101).

8 On Benjamin as a Marxist, and the member of the Frankfurt School, see, among others, Rolf Tiedemann, *Studien zur Philosophie Walter Benjamins* (Frankfurt: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1965); Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1973); Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt Institute* (New York: The Free Press, 1977); and, Theodor Adorno, "A Portrait of Walter Benjamin," *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1982) 227–241.

easy cataloguing: both Messianism and Marxism remained the constant lines of inquiry in his work; it is precisely this constructive tension that shapes Benjamin's last text, "On the Concept of History", into an explosive amalgam of critical afterthought. To classify Benjamin as one or the other (or a third) thus always means to miss the point.

Regarding Benjamin's immense popularity among scholars, Arendt has correctly observed that the "posthumous fame [is] the lot of the unclassifiable ones, those whose work neither fits the existing order nor introduces a new genre that lends itself to future classification" (Arendt 3). One should immediately specify this "unclassifiability: " Benjamin's "non-fitting" (as well as his fame) lies in a deliberate refusal of his texts to be categorized or to produce further classifications. It is precisely this simultaneous openness and resilience of Benjamin's text that propels Benjamin-industry, a prolific enterprise with more than 2500 various publications recorded in the major databases at present, the number which represents but a fraction of the thousands of books, essays, articles, and doctoral dissertations devoted to this thinker.[9] Benjamin's unclassifiability is, then, both a critical necessity and an intrinsic characteristic of his text, a specification we should bear in mind when we attempt to extrapolate (and thus "classify") that aspect of his work which presents him as a historian.

For, while Benjamin's popularity and the appropriative debates it has entailed have generated a great body of valuable and diverse scholarship, much of it seems to occlude the actuality of Benjamin's thought on history and its relevance for historical practice. Nikolaus Müller-Schöll has astutely observed that "the most urgent task of any further reading would be to save Benjamin from the ghetto of inefficacy, even irrelevance, in which academic care threatens to enclose him."[10] To effect this "actuali-

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On Benjamin as a Jewish mystic and political theologian, see, among others, Gershom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin—die Geschichte einer Freundschaft* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1975); *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis* (New York: Schocken Books, 1976) 172–236; and, Eric Jacobson, *Metaphysics of the Profane: The Political Theology of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003). On Benjamin as a "conservative revolutionary," see, Jürgen Habermas, "Bewusstmachende oder rettende Kritik—die Aktualität Walter Benjamins," *Zur Aktualität Walter Benjamins. Aus Anlaß des 80. Geburtstags von Walter Benjamin*, ed. Siegfried Unseld (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1972) 173–223.

9 This search was conducted on 20 May 2007, and it comprised the following databases: MLA International Bibliography, BHI British Humanities Index, CSA Linguistics and Language Behaviour Abstracts, and CSA Worldwide Political Science Abstracts. According to a bibliography from the early 1990s, more than 2100 publications dedicated to Benjamin had been published only in the previous decade (cf. *Literatur über Walter Benjamin: kommentierte Bibliographie 1983–1992*, eds. Reinhard Markner and Thomas Weber [Hamburg: Argument, 1993]).

10 Nikolaus Müller-Schöll, "Review: Beatrice Hanssen, Walter Benjamin's Other History: Of Stones, Animals, Human Beings, and Angels," *MLN* 113.5 (1998): 1220.

zation" of Benjamin, one has to accept history in Benjamin's work not as a metaphor or a critical trope but as a distinctive engagement with the material world, as a living yet sophisticated dialectics that may offer tangible means of reflecting on and working in history. The present article is premised on such an interpretation.

Contextualizations and Concepts

Despite the claims of novelty, Benjamin's critique of normative historiography is, generally speaking, a typical product of its time. His conception of history gives expression to the demise of progressive linear narrative, which was much in evidence in the thought and creative writing of the period. Benjamin philosophy of history thus consists of a stock of modernist conceptual tropes: anti-progressivism, critique of Enlightenment, interaction of theory and practice à la Benedetto Croce, and, as Heinz-Dieter Kittsteiner has noted, the discourse of "a rather conservative critique of civilization which became amalgamated in the 1920s and the 1930s with the position of the 'Left.'"[11] Furthermore, Benjamin is mindful of the narrative character of historical record, and, similarly to the early Annales School, attentive to (urban) geography, material culture, and group psychology. Like many contemporaneous philosophers of history, Benjamin rejected G. W. F. Hegel's teleological model of history as the realization of the idea of freedom; similarly to Bloch, Benjamin uses theology as a method and myth as a structural lever for his critique of linearity, much in the fashion of the modernist writers of the time. Finally, his work may be most readily placed under the label of cultural history, then nascent discipline in which Benjamin was educated and within which and against which he formulated his major insights. To each of these lines of inquiry, Benjamin offered his own methodological correctives, fusing and moulding concepts without worrying too much about hermeneutic inconsistencies.

