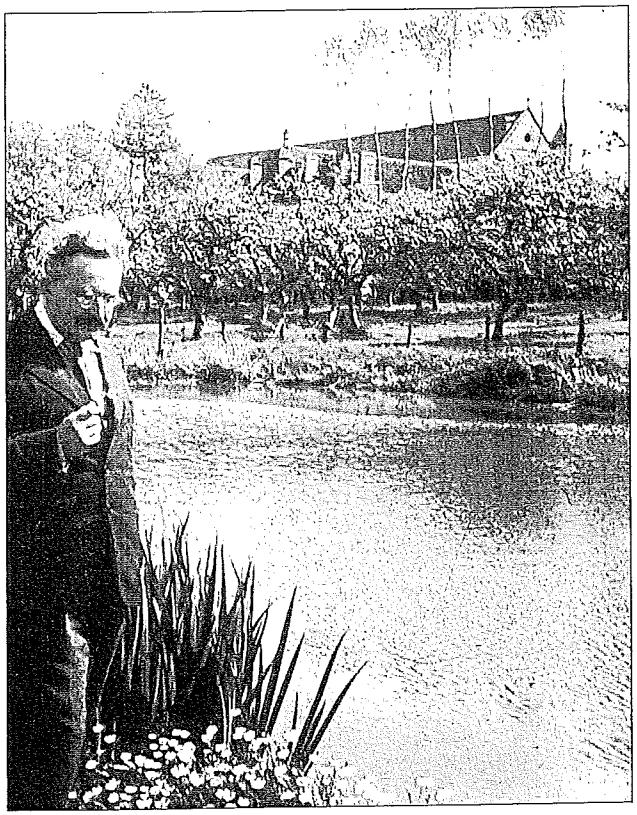

Walter Benjamin

SELECTED WRITINGS
VOLUME 4
1938–1940

Translated by Edmund Jephcott and Others

Edited by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings

THE BELKNAP PRESS OF HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England 2003

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This work is a translation of selections from Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften, Unter Mitwirkung von Theodor W. Adorno und Gershom Scholem, herausgegeben von Rolf Tiedemann und Hermann Schweppenhäuser,* copyright © 1972, 1974, 1977, 1982, 1985, 1989 by Suhrkamp Verlag. Some of the pieces in this volume were previously published in English, as follows: "The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire" appeared in Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism* (London: NLB/Verso, 1973). "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility (Third Version)," "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," "On the Concept of History," and "What Is the Epic Theater?" appeared in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations,* ed. Hannah Arendt, copyright © 1968 by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc. Translations published by arrangement with Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc.

Publication of this book has been aided by a grant from Inter Nationes, Bonn.

Frontispiece: Walter Benjamin at the Abbey of Pontigny, 1938. Photo by Gisèle Freund. Copyright © Gisèle Freund / Agence Nina Beskow.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Benjamin, Walter, 1892–1940.
[Selections. English. 2003]
Selected writings / Walter Benjamin; edited by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings
p. cm.
"This work is a translation of selections from Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* . . . copyright 1972 . . . by Suhrkamp Verlag"—T.p. verso.
Includes index.
Contents: v. 1. 1913–1926.—v. 2. 1927–1934.—v. 3. 1935–1938.—v. 4. 1938–1940
ISBN 0-674-94585-9 (v. 1: alk. paper) ISBN 0-674-94586-7 (v. 2: alk. paper)
ISBN 0-674-00896-0 (v. 3: alk. paper) ISBN 0-674-01076-0 (v. 4: alk. paper)
I. Eiland, Howard. II. Jennings, Michael William. III. Title.
PT2603.E455A26 1996
833'.91209—dc20 96-23027

Designed by Gwen Nefsky Frankfeldt

Contents

FRUITS OF EXILE, 1938 (PART 2)

The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire 3
Blanqui 93
The Study Begins with Some Reflections on the Influence of *Les Fleurs du mal* 95
Exchange with Theodor W. Adorno on "The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire" 99
Review of Renéville's *Expérience poétique* 116
Review of Freund's *Photographie en France au dix-neuvième siècle* 120
Review of Francesco's *Macht des Charlatans* 123
A Chronicle of Germany's Unemployed 126
A Novel of German Jews 135

