

THAT OTHER SENTIMENTAL SURREALIST:
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I

Taking Thomas Pynchon's critique of the cause-effect mentality as a point of departure, the social or literary critic is reluctant to accept arguments of influence. It may be both correct and interesting to argue that Pynchon has read this or that author, but such an argument also suggests that there is a traceable, even causal connection between the works read and the works produced. By distancing himself as much as possible from this approach, the critic widens his field of research to the point where anything may provide insights into Pynchon's work. The critical act then becomes not so much a proof of influence as a process of juxtaposition. The result is, at best, a series of illuminating observations that are in keeping with the thought processes Pynchon portrays.

In their essay "The New Jeremiad: Gravity's Rainbow," Marcus Smith and Khachig Tölölyan convincingly argue that Gravity's Rainbow is a "reworking of the old Puritan jeremiad."¹ Using the terms Sacvan Bercovitch establishes in Horologicals to Chronometricals: The Rhetoric of the Jeremiad, they posit the following:

The basic terms of GR's discussion of the possibility of freedom from history's curse are established here: past and future (the horological) vs. the chronometric Now. . . . Pynchon's massive work erodes the possibilities offered by history, Puritan religion or technological achievement, but as these are undercut, the idea of what we shall call the "chronometric Now" is offered as a fragile possibility that is ever-recurring and usually ignored. Such an idea becomes possible only when Pynchon displaces categories from the religious-transcendental plane into the mundane, and finds plausible equivalents for them. The "chronometric Now" is a re-imagining of the possibilities open to us in a secular age. (NJ 176)

Smith and Tölölyan discuss the relevance of Frank Kermode's distinction between kairos and chronos, thus reinforcing the idea that Pynchon's concerns are largely "religious" ones. They conclude that through GR's "recasting of the chronometric-horological nexus it demonstrates the incredibly tenacious hold which Puritanism maintains on the American imagination" (NJ 184).

While Smith and Tillyan make very clear their hesitance to call Pynchon "a profoundly 'American' writer" (NJ 185), their discussion of his standing in the Jeremiad tradition nevertheless suggests that there is some truth to the statement. But their hesitation is well-grounded: a reading of the work of Walter Benjamin reveals that the concerns Pynchon addresses, as well as the categories of his thought, are in no way distinctly American. Benjamin's variation on the chronometric-horological nexus--the distinction between "homogeneous, empty time" and the "time of the now" (*Jetztzeit*) he makes in his "Theses on the Philosophy of History"²--clearly anticipates the religious and historical concerns Pynchon addresses in fictional form.

A close reading of other essays by Benjamin, especially "The Storyteller" and "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,"³ reveals an even closer affinity between the two men than the one that is obvious from a reading of the "Theses." Both Pynchon and Benjamin return again and again to a few central issues: the rise of information, the decline of experience, the sequestering of death, the importance of technological change. But the fact that the two men are concerned with the same issues is not nearly as interesting as the suggestion that their minds somehow work in similar ways. This suggestion is at times so strong that, if there were any direct textual evidence that Pynchon has read Benjamin, it would be tempting to say that Benjamin has been a major influence on Pynchon. But in the absence of such evidence, the critic arrives at a very different, more fruitful conclusion: that any similarities between the two men are much more fundamental than mere influence; that Pynchon's vision is perhaps not so much a product as a determinant of his reading list.

II

Near the middle of V., we find the following passage:

Twenty days before the Dog Star moved into conjunction with the sun, the dog days began. The world started to run more and more afool of the inanimate. Fifteen were killed in a train wreck near Oaxaca, Mexico, on 1 July. The next day fifteen people died when an apartment house collapsed in Madrid. July 4 a bus fell into a river near Karachi and thirty-one passengers drowned. Thirty-nine more were drowned two days later in a tropical storm in the central Philippines. 9 July the Aegean Islands were hit by an earthquake and tidal waves, which killed forty-three. 14 July a MATS plane crashed after takeoff from McGuire Air Force Base in New Jersey, killing forty-five.⁴

In "The Storyteller," Benjamin quotes this long passage from Hebel's "Unexpected Reunion":