To examine the principles that govern Benjamin's thought on history, one is well advised to turn to his last thoughts on the matter. While, generally speaking, there is no reason to assume that a thinker's final piece of writing by necessity contains the most adequate summation of his/her work, there is much evidence that Benjamin's last text, "On the Concept of History" (1940), is the most complete, if alarmingly brief, product of almost twenty years of Benjamin's reflection on the content and practice of history; Benjamin's own assessment in his letter to Gre-

11 Heinz-Dieter Kittsteiner, "The Allegory of the Philosophy of History in the Nineteenth Century," *Walter Benjamin and the Demands of History*, ed. Michael P. Steinberg (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1996) 60.

tel Adorno confirms this assumption (*GB* 435). In "On the Concept of History" and the writings that precede or surround it ("Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian" and the series of related fragments that has been collected under the title <Paralipomena to "On the Concept of History">), the thinker gives his concern with history and the practice of historiography a direct form, unadorned and perhaps unfettered by the interdisciplinarity that characterizes his other writings. Finally, "On the Concept of History" emblematizes the Benjaminian blend of Marxism and theology, and thereby it is also the text around which the debates over "Marxist Benjamin" and "Messianic Benjamin" peaked.[12]

"On the Concept of History" is structured as a series of theses, numbered I–XVIII, perhaps followed by two sections (also theses?) headed by capital letters A and B.[13] Whereas Benjamin's text does belong to the tradition of "theses" (especially with respect to its polemic character and its gesturing towards historical importance), it also conspicuously diverges from this tradition. Benjamin's theses take form of questions, aphorisms, and hypotheses, a form which, one may argue, resembles that of Kafka's aphoristic-philosophical miniatures. The linearity of this textual series is challenged in two ways: by breaking the narrative into images-fragments and by the montage-like constellation of these fragments, a technique which involves repetition, inversion, and convolution. These strategies expound performatively what the text contains: a critique of the concept of linear progression. For, "history," Benjamin claims, "breaks down into images not into stories."[14]

Benjamin's "miniatures" are organized by the opposition of two models of historiography: one, referred to as "historicism," which subsumes the flaws of all kinds of traditional historiography and which has a political counterpart in German Social Democratic Party; the other, called "historical materialism," which offers a set of alternatives to the operative models of archiving, selection, reference, and interpretation of historical data. Benjamin's critique of historicism focuses on its grounding principles which, parenthetically, also guide our common-sense perception of history and history-writing: the conviction that there is an

12 For an early account of the debates surrounding "On the Concept of History," see, *Materialien zu Benjamins Theses "Über den Begriff der Geschichte." Beiträge und Interpretationen*, ed. Peter Bulthaup (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1975).

13 The last two sections appear in early drafts, but are excluded from the final versions. While their status remains vague, they are generally printed as a supplemental "ending" of the text, on account of their conclusive nature and intrinsic interest. Cf. *SW* 397, 400, n. 28; and, *GS* 703, 1252–59.

14 Walter Benjamin, "N [Re the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress]," convolute N 11, *Benjamin: Philosophy, Aesthetics, History*, ed. Gary Smith (Chicago, 1989) 67; henceforth cited abbreviated as "N."

"eternal image of the past" (the subject of critique in Thesis V), and that this image is always available to historians (attacked in Thesis V); that the task of the latter is to record history "the way it really was" (Leopold von Ranke) by using empathy (*Einfühlung*, in the trace of Wilhelm Dilthey and Friedrich Schleiermacher, later developed by R. W. Collingwod in the doctrine of presentism) (criticized in Theses VI-VII). Benjamin's critical analysis expands into a wider questioning of Hegel's concept of *Weltgeschichte* (world history) and the Enlightenment concept of progress. As it becomes evident early in the text, Benjamin's specific target is the ineffectiveness of our response to the rise of Fascism. This historical response, adopted by Social Democratic Party, is both conformist and idealist: it is based on conceited belief in continual progress and a reverentially tranquil approach to the flow of history. The latter makes us regard the occurrence of events such Fascism as a norm. According to Benjamin, historiography based on these principles not only falsifies the past, but also inadvertently perpetuates the rise of rulers such as Hitler, the development which the Angel of History (Thesis IX) can observe only with horror.