THEORY OF REMEMBRANCE, 1939

Review of Hönigswald's *Philosophie und Sprache* 139
Review of Sternberger's *Panorama* 145
Review of Béguin's *Ame romantique et le rêve* 153
Note on Brecht 159
Central Park 161

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

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

Notes

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

On the Concept of History

I

There was once, we know, an automaton constructed in such a way that it could respond to every move by a chess player with a countermove that would ensure the winning of the game.[1] A puppet wearing Turkish attire and with a hookah in its mouth sat before a chessboard placed on a large table. A system of mirrors created the illusion that this table was transparent on all sides. Actually, a hunchbacked dwarf—a master at chess—sat inside and guided the puppet's hand by means of strings. One can imagine a philosophic counterpart to this apparatus. The puppet, called "historical materialism,"[2] 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.

II

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

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

III

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

IV

Seek for food and clothing first; then
shall the Kingdom of God be granted to you.
—Hegel, 1807[5]

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

V

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

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

VI

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

VII

Consider the darkness and the great cold
In this vale resounding with mystery.
—Brecht, *The Threepenny Opera*[8]

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

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

VIII

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

IX

My wing is ready for flight,
I would like to turn back.
If I stayed everliving time,
I'd still have little luck.
—Gerhard Scholem, "Greetings from the Angelus"[12]

There is a picture by Klee called *Angelus Novus*. It shows an angel who seems about to move away from something he stares at.[13] His eyes are wide, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how the angel of history must look. His face is turned toward the past. Where a chain of events appears before *us, he* sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise and has got caught in his wings; it is so strong that the angel can no longer close them. This storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows toward the sky. What we call progress is *this* storm.

X

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

XI

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

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

XII

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

—Nietzsche, *On the Advantages and Disadvantages of History for Life*[18]

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

XIII

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

—Josef Dietzgen, *Social Democratic Philosophy*[21]

Social Democratic theory and to an even greater extent its practice were shaped by a conception of progress which bore little relation to reality but made dogmatic claims. Progress as pictured in the minds of the Social Democrats was, first of all, progress of humankind itself (and not just advances in human ability and knowledge). Second, it was something boundless (in keeping with an infinite perfectibility of humanity). Third, it was considered inevitable—something that automatically pursued a straight or spiral course. Each of these assumptions is controversial and open to criticism. But when the chips are down, criticism must penetrate beyond these assumptions and focus on what they have in common. The concept of mankind's historical progress cannot be sundered from the concept of its progression through a homogeneous, empty time. A critique of the concept of such a progression must underlie any criticism of the concept of progress itself.

XIV

Origin is the goal.

—Karl Kraus, *Words in Verse,* vol. 1[22]

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

XV

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

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

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

XVI

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

XVII

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

XVIII

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

A[28]

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

B

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

Written February–May 1940; unpublished in Benjamin's lifetime. *Gesammelte Schriften,* I, 691–704. Translated by Harry Zohn.

Notes

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

Player" (1836). In 1809 it defeated Napoleon in a game, and from 1817 to 1837 it regularly toured England and America. The secret of the cabinet was exposed in 1834 by a former operator of the mechanism, but it continued to draw crowds. After Maelzel died in 1838, the Turk became an exhibit in a small museum in Philadelphia, where it was gradually forgotten. It was destroyed by a fire in 1854.

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

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

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

Paralipomena to "On the Concept of History"

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

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

XVIIa

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

the school philosophy of the Social Democratic party—from Schmidt and Stadler through Natorp and Vorländer.[3] Once the classless society had been defined as an infinite task, the empty and homogeneous time was transformed into an anteroom, so to speak, in which one could wait for the emergence of the revolutionary situation with more or less equanimity. In reality, there is not a moment that would not carry with it *its* revolutionary chance—provided only that it is defined in a specific way, namely as the chance for a completely new resolution of a completely new problem [*Aufgabe*]. For the revolutionary thinker, the peculiar revolutionary chance offered by every historical moment gets its warrant from the political situation. But it is equally grounded, for this thinker, in the right of entry which the historical moment enjoys vis-à-vis a quite distinct chamber of the past, one which up to that point has been closed and locked. The entrance into this chamber coincides in a strict sense with political action, and it is by means of such entry that political action, however destructive, reveals itself as messianic. (Classless society is not the final goal of historical progress but its frequently miscarried, ultimately [*endlich*] achieved interruption.)