"In the meantime the city of Lisbon was destroyed by an earthquake, and the Seven Years' War came and went, and Emperor Francis I died, and the Jesuit Order was abolished, and Poland was partitioned, and Empress Maria Theresa died, and Struensee was executed. America became independent, and the united French and Spanish forces were unable to capture Gibraltar. The Turks locked up General Stein in the Veteraner Cave in Hungary, and Emperor Joseph died also. King Gustavus of Sweden conquered Russian Finland, and the French Revolution and the long war began, and Emperor Leopold II went to his grave too. Napoleon captured Prussia, and the English bombarded Copenhagen, and the peasants sowed and harvested. The millers ground, the smiths hammered, and the miners dug for veins of ore in their underground workshops. But when in 1809 the miners at Falun . . ." (I 95)

It is difficult to imagine more distinct passages. According to Benjamin, "Never has a storyteller embedded his report deeper in natural history than Hebel manages to do in this chronology" (I 95). This carries a special resonance because the verb "embedded" (*betten*) suggests something of the story's plot: on the eve of his wedding, a young man is killed deep in the mines, and his body is so well preserved by iron vitriol that, when he is found in 1809, his fiancée—who has remained true to him—is able to recognize him before "she too is called away by death" (I 94). Thus Hebel's chronology invokes both a literal penetration to a specific point in the Earth and an inter-penetration of the miners' lives with "history." Neither of these elements, neither the spatial nor the temporal distribution of the story, is found in Pynchon's passage. He makes this quite explicit:

These were the mass deaths. There were also the attendant maimed, malfunctioning, homeless, lorn. It happens every month in a succession of encounters between groups of living and a congruent world which simply doesn't care. Look in any yearly Almanac, under "Disasters"—which is where the figures above come from. The business is transacted month after month after month. (V 290-91)

And so at the novel's end, the place of Sidney Stencil's death remains imprecise, and the surface of the water undisturbed.

Benjamin writes: "Here 'meaning of life'—there 'moral of the story': with these slogans novel and story confront each other, and from them the totally different historical co-ordinates of these art forms may be discerned." For "the meaning of life" is really the center about which the novel moves. But the quest for it is no more than the initial expression of perplexity with which its reader sees himself living this written life" (I 99). The writing of a novel is for

Benjamin the ultimate expression of isolation. The reader too is isolated, only there able to "look for human beings from whom he derives the 'meaning of life.' Therefore he must, no matter what, know in advance that he will share their experience of death: if need be their figurative death--the end of the novel--but preferably their actual one" (I 101).

Gravity's Rainbow carries this sense of isolation to its extreme. The death--the "stranger's fate [that] by virtue of the flame which consumes it yields us the warmth which we never draw from our own fate" (I 101)--is not simply that of any one character. It is, instead, global extermination, and it could come at any time. Only through the reading of the novel can we experience this death, and therefore only through the reading of the novel can we understand how, in some way, to escape it. As Smith and Tillyan indicate, this can be achieved by devoting ourselves to "Here and Now" (NJ 182). Read from this perspective, GR is nothing if not didactic. Benjamin says that the novelist "is no longer able to express himself by giving examples of his most important concerns, is himself uncounseled, and cannot counsel others" (I 87). While Pynchon's work might at first seem to contradict this statement, it must be kept in mind that Pynchon found it necessary to write nearly 800 pages to pass on what is finally a rather simple message. Pynchon's situation is in some ways analogous to that of Proust: "Proust's eight-volume work conveys an idea of the efforts it took to restore the figure of the storyteller to the present generation."⁵ Benjamin also points out that, whenever novelists have attempted instruction, "these attempts have always amounted to a modification of the novel form" (I 88). This observation, too, applies to GR, and Pynchon's work perfectly exemplifies the crisis in the novel Benjamin saw arising through the "dissemination of information" (I 89).