As Ronald Beiner notices, even though Benjamin labels this conception "historical materialism," his view of history is in sharp contrast with at least two important principles of the normative historical materialism.[15] Firstly, Marxism defines itself in terms of revolutionary expectations for the future, and thus promotes a historiography which analyzes past in terms of what is to come. A typical example of such historiographical writing is Marx's *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte.* The "futurist" orientation of Marx's argument in this work has been cited by both Susan Buck-Morss and Rolf Tiedemann as diametrically opposed to Benjamin's effort to establish a "redemptive" relation to the past.[16] Furthermore, while historical materialism appropriates Hegel's idea of history as a rational movement forward, oriented and ordered by a goal, Benjamin views history as everything but rationally ordered and

15 Ronald Beiner, "Walter Benjamin's Philosophy of History," *Political Theory* 12/3 (August 1984) 424–425. However, Beiner's argument that Benjamin discloses a "hidden" Marx, a theory which Marx implied but did not explicate, is somewhat unconvincing.

16 Cf. "The social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot draw its poetry from the past, but only from the future. It cannot begin with itself before it has stripped off all superstition about the past. Earlier revolutions required recollections of past world history in order to dull themselves to their own content. In order to arrive at its own content the revolution of the nineteenth century must let the dead bury their dead" (Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, section I, in Marx, *Selected Writings*, ed. Lawrence H. Simon [Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1994] 190). See, also, Susan Buck-Morss, "Walter Benjamin—Revolutionary Writer (II)," *New Left Review* 129 (September-October 1981) 84, n. 179; and, Rolf Tiedemann, "Historical Materialism or Political Messianism?" *The Philosophical Forum*, 15/1–2 (Fall-Winter 1983–84) 79.

intelligible. In his writings, history is revealed as a fragmented, aimless movement, ordered hardly by anything but the disorder itself.

What is, then, historical materialism for Benjamin? A dense and compact set of definitions, offered in Convolute 11 of The Arcades Project, merits a quotation in full:

Re the basic doctrine of historical materialism: 1) A historical object is whatever is redeemed by knowledge. 2) History breaks down into images, not into stories. 3) Wherever a dialectical process takes place, we are dealing with a monad. 4) The materialist presentation of history goes hand in hand with an immanent critique of the concept of progress. 5) The procedures of historical materialism are founded on experience, on common sense, on presence of mind, and on dialectics. ("N" 67–8)

These postulates suggest that Benjamin understands history as a modernist narrative event—a fragmentary juxtaposition of images rather than a seamless progression of stories. Since the discourse on history should mime the discourse *of* history, Benjamin proposes a history-writing practice that deals away with the concept of progress/progression: a dialectical reflection that singles out a historical event as a "monad" rather than just a passing incident in the succession of historical changes. In this "monad," a moment in past and a moment in present coalesce explosively, subverting the continuum of history and providing the historian with a theoretical and practical model for altering the present. In the light of the danger of complacency, the primary aim of materialist historiography should be the renunciation of contemplativeness (cf., also, "Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian," section I, and "The Work of Art in the Age of Reproducibility," section XV). The historical materialist's reflection on history is, therefore, distractive rather than contemplative; structurally, this practice is verisimilar to Benjamin's literary criticism.

The notion of redemption, or saving of a historical object from oblivion (postulate 1), signals Benjamin's most significant departure from the normative historical materialism. According to Benjamin, in order to be effective, materialist historiography should learn new strategies neither from Hegel nor from Marx, but from—theology. Benjamin's frequently commented Thesis I proposes a pragmatic, if uneasy, alliance of historical materialism and theology. Here, Benjamin rewrites Edgar Alan Poe's story about Johann Maelzel's chess automaton, an apparatus which was "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" ("Concept" 389). The independence of the automatic chess-player (a puppet wearing Turkish attire) was an illusion supported

by a system of mirrors. In fact, a hunchbacked dwarf, a master at chess, sat inside the automaton and guided the puppet's hand. Benjamin imagines a philosophical counterpart to this apparatus: "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, which today, as we know, is small and ugly and has to keep out of sight" (389).

However unexpected the proposition to "enlist the services of theology" for the purpose of furthering historical materialism may sound at first, it is not the most enigmatic aspect of this thesis. After all, the thesis, like the text as a whole, only continues the theological-political deliberations that have been a constant in Benjamin's thought. What is more surprising, however, is the structure and position of this section within the text. Benjamin's first thesis on history may be recognized as a characteristic modern(ist) parabola. Similarly to Kafka's parabolas, Benjamin's story relies on the semantic complication (or sophistication?) of the relationship between its actors; this effect is achieved by a series of semantic convolutions: attires, mirrors, games, analogies. Secondly, this section opens the text, thereby acquiring the status of an allegorical image of what is to come; yet this allegory—if allegory it is—does not enclose the text semantically, for the function of theology bifurcates in the text: while Thesis I seem to be focused on the methodological, practical help that theology may afford to the puppet of historical materialism, the closure, Thesis B, shifts our focus to the concept of historical time as Messianic time. This bifurcation of function should be understood as reflective of the dual aspiration of Benjamin's essay: to improve historiography by reworking its methodological apparatus and its terminology, and to forge a novel philosophy of history by altering the conceptual basis of the discipline.