The historical materialist who investigates the structure of history performs, in his way, a sort of spectrum analysis. Just as a physicist determines the presence of ultraviolet light in the solar spectrum, so the historical materialist determines the presence of a messianic force in history. Whoever wishes to know what the situation of a "redeemed humanity" might actually be, what conditions are required for the development of such a situation, and when this development can be expected to occur, poses questions to which there are no answers. He might just as well seek to know the color of ultraviolet rays.

Marx says that revolutions are the locomotive of world history. But perhaps it is quite otherwise. Perhaps revolutions are an attempt by the passengers on this train—namely, the human race—to activate the emergency brake.

Three basic concepts can be identified in Marx's work, and its entire theoretical armature can be seen as an attempt to weld these three concepts together. They are the class struggle of the proletariat, the course of historical development (progress), and the classless society. The structure of Marx's basic idea is as follows: Through a series of class struggles, humanity attains to a classless society in the course of historical development. = But classless society is not to be conceived as the endpoint of historical development. = From this erroneous conception Marx's epigones have derived (among other things) the notion of the "revolutionary situation," which, as we know, has always refused to arrive. = A genuinely messianic face must be restored to the concept of classless society and, to be sure, in the interest of furthering the revolutionary politics of the proletariat itself.

New Theses B

History deals with connections and with arbitrarily elaborated causal chains. But 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. In this moment, time must be brought to a standstill.

The dialectical image is an occurrence of ball lightning[4] that runs across the whole horizon of the past.

Articulating the past historically means recognizing those elements of the past which come together in the constellation of a single moment. Historical knowledge is possible only within the historical moment. But knowledge *within* the historical moment is always knowledge *of* a moment. In drawing itself together in the moment—in the dialectical image—the past becomes part of humanity's involuntary memory.

The dialectical image can be defined as the involuntary memory of redeemed humanity.

The notion of a universal history is bound up with the notion of progress and the notion of culture. In order for all the moments in the history of humanity to be incorporated in the chain of history, they must be reduced to a common denominator—"culture," "enlightenment," "the objective spirit," or whatever one wishes to call it.

New Theses C

Only when the course of historical events runs through the historian's hands smoothly, like a thread, can one speak of progress. If, however, it is a frayed bundle unraveling into a thousand strands that hang down like unplaited hair, none of them has a definite place until they are all gathered up and braided into a coiffure.

The basic conception in myth is the world as punishment—punishment which actually engenders those to whom punishment is due. Eternal recurrence is the punishment of being held back in school, projected onto the cosmic sphere: humanity has to copy out its text in endless repetitions (Eluard, *Répétitions*).[5]

The eternity of punishment in hell may have sheared off the most terrible spike from the ancient idea of eternal recurrence. It substitutes an eternity of torment for the eternity of a cycle.

Thinking the idea of eternal recurrence once more in the nineteenth cen-

tury, Nietzsche becomes the figure on whom mythic doom is now carried out. For the essence of mythic happenings is recurrence. (Sisyphus, the Danaides.)[6]

New Theses H

The dissolution into pragmatic history ought not to benefit cultural history. Moreover, the pragmatic conception of history does not founder on the demands made by "strict science" in the name of the law of causality. It founders on a shift in historical perspective. An age that is no longer able to transfigure its positions of power in an original way loses its understanding of the transfigurations which benefited such positions in the past.

The history-writing subject is, properly, that part of humanity whose solidarity embraces all the oppressed. It is the part which can take the greatest theoretical risks because, in practical terms, it has the least to lose.

Universal histories are not inevitably reactionary. But a universal history *without* a structural [*konstruktiv*] principle is reactionary. The structural principle of universal history allows it to be represented in partial histories. It is, in other words, a monadological principle. It exists within salvation history.