"The value of information," writes Benjamin, "does not survive the moment in which it was new. It lives only at that moment; it has to surrender to it completely and explain itself to it without losing any time" (I 90). From this arises GR's frenetic pace; its world, like that of the first passage from V. above, is that of the newspaper--fractured, abrupt, incomplete. Facts alone cannot create a coherent vision of the world, but instead preclude the continuum of life so obvious in the passage from Hebel. And just as the novel arose out of the decline of the epic, so too "the epic side of truth, wisdom, is dying out" (I 87). This is "a concomitant symptom of the secular productive forces of history, a concomitant that has quite gradually removed narrative from the realm of living speech" (I 87). From here it is not far to the conclusion that narrative will gradually vanish from the written work as well.

For Benjamin, the art of storytelling is passing away simply because "experience has fallen in value" (I 83-84). "For never has experience," he writes,

been contradicted more thoroughly than strategic experience by tactical warfare, economic experience by inflation, bodily experience by mechanical warfare, moral experience by those in power. A generation that had gone to school on a horse-drawn streetcar now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remained unchanged but the clouds, and beneath these clouds, in a field of force of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile human body. (I 84)

It is thus not surprising that, existing in this "congruent world which simply doesn't care," Benjamin was so out of place in the twentieth century. Hannah Arendt puts it this way in her introduction to Illuminations:

His gestures and the way he held his head when listening and talking; the way he moved; his manners, but especially his style of speaking, down to his choice of words and the shape of his syntax; finally, his downright idiosyncratic tastes--all this seemed so old-fashioned, as though he had drifted out of the nineteenth century into the twentieth the way one is driven onto the coast of a strange land.⁶

It would be easy to imagine this passage appearing as is in The Education of Henry Adams. Like Benjamin and the Adams of The Education, Pynchon's "heroes" never cross the line to become active members of the congruent world they are faced with; like Benjamin's storyteller and the figure of the flaneur he creates in his essays on Baudelaire, each "finds his way about the world without getting too deeply involved in it."⁷ Benjamin quotes and agrees with Jacques Riviere's explanation of Proust's death: "'Marcel Proust died of the same inexperience which permitted him to write his works. He died of ignorance of the world and because he did not know how to change the conditions of his life which had begun to crush him. He died because he did not know how to make a fire or open a window.'⁸ And thus Benny Profane makes his way along the Street:

Though the street had claimed a big fraction of Profane's age, it and he remained strangers in every way. Streets (roads, circles, squares, places, prospects) had taught him nothing: he couldn't work a transit, crane, payloader, couldn't lay bricks, stretch a tape right, hold an elevation rod still, hadn't even learned to drive a car. (V 36-37)

III

Mein Flügel ist zum Schwung bereit,
ich kehrte gern zurück,

denn blieb ich auch lebendige Zeit,
ich hätte wenig Glück.

--Gerhard Scholem, "Gross vom Angelus"⁹

A Klee painting named "Angelus Novus" shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of 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; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (I 257-58)

This is the ninth of Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History." It is difficult to believe that its writer had any faith at all in either the Revolution or any type of Marxist programming. It also seems clear that, unlike Scholem, he had no faith in the possibility of a state founded on religious principles. The new angel of history cannot save, redeem, or change the future; all he can do is witness. GR is, of course, filled with references to angels, but perhaps none is more striking than the one that appeared over Lübeck:

Basher St. Blaise's angel, miles beyond designating, rising over Lübeck that Palm Sunday with the poison-green domes underneath its feet, an obsessive crossflow of red tiles rushing up and down a thousand peaked roofs as the bombers banked and dived, the Baltic already lost in a pall of incendiary smoke behind, here was the Angel: ice crystals swept hissing away from the back edges of wings perilously deep, opening as they were moved into new white abyss. . . .¹⁰

Pynchon's angel does not have the anxiety Benjamin's has. While Benjamin's angel cannot escape from the storm, i.e., the horological, the incessant flow of "homogeneous, empty time," Pynchon's stands indifferently outside it: "their faces, serene, unattached, like the Buddha's, bending over the sea, impassive, indeed, as the Angel that stood over Lübeck during the Palm Sunday raid, come that day neither to destroy nor to protect, but to bear witness to a game of seduction" (GR 214-15). But for Pynchon, Benjamin, and their angels, the vision of history as wreckage is a similar one.