Thus the text moves from practical historiography, through political philosophy, to eschatology, indicating the continuity of the realms usually thought disparate. The closure ("For every second was the small gateway in time through which the Messiah might enter," "Concept" 397) spells out what many have felt is the major methodological inconsistence in Benjamin's thought: having directed our attention to the harshness of past injustices, the thinker proposes to amend, indeed "redeem," them in eschatological time. This approach proclaims a radical incompleteness for the past, a cross-temporality which is hard to be understood, let alone incorporated, by the mainstream philosophical-political thought. A perhaps unwitting, but highly problematic, consequence of this extension of the past into the present is a discursive obliteration of the real historical loss. Max Horkheimer was the first to articulate these objec-

tions. In his letter of 16 March 1937 Horkheimer reminds Benjamin that "past injustice has occurred and is done with" and "the murdered are really murdered," and he judges Benjamin's Arcades Project in the following terms: "In the end, your affirmation is theology. If one takes incompleteness completely seriously, one has to believe in the Last Judgement" ("N" 61).[17] Benjamin excerpts this letter in the Arcades Project itself and accompanies the quote with an explanation which fruitfully illuminates the status of history in his work: "history is not just a science but also a form of memoration [remembrance, *eine Form des Eingedenkens*]" (61). The act of memoration is the dynamic principle of the historian's work, directing his/her gaze towards "the image of enslaved ancestors rather than (…) the ideal of liberated grandchildren" ("Concept" 394). Remembrance, a new strategy of historiography, has a redemptive function, Benjamin argues, admitting that his affirmation of incompleteness is, indeed, theology; it is precisely in the act of remembrance that "we discover the experience [*Erfahrung*] that forbids us to conceive of history as a-theological" (61). In this light, the concept of temporal incompleteness may be interpreted as the primary contribution of theology to the new philosophy of history and the practice of its recording. In the following pages, I shall propose a kind of memoration (reading praxis) which may constellate Benjamin's "incomplete moment" with the present day historical subject.

Historical Subjects and Constellation-Events

Benjamin claims that there is nothing more detrimental for a historian than to seek to recognize the past "the way it really was" ("Concept" 391). The ambition to resurrect the past through "empathy" with the past events bespeaks not only the historian's hegemonic proclivities, but also his/her heavily restricted view of the past. The historian's "empathy" is always empathy with the victor, for the attempt to "relive" an era is necessarily conducted with the help of artefacts, "cultural treasures" that have been preserved, and the latter are invariably products of the side victorious in historical dynamics (391). The traditional historian becomes a beneficiary to, indeed an *accomplice* of, the current rulers, who are true "heirs" of the past victors. Emphasizing that "whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphant procession in which current rulers step over those who are lying prostrate" (391), Benjamin records the tacit mutual backing of the past and present rulers via the

17 Horkheimer, letter to Benjamin, 16 March 1937. Also quoted in Howard Caygill, "Walter Benjamin's Concept of Cultural History," *The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 94–95.

exultation of cultural heritage: what we perceive as a cultural treasure owes its existence not only to the efforts of the great genius who created it, but also to the anonymous toil of others who worked and lived in the same period. Therefore, "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" (392).

The contamination of this transmission calls for an urgent response, Benjamin believes. Thus the new historiographer, a "history-writing subject [which] is, properly, that part of humanity whose solidarity embraces all the oppressed" (<Paralipomena> 404), should "brush history against the grain" ("Concept" 392) and salvage the object of historical inquiry from the realm of the obscured and the vanquished. In his commentary on Thesis VII, Adorno underscores the importance of this activity, but also points out a specific intervention in epistemology and methodology of historical research that such a move implies:

If Benjamin said that history had hitherto been written from the standpoint of the victor, and needed to be written from that of the vanquished, we might add that knowledge must indeed present the fatally rectilinear succession of victory and defeat, but should also address itself to those things which were not embraced by this dynamic, which fell by the wayside—what might be called the waste products and blind spots that have escaped the dialectic. It is in the nature of the defeated to appear, in their impotence, irrelevant, eccentric, derisory (…) Theory must deal with cross-grained, opaque, unassimilated material…[18]

Benjamin's writings speak well to Adorno's advice: their regular subject is the fleeting contents of history's underside—Germany's unemployed; the protestant lamentation play in the context of the exuberance of catholic Baroque; bohemians and flâneurs of the Second Empire; children; avant-gardists of the 1930s; temporally displaced story-tellers; mentally ill; gamblers; old toys, city-streets; pornography; "absent presences" such as shadows and angels; and, also, as Beatrice Hanssen has recently suggested, a variety of natural world occurrences—wild and domestic animals, stones, and dual-species creatures such as those found in Kafka's writings.[19] This (seemingly) impotent, eccentric, and unassimilated material presents the core of Benjamin's inquiries, constituting

18 Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia* (London: New Left Books, 1974) 151.