The idea of prose coincides with the messianic idea of universal history. (Leskov!)[7]

New Theses K

"For to organize pessimism means . . . to discover in the space of political action . . . image space. This image space, however, can no longer be measured out by contemplation. . . . The long-sought image space . . . , the world of universal and integral actuality" (Surrealism).[8]

Redemption is the *limes* of progress.[9]

The messianic world is the world of universal and integral actuality. Only in the messianic realm does a universal history exist. Not as written history, but as festively enacted history. This festival is purified of all celebration. There are no festive songs. Its language is liberated prose—prose which has burst the fetters of script [*Schrift*]. (The idea of prose coincides with the messianic idea of universal history. Compare the passage in "The Storyteller": the types of artistic prose as the spectrum of historical types.)[10]

The multiplicity of "histories" is closely related, if not identical, to the multiplicity of languages. Universal history in the present-day sense is never more than a kind of Esperanto. (It expresses the hope of the human race no more effectively than the name of that universal language.)[11]

The Now of Recognizability

The saying that the historian is a prophet facing backward[12] can be understood in two ways. Traditionally it has meant that the historian, transplanting himself into a remote past, prophesies what was regarded as the future at that time but meanwhile has become the past. This view corresponds exactly to the historical theory of empathy, which Fustel de Coulanges encapsulated in the following advice: "Si vous voulez reviver une époque, oubliez que vous savez ce qui s'est passé après elle."[13]—But the saying can also be understood to mean something quite different: the historian turns his back on his own time, and his seer's gaze is kindled by the peaks of earlier generations as they sink further and further into the past. Indeed, the historian's own time is far more distinctly present to this visionary gaze than it is to the contemporaries who "keep step with it." The concept of a present which represents the intentional subject matter of a prophecy is defined by Turgot—not without reason—as an essentially and fundamentally political concept. "Before we have learned to deal with things in a given position," says Turgot, "it has already changed several times. Thus, we always find out too late about what has happened. And therefore it can be said that politics is obliged to foresee the present."[14] It is precisely this concept of the present which underlies the actuality of genuine historiography (N8a,3; N12a,1).[15] Someone who pokes about in the past as if rummaging in a storeroom of examples and analogies still has no inkling of how much in a given moment depends on its being made present [*ihre Vergegenwärtigung*].

The Dialectical Image

(If one looks upon history as a text, then one can say of it what a recent author has said of literary texts—namely, that the past has left in them images comparable to those registered by a light-sensitive plate. "The future alone possesses developers strong enough to reveal the image in all its details. Many pages in Marivaux or Rousseau contain a mysterious meaning which the first readers of these texts could not fully have deciphered." (Monglond; N15a,1.)[16] The historical method is a philological method based on the book of life. "Read what was never written," runs a line in Hofmannsthal.[17] The reader one should think of here is the true historian.)

The multiplicity of histories resembles the multiplicity of languages. Universal history in the present-day sense can never be more than a kind of Esperanto. The idea of universal history is a messianic idea.

The messianic world is the world of universal and integral actuality. Only in the messianic realm does a universal history exist. Not as written history, but as festively enacted history. This festival is purified of all celebration.

There are no festive songs. Its language is liberated prose—prose which has burst the fetters of script [*Schrift*] and is understood by all people (as the language of birds is understood by Sunday's children).[18]—The idea of prose coincides with the messianic idea of universal history (the types of artistic prose as the spectrum of universal historical types [the passage in "The Storyteller"]).[19]

A conception of history that has liberated itself from the schema of progression within an empty and homogeneous time would finally unleash the destructive energies of historical materialism which have been held back for so long. This would threaten the three most important positions of historicism. The first attack must be aimed at the idea of universal history. Now that the nature of peoples is obscured by their current structural features as much as by their current relationships to one another, the notion that the history of humanity is composed of peoples is a mere refuge of intellectual laziness. (The idea of a universal history stands and falls with the idea of a universal language. As long as the latter had a basis—whether in theology, as in the Middle Ages, or in logic, as more recently in Leibniz—universal history was not wholly inconceivable. By contrast, universal history as practiced since the nineteenth century can never have been more than a kind of Esperanto.)—The second fortified position of historicism is evident in the idea that history is something which can be narrated. In a materialist investigation, the epic moment will always be blown apart in the process of construction. The liquidation of the epic moment must be accepted, as Marx did when he wrote *Capital*. He realized that the history of capital could be constructed only within the broad, steel framework of a theory. In Marx's theoretical sketch of labor under the dominion of capital, humanity's interests are better looked after than in the monumental, long-winded, and basically lackadaisical works of historicism. It is more difficult to honor the memory of the anonymous than it is to honor the memory of the famous, the celebrated, not excluding poets and thinkers. The historical construction is dedicated to the memory of the anonymous.—The third bastion of historicism is the strongest and the most difficult to overrun. It presents itself as "empathy with the victor." The rulers at any time are the heirs of all those who have been victorious throughout history. Empathizing with the victor invariably benefits those currently ruling. The historical materialist respects this fact. He also realizes that this state of affairs is well-founded. Whoever has emerged victorious in the thousand struggles traversing history up to the present day has his share in the triumphs of those now ruling over those now ruled. The historical materialist can take only a highly critical view of the inventory of spoils displayed by the victors before the vanquished. This inventory is called culture. For in every case these treasures have a lineage which the historical materialist cannot contemplate without horror. They owe their existence not only to the efforts of the great geniuses who created them, but also to the anonymous toil of others who lived in the same period. There is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. The historical materialist keeps his distance from all of this. He has to brush history against the grain—even if he needs a barge pole to do it.

Categories for developing the concept of historical time.

The concept of historical time forms an antithesis to the idea of a temporal continuum.

The eternal lamp[20] is an image of genuine historical existence. It cites what has been—the flame that once was kindled—in perpetuum, giving it ever new sustenance.

The existence of the classless society cannot be thought at the same time that the struggle for it is thought. But the concept of the present, in its binding sense for the historian, is necessarily defined by these two temporal orders. Without some sort of assay of the classless society, there is only a historical accumulation of the past. To this extent, every concept of the present participates in the concept of Judgment Day.

The saying from an apocryphal gospel—"Where I meet someone, there will I judge him"[21]—casts a peculiar light on the idea of Last Judgment. It recalls Kafka's note: "The Last Judgment is a kind of summary justice."[22] But it adds to this something else: the Day of Judgment, according to this saying, would not be distinguishable from other days. At any rate, this gospel saying furnishes the canon for the concept of the present which the historian makes his own. Every moment is a moment of judgment concerning certain moments that preceded it.

Excerpts from the Fuchs essay.[23]

The passage on Jochmann's visionary gaze should be worked into the basic structure of the Arcades.[24]

The seer's gaze is kindled by the rapidly receding past. That is to say, the prophet has turned away from the future: he perceives the contours of the future in the fading light of the past as it sinks before him into the night of times. This prophetic relation to the future necessarily informs the attitude of the historian as Marx describes it, an attitude determined by actual social circumstances.

Should criticism and prophecy be the categories that come together in the "redemption" of the past?

How should critique of the past (for example, in Jochmann) be joined to redemption of the past?

To grasp the eternity of historical events is really to appreciate the eternity of their transience.

Fragments written in 1940; unpublished in Benjamin's lifetime. *Gesammelte Schriften,* I, 1230–1235, 1237–1238, 1240–1241, 1245–1246. Translated by Edmund Jephcott and Howard Eiland.

Notes

Benjamin wrote these fragments (selected from a larger body of material published in the *Gesammelte Schriften*) in the course of composing "On the Concept of History."

1. Eduard Meyer (1855–1930) was a well-known German historian who attempted to justify Germany's position in World War I. He was the author of *Geschichte des Altertums* (History of the Ancient World; 5 vols., 1884–1902) and other works.
2. Emile Meyerson (1859–1933), French chemist and philosopher, was best known for his work *Identité et réalité* (Identity and Reality; 1908), in which he develops a position opposed to positivism. *De l'explication dans les sciences* (On Explanation in the Sciences) was published in Paris in 1921.
3. The Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (Social Democratic Party of Germany), or SPD, was founded by Wilhelm Liebknecht and August Bebel in 1863, originally as a Marxist revolutionary organization. In the course of the nineteenth century, partly in response to Chancellor Otto von Bismarck's anti-Socialist laws of the 1880s, its policy shifted from revolutionary to social-reformist. Becoming Germany's largest political party after World War I, it adopted a moderate reformist policy and participated in the government of the Weimar Republic. The party was banned by the Nazis in June 1933.