19 Cf. Beatrice Hanssen, *Walter Benjamin's Other History: Of Stones, Animals, Human Beings, and Angels* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.

a dynamic philosophy of history dedicated to what Rodolphe Gasché has called a "radical and non-phenomenal Other."[20]

Benjamin's decision to "read the unwritten" makes his project akin to many contemporary and later philosophies of history. Yet, the Benjaminian "new historiography" requires more than a simple alteration of the historical subject: it calls for a thorough revision of the operative model of archiving, referencing, and interpreting, and thus also a substantial modification of the current epistemo-critical practice. This is the reason why Benjamin's critique of historicism is inextricably bound to his questioning of the notion of progress and the historiographical practice based on it. Benjamin's performative critique is directed specifically against linearity as a constructive principle of progressivism and teleology. It is here that one may recognize the import of Benjamin's thought for the practice of writing history. Benjamin's model of historical reference is based on the "blasting of the continuum" of historical contemplation rather than the pursuit of narration. In such a practice, "thinking suddenly comes to a stop in a constellation saturated with tensions [and] it gives that constellation a shock," whereby "thinking is crystallized as a monad" ("Concept" 396). In this way, the dialectical image of the past appears. Constructed in the materialist presentation of history and extrapolated from the continuum of historical process, the dialectical image of the past-present marks the spot where the tension between dialectical oppositions is greatest ("N" 67). Benjamin's historical constellations in "On the Concept of History" signal these tensions. They take form of image-bound allegorical narratives which arrest the thought in a fusion of the fore and the after (the story about Maezel's automaton, triumphant procession of rulers and their heirs, Paul Klee's painting Angelus Novus, and others).

As "every historical state of affairs presented dialectically polarizes and becomes a force field in which the conflict between fore- and after-history plays itself out" ("N" 118), Benjamin's dialectical images instantiate unique temporal constellations. This "constellative" historiography challenges progressivism by an alternative, retroactive temporality, in which historical thinking and writing performs a bidirectional temporal movement—from the present into the past, (retrospective revaluation of a past event), and, almost simultaneously, from the past into the present/future (recognition of the relevance of the redeemed past for the present). This dual move allows the past to be citable as a reference to re-

20 Rodolphe Gasché, "Saturnine Vision and the Question of Difference in Walter Benjamin's Theory of Language," *Benjamin's Ground: New Readings of Walter Benjamin*, ed. Rainer Nägele (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989) 100.

demption. Timothy Bahti correctly describes this epistemological movement as a "metaleptic prolepsis," a temporal hermeneutics characteristic of allegory.[21]

It is true that Benjamin's historical constellations structurally correspond to the narrative event of allegory: these compressed images of high evocative power naturally conjoin the act of writing/drawing and that of interpretation. Yet, there is one significant difference between traditional allegory and Benjamin's dialectical constellation. Whereas the former results from our intention to generate a semantic cluster, the latter happens accidentally—an image of the past "flashes up" (*aufblitzen*) in the present and appears unexpectedly in the visual-epistemic field of the historical subject "at a moment of danger" (*im Augenblick der Gefahr*) ("Concept" 391). This unintentionality is important for Benjamin, for he deems both intentional attention and contemplation hegemonic strategies in which the (historical) subject seemingly masters, and consequently obliterates, the object. Thus, the history-writing subject is doubly subverted in Benjamin's notion of constellation. First, instead of placing the power of reflection at disposal of the knowing subject, Benjamin allots a dose of activity to the object/event itself. Second, the anterior—the minor, vanquished, obscured anterior—commands the epistemological activity of the posterior, in turn questioning the very concept of "critical distance" and the subject's claims to objectivity. For, as Benjamin writes in the Arcades Project, "the truth is not—as Marxism maintains—just a temporal function of knowledge; it is bound to a time-kernel [*Zeitkern*] that is planted in both the knower and the known" ("N" 51). This relative epistemological independence of the object of knowledge effectively dispels "the false aliveness of the past-made-present" and the hegemony of the subject to which historicists aspire (<Paralipomena> 401).