   Neo-Kantianism arose in the mid-nineteenth century as a many-sided response to both Positivism and Romantic Idealism. Its leading exponents in Germany included the philosophers Hermann Cohen, Wilhelm Windelband, Alois Riehl, and Heinrich Rickert. It was in particular the Marburg school of Neo-Kantianism, under the leadership of Cohen, that propounded the ideal of knowledge as an infinite task *(Aufgabe).* Conrad Schmidt (1863–1932), German economist and philosopher, was initially allied with Marx and Engels, but in the 1890s he lent his support to bourgeois revisionist elements within the Social Democratic party. August Stadler (1850–1910), a Neo-Kantian philosopher, was a disciple of Hermann Cohen. He was the author of *Kants Teleologie und ihre erkenntnistheoretische Bedeutung* (The Epistemological Significance of Kant's Teleology; 1874) and other works. Paul Natorp (1854–1924) was one of the leading Neo-Kantian philosophers, a professor at Marburg and the author, notably, of *Platos Ideenlehre* (Plato's Theory of Ideas; 1903) and *Sozialidealismus* (Social Idealism; 1920). He argued that the development of national education, in the form of a "social pedagogics," necessarily preceded any legitimate social or economic change. Karl Vorländer (1860–1928), German philosopher, attempted to combine the Neo-Kantianism of the Marburg school with Marxian socialism. He edited Kant's collected works (9 vols.; 1901–1924) and published books such as *Kant und der Sozialismus* (Kant and Socialism; 1900) and *Kant und Marx* (1911).
4. Ball lightning *(Kugelblitz)* is a rare form of lightning in the shape of a glowing red ball. It is associated with thunderstorms and thought to consist of ionized gas.
5. Paul Eluard (pseudonym of Eugène Grindel; 1895–1952), French poet, was an early Surrealist and one of the leading lyric poets of the twentieth century. His major collections include *Capitale de la douleur* (Capital of Sorrow; 1926), *Les Yeux fertiles* (The Fertile Eyes; 1936), and *Répétitions* (1922). After the Spanish Civil War, Eluard abandoned Surrealist experimentation.
6. In Greek mythology, the Danaides were the fifty daughters of Danaus. As punishment for murdering their fifty husbands on their wedding night, they were condemned to futile labor in Hades: until the end of time, they would pour water into a vessel that was pierced with holes and thus could never be filled.
7. Nikolai Leskov (1821–1881), Russian prose writer, is best known for his short stories, especially "Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District" (1865). See Benjamin's essay on Leskov, "The Storyteller," in *Selected Writings, Volume 3: 1935–1938* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002).
8. A citation from Benjamin's essay "Surrealism," in *Selected Writings, Volume 2: 1927–1934* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 217.
9. The Latin word *limes,* meaning "boundary line," referred specifically to any of the fortified frontiers of the Roman Empire. These included the Limes Germanicus (marking the limits of Rome's German provinces), the Limes Arabicus (the Arabian frontier), and the Limes Britannicus (the British frontier, or Hadrian's Wall).
10. See the essay "The Storyteller" in Volume 3 of this edition, p. 154.
11. Esperanto is the most important of the international constructed languages. It was created by the Polish ophthalmologist Ludwig Zamenhof (born Lazar Markevitch; 1859–1917), who, under the pseudonym Dr. Esperanto ("one who hopes"), published an expository textbook in Russian in 1887, after years of experiment. His *Fundamento de Esperanto* (Basis of Esperanto; 1905) established the principles of the language's structure and formation. Esperanto is characterized by a simple grammar (its rules have no exceptions) and by logical word-formation, using prefixes and suffixes to build on a small number of roots. Its vocabulary is formed from the most commonly used words of the western European languages: the name "Esperanto," for example, recalls such words as *esperanza, speranza,* and *espoir.*
12. "Der Historiker ist ein rückwärts gekehrter Prophet." This is fragment 80 of Friedrich Schlegel's *Athenäums-Fragmente* (Athenaeum Fragments; 1798).
13. "If you want to relive an epoch, forget that you know what happened after it." The French historian Numa Denis Fustel de Coulanges (1830–1889) specialized in the Greco-Roman and medieval periods.
14. Anne-Robert Turgot, *Oeuvres,* vol. 2 (Paris, 1844), p. 673, "Pensées et fragments." Turgot (1727–1781) was a French statesman and economist who was appointed comptroller general of France by Louis XVI in 1774. His fiscal and political reforms met with opposition from high-ranking circles and led to his

dismissal two years later. Among his works are *Lettres sur la tolérance* (Letters on Tolerance; 1753–1754) and *Réflexions sur la formation et la distribution des richesses* (Reflections on the Formation and Distribution of Wealth; 1766).

15. See Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project,* trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), Convolutes N8a,3 and N12a,1.
16. André Monglond, *Le Préromantisme français,* vol. 1, *Le Héros préromantique* (Grenoble, 1930), p. xii. The translation here reflects Benjamin's German translation of the French original. See *The Arcades Project,* Convolute N15a,1. Pierre Carlet de Chamblain de Marivaux (1688–1763) was a French playwright, essayist, and novelist whose light comedies won great popularity in the mid-eighteenth century. His best-known works include plays such as *Le Jeu de l'amour et du hasard* (The Game of Love and Chance; 1730) and *Le Legs* (The Bequest; 1736), and the novel *Le Paysan parvenu* (The Peasant Upstart; 1736). He was elected to the Académie Française in 1742.
17. Hugo von Hofmannsthal (1874–1929), Austrian poet and dramatist, is best known in the English-speaking world for his collaborations with the composer Richard Strauss, including his librettos for the operas *Der Rosenkavalier* and *Ariadne auf Naxos*. The quotation is from his play *Der Tor und der Tod* (Death and the Fool; 1894).
18. In German folk tradition, children born on Sunday, particularly under a new moon, are likely to possess special powers, such as the ability to see spirits, speak with the dead, or have their wishes fulfilled. The term *Sonntagskind* ("Sunday's child") is also used figuratively to refer to someone who is "born under a lucky star," who has an easy time with things that are difficult for others, or for whom each day is imbued with the spirit of Sunday.
19. See Benjamin's essay "The Storyteller" in Volume 3 of this edition, p. 154.
20. In Exodus 27:20, in the Hebrew Bible, God tells Moses on Mount Sinai to maintain a lamp at all times in the sanctuary: "And you shall command the people of Israel to bring to you pure beaten olive oil for the light, that a lamp may be set up to burn continuously." The lamp was to burn continuously as a sign of God's presence.
21. Possibly a reference to a passage in paragraph 5 of the *Revelation of Paul,* part of the New Testament Apocrypha: "My long-suffering bears with them, that they may turn to me; but if not, they shall come to me, and I will judge them."
22. Benjamin refers to number 40 in an untitled sequence of numbered reflections that Kafka composed ca. 1917–1918: "Nur unser Zeitbegriff lässt uns das Jüngste Gericht so nennen, eigentlich ist es ein Standrecht" ("It is only our concept of time that makes us call the Last Judgment by this name. Actually it is a kind of summary justice"). *Standrecht* literally suggests "standing imperative." See Franz Kafka, *Nachgelassene Schriften und Fragmente,* vol. 2 (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1992), p. 122. In English, *Dearest Father: Stories and Other Writings,* trans. Ernst Kaiser and Eithne Wilkins (New York: Schocken, 1954), p. 38. Born in Prague of Jewish parentage, Kafka (1883–1924) is best known for his short stories, such as "Die Verwandlung" (The Metamorphosis; 1915) and "In der Strafkolonie" (In the Penal Colony; 1919), and his posthumously published novels *Der Prozess* (The Trial; 1925) and *Das Schloss* (The Castle; 1926).
23. See Benjamin's essay "Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian," in Volume 3 of this edition.
24. See "'The Regression of Poetry,' by Carl Gustav Jochmann," in this volume, and Convolute N9,7 in Benjamin's *Passagen-Werk* (Arcades Project).