Benjamin's manipulation of temporality has one distinct epistemological implication: a historical sign becomes fully legible only in a subsequent fusion with a moment in future and only insofar as it does not relinquish its simultaneous rootedness in the past. According to Giorgio Agamben, "Benjamin's principle (…) proposes that every work, every text, contains a historical index which indicates both its belonging to a determinate epoch, as well as its only coming forth to full legibility at a determinate historical moment."[22] Agamben convincingly links this principle to the Pauline conception of typology and the derived models

21 Timothy Bahti, "History as Rhetorical Enactment: Walter Benjamin's Theses 'On the Concept of History'," *Diacritics* (September 1979) 9. Cf. also, Benjamin's writings on allegory in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* and "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire."

22 Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. Patricia Daily (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005) 145.

of temporality and legibility. For, this inverted and expanded temporality, congealed in allegory, is the very reason why Benjamin invites theology to help historical materialism (Thesis I). The temporality of the Scripture is markedly opposed to the linearity of the Enlightenment progressivism and conspicuously similar to Benjamin's view of historical time: it celebrates discontinuity, but also the possibility of constellation of each moment in present with a correspondent in past. This "corresponding" event in past—either allegorized in record or unrecorded—is now felt by the historical subject not as an isolated experience of the moment (*Erlebnis*) but as "lived experience over time," experience in which the contents of the individual past fuse in memory with the material from the collective past (*Erfahrung*).[23] Where historicism offers an "eternal" image of the past, theological convolutions of historical materialism supply a unique lived experience, *Erfahrung*. These cross-temporal constellations are, then, performed and activated in a ritual or a speech act in the present; this act happens not as a function or call of reflection but as a summation or a task that the dead impose on the living.

The last observation guides us to another provenance of Benjamin's experimentation with historical time. Benjamin's reworking of temporality through an over-layering of images/traces/acts may have also been informed by his interest in psychoanalysis, a discipline which celebrates retroactive temporality, both in terms of its epistemology and its practice. It is the reworking of time in psychoanalysis that underlies Benjamin's discussion of Proustian *mémoire involontaire* in "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire." Benjamin perceptively conjoins the over-layering of memory traces (constitutive of consciousness, according to Freud) with the content of "lived experience" (*Erfahrung*), but also with the ways in which such experience can be interpreted or "read," individually and historically. Thus the inclusion of psychoanalysis allows Benjamin's argumentation to work simultaneously in two directions, both of which may be seen as informing, for instance, Paul Connerton's recent assessment of memory as a cultural-historical category.[24] One of these directions deals with the temporality of the move from the traces of past experiences (individual and collective) to a specific experience-trace in present which represents a lived-through fusion of the individual and the collective

23 On Benjamin's distinction between *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*, see "On Some Motifs in Baudelarie," *SW*, 316, 317 et passim. See, also, Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999) 802 (Convolute M 2a, 4).

24 Cf. Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

(*Erfahrung*, exemplified by poetic experience and poetry).[25] The other direction builds on the *practice* of psychoanalysis and its implied epistemology: it tracks the move in analytic session from the present trace *retroactively* to the under-inscribed experiences, and back to present (now future) in a speech act. A specific epistemology of the record established in the analytical move is, I would argue, what informs Benjamin's belief in the efficacy of the dialectic image for materialist historiography.

For, Benjamin's temporal re-shelving has the greatest consequences precisely on the *practice* of reading and writing/re-inscribing historical signs. By inviting us to consider the moments in past as indices to present, Benjamin transforms the interpretation of history into a practice which both inverts the linearity of the (customary) reading sequence and configures our historical perception as a mnemonic inscription. Tom Cohen notes that Benjamin's "materialist historiography" purports to "expose the trace-chains that manage anteriority as *virtual*, together with their semantic capital and canonical accounts."[26] A mnemonic intervention on these chains is necessary for Benjamin, for it is only with the help of a re-inscriptive intervention, or a "re-decision," as Cohen terms it, that we can alter the archival basis which sustains the history of victors.

Practices of reading-writing

By singling out historical events as explosive points in which the past and the present coalesce (so as to change the future) and then positing their interpretation in the Messianic time, Benjamin simultaneously works within the tradition of the history of events and subverts it. The reason for Benjamin's unusual equilibration of two opposing approaches to history— the history of long spans (exemplified by the Annales School, with whose early work Benjamin may have been acquainted) and the traditional history of events—may be sought in the thinker's need to reaffirm human time as the time of initiative. In this respect, Hanssen's attempt to present Benjamin as a thinker of the "natural" alter/other has an important limitation: it relegates Benjamin's thought almost fully into the realm of an abstract, *dehumanised* alter-ology. For a scholar intent on tracing Benjamin the historian, this is highly problematic, no less than the entire post-Derrida debate about the anthropocentrism or creaturely

25 In notes accompanying the composition of "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," Benjamin explicates that isolated experiences (i.e., those of the *Erlebnis* type) are "unsuitable for literary composition" and that a creative work is distinguished precisely by its ability to "beget *Erfahrungen* out of *Erlebnissen*" (*GS*, I: 1183).

26 Tom Cohen, *Ideology and Inscription: "Cultural Studies after Benjamin, De Man, and Bakhtin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 4.

attentiveness in Benjamin's writings. Indeed, as Harry D. Harootunian observes, Benjamin's work deals more "with the status of historical discourse and practice (…) than with history as such."[27] Benjamin's anthropocentrism (or "humanism"), I would argue, is neither hidden nor incidental: it is necessitated by his ambition actively to engage with history as a "time-of-initiative." Benjamin the creaturely ethicist and Benjamin the philosopher of history simply do not commeasure.

Thus, Derrida is right: anthropocentrism "lurks" behind Benjamin's ethical attentiveness for the otherness of the Other.[28] But it does so by necessity, informed as it is by Benjamin's simultaneous urge to incite a change in *human* history. It is only logical for Benjamin to argue that "since history affords an idea of the fundamental citability of its object, this object must present itself in its ultimate form, as a moment of humanity" (<Paralipomena> 403). According to Benjamin, to change human history, one has to engage with human capacity to modify history. This capacity takes a distinct form in the mental realm: that of citing/interpreting history. The citability of historical events involves two interlocked activities: *reading* and *writing* of history. These practices are understood as anthropological categories, and unashamedly so. They provide Benjamin with a means to ground the cogitation of history in a political model based on human agency. If history is a narrative by means of which, as Paul Ricoeur would later claim, we make sense of the aporias of time, if history, furthermore, presents a narrative condition which forcibly invites our metahistorical, social agency (in the form of rereading, rewriting, and rearticulating history), it is impossible to speak about/engage with this history from the position beyond human.[29] If, on the other hand, history is "creaturely," supra- and beyond-human, we, humans, cannot take initiative in that history—at least not in a non-hegemonic way envisioned by Benjamin. Undoubtedly, "stones, animals, human beings, and angels" all have their "histories," yet making sense of our experience of time and space by formulating the historical experience into a narrative is a paradigmatically human trait, for good or for worse. For a philosopher of history with at least a dint of interest in societal agency on the ground-level, it is both impossible and impracti-

27 Harry D. Harootunian, "The Benjamin Effect: Modernism, Repetition, and the Path to Different Cultural Imaginaries," *Walter Benjamin and the Demands of History*, 66.

28 Cf. Jacques Derrida, "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority'" ("Force de Loi: Le 'Fondement Mystique de l'Autorité,'"), *Cardozo Law Review* 11 (1990): 919–1045.

29 Cf. Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), vol. I, 224 et passim. For the most influential critique of the notion of history of long-time spans, see, Jacques Rancière, *The Names of History: On the Poetics of Knowledge*, trans. Hassan Melehy (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1994).

cable to assess human history without starting from the position of the human.

Hence the importance of Benjamin's *performance* of the critique of linearity, demonstrated in modernist montage form adopted for Benjamin's "On the Concept of History" or the texts of the Arcades Project, and reflected in Benjamin's plans for the production of a text consisting entirely of citations. The disruptive, fragmentary, and self-reflexive structure of Benjamin's writings exteriorizes a peculiar methodological principle: since the historical narration is intrinsically prone to reification, to narrate history truthfully means to question the very process of narration while performing it, to invent such a mode of narration in which "the epic moment will always be blown apart in the process of construction" (<Paralipomena> 406). Based on a continuous suspension of the epic nature of prose, such mode of narration will honour "the memory of the anonymous" (406) and save them from oblivion, Benjamin argues; only such a text may propel a correspondent reading/interpreting history—distractive, fragmentary, in constant defiance of the sovereignty of discourse. Upsetting the operative historiographical models, such writing-reading practice finally contributes to an impossible project—simultaneously to narrate and to question the narration of history.

Potentials of failure

Indeed, it is adequate to close this study with the notion of impossibility. The non-commensurability of Benjamin's project and the actual scholarly practice in social sciences is uncomfortable for any Benjamin-scholar. It is the persistence of this discomfort that leads us to the most important question in the present study: in the light of all these incongruences—the mouldable epistemology, the shifting nature of his subject matter, the deliberately fragmentary nature of his exposé, the exultation of gesture (rather than unequivocal verbal signs), caesuras and occlusions, and multiple inconsistencies of thought—, can we seriously perceive Benjamin as either a philosopher of history or a historian? How viable, how workable, how (even) possible, is Benjamin's hypothetical model of reading/writing history? The simplest answer is: partly. It is true that the development of the discipline of historiography in the twentieth century has proved Benjamin correct in many of his propositions: the subject matter of historiography has markedly shifted away from "the history of victors" and the themes advocated by Benjamin (mass media, technology, artefacts, public rituals, social institutions of daily life, "virtual" objects, and so on) are now the historiographer's common stock of

topics; Benjamin's recognition of particular histories and multiple temporalities of historical experience is an almost unavoidable trope in the post-1960s historiography. Yet, what Benjamin arguably considered the very grounding of his method/practice of writing and reading history, namely, the subversion of temporality in an act of cross-temporal, accidental constellation, has attracted significantly less enthusiasm. A comprehensive historiographical text that would seriously (yet accidentally!) examine a constellation of an instant in past and a moment in present, in order to crystallize and activate the revolutionary potential of the humankind, is still to be written.

The reason for the improbability of this prospect can be sought in the changed structure of experience—precisely where Benjamin himself would search for it. Nowadays, historians are not likely to invest either Marxism or theology (and even less the fusion thereof) with authority to preside over history. Furthermore, while the difficulties of recognizing the historical subject in the fleeting, the transient, and the fortuitous, might be overcome in the future, a text based on the notion of chance encounter is likely to remain an impossible task. The practical impossibility of such a historical text taints our general theoretical openness to the accidental. It is perhaps only too apt that Benjamin's Arcades Project—fragmentary, repetitious, exuberant historiographical text that it is—has never been finished.

In his letter to Gershom Scholem, dated 11 June 1938, Benjamin describes Kafka's work in terms of "purity and beauty of a failure."[30] The revaluation of failure connects the diverse threads of Benjamin's thought: the historically unsuccessful, the defeated, "underdogs." By contrast, the most negatively charged terms in Benjamin's "On the Concept of History" are those of triumph and progress: it is in the image of a "triumphant procession" that the temporalities and activities of the Nazis and the past rulers coalesce ("Concept" 391). I contend that we should approach Benjamin's philosophy of history precisely through this invitation to reconstruct, refigure, and re-appropriate the concept of failure. This conceptual reversal presupposes more than a superficial melancholic exultation of failure, familiar to the Western thought on history. Rather, this rediscovery of failure as a "successful" hermeneutic and methodological principle is based on a repositioning of the general structure of thought, and the transformation of history-thinking in particular.

One may argue that the dynamic notion of failure, or, the "success of unsuccessfulness," is part and parcel of Benjamin's rethinking of temporality and epistemology. In the introduction to his rendition

30 Walter Benjamin, "Some Reflections on Kafka," *Illuminations*, 145.

of Baudelaire's *Tableaux parisiens*, entitled "The Task of the Translator," Benjamin praises the failure-bound activity of translation. If measured in terms of its "accuracy," translation always fails, Benjamin acknowledges. Yet, the afterlife of the translated work reveals the success of this failure: translation adds something to or reveals something about the original—namely, it intimates "pure language" (*SW* I: 255, 258). Thus, while translation owes its existence to the original, it also presents a different value-system, separate from but not secondary to the original. As an "afterlife" which purports to record an original activity, translation resembles history, Paul de Man has noticed.[31] The retrospectively disclosed "success of failure" pertains thus to both activities, that of translating a literary work and that of transcribing historical experience. A "failing" model of record thus may be the one which will most successfully add to, revise, and reinvigorate the original (history). Its "success" is to be measured by the value of its "distractive" activity rather than its accuracy, by its historical intention rather than its content.

It is for this reason that I have commenced the present study by underscoring the problems, failures, and open questions that permeate Benjamin's thought on history. Only a critical practice which does not attempt to equilibrate, rationalize, or pacify Benjaminian gaps and incongruities, and therefore a critical practice itself premised upon the unfinalisability of its results, can help us understand Benjamin's vision of history and use it in social practice. For it is probable that the most important lesson which one can learn from reading Benjamin is the necessity of a constant alteration and battle against the totalizing tendencies in one's own transcriptions of history.

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31 Paul de Man, *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1986) 83.

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Сања Бахун

УСПЕХ НЕУСПЕХА: ФИЛОЗОФИЈА ИСТОРИЈЕ ВАЛТЕРА БЕЊАМИНА

Резиме

Овај чланак нуди ново читање једне од најутицајнијих и најчешће погрешно тумачених филозофија историје у савременој мисли. Полазећи од Бењаминове тврдње да је „ванредно стање“ историјско-филозофска датост која захтева перманентну трансформацију нашег поимања историје и наше активности у истој, Бахун испитује релевантност Бењаминове мисли за савремну друштвену и историографску праксу. Кроз интерпретацију Бењаминових позних текстова садржаних у *Пројекту Аркаде* (*Passagenwerk*), те есеја „О Концепту историје” (“Über den Begriff der Geschichte,” 1940) и кореспондентних фрагмената из дневника и архива, Бахун открива структурну и садржајну премису Бењаминове филозофије историје у концепту „не-успеха“.