The wreckage in Thesis IX "grows skyward," thus suggesting a spatial estrangement from Paradise just as the "storm" suggests a temporal one. After the epigraph by Karl Kraus to Thesis XIV--"Origin is the goal"--Benjamin writes: "History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now [Jetztzeit]" (I 261). What we have, then, is the idea of the study of history as an intuitive leap back through both time and the wreckage that attends it: "Thus, to Robespierre," Benjamin writes in the "Theses," "ancient Rome was a past charged with the time of the now which he blasted out of the continuum of history" (I 261). Not the least of this idea's ramifications are its stylistic ones: the theses are an extreme expression of the discontinuity that is characteristic of all Benjamin's writing. The links between one section and another are vital even if they are not always discernible. It is as if there is a Truth that does exist but cannot be grasped directly, only approached, circled, glimpsed from ever changing postures.

GR relies heavily on a similar discontinuous structure. For example, Tchitcherine departs from the novel in this unusually sparse passage:

They're in the middle of the bridge. They talk broken German. Tchitcherine manages to hustle half a pack of American cigarettes and three raw potatoes. The two men nod, not quite formally, not quite smiling, Enzian puts his bike in gear and returns to his journey. Tchitcherine lights a cigarette, watching them down the road, shivering in the dusk. Then he goes back to his young girl beside the stream. They will have to locate some firewood before all the light is gone.

This is magic. Sure--but not necessarily fantasy. Certainly not the first time a man has passed his brother by, at the edge of evening, often forever, without knowing it. (GR 734-35)

Here the "frame" ends. Nothing could be further from Tchitcherine's concern with the bare essentials of life than the beginning of the section that immediately follows this one: "By now the City is grown so tall that elevators are long-haul affairs, with lounges inside: padded seats and benches, snack bars, newsstands where you can browse through a whole issue of Life between stops" (GR 735). Again, the distance of this world of the elevator from what Smith and Töblyan call "Earth" is both spatial and, as the inclusion of "now" indicates, temporal.

"It can be argued," write Smith and Töblyan,

that Pynchon's vision of the social world is impoverished, and that the appeal to Here and Now involves the Earth and Love to an overwhelming degree, while ignoring Society, the relation of more than two people, the community which was Ecclesias to

Augustine. At least one of us thinks there is truth to the charge, which invites further study; such study can begin with the consideration of a sentence from GR: "in each of these streets, some vestige of humanity, of Earth, has to remain. No matter what has been done to it, no matter what it's been used for. . ." (p. 693). Though the sentence is placed in a section which reports to the reader the bombing of Hiroshima, the word "humanity" receives less attention than "Earth," which quickly becomes the focus of the next sentence, with its ecological overtones. (NJ 182)

I think there is truth to this charge, with one important qualification. While Pynchon does ignore Society in the abstract, groups of more than two--although never a family--are certainly among his alternatives. The most obvious examples occur in the opening pages at Pirate's banana breakfast, where "Death is told so clearly to fuck off" (GR 10), and much later at SÅure Bummer's. The real question seems to be what kind of value judgment we are going to attach to the ignoring of Society. While it may seem an act of hopelessness and desperation, is this in fact the case? Benjamin, especially in "The Storyteller," was haunted by this same question. If man is being transformed, if experience is withering away even through an act as simple as reading the paper, or Life, then what is wrong with turning away from this social world, away from "Them," to the small community inherent in the storytelling situation? In the "Theses" this idea is drawn out further in Benjamin's derision of all ideas of progress. This is an issue that must remain central to all analyses of either Pynchon or Benjamin. The major implication here, that political freedom in modern America is as impossible as it was in Nazi Germany, is nevertheless disturbing, and very difficult to accept.

IV

The angel that appeared over Lübeck came only "to bear witness to a game of seduction. . . . because sending the RAF to make a terror raid against civilian Lübeck was the unmistakable long look that said hurry up and fuck me, that brought the rockets hard and screaming, the A4s, which were to've been fired anyway, a bit sooner instead" (GR 215). Here, more clearly than anywhere else in GR, Pynchon makes the correspondence between sex and war explicit. It is a problem that he returns to again and again, one implied in each of the many scenes depicting sado-masochism.

Engaging in any form of sado-masochism is, for Pynchon, antithetical to focusing on the Here and Now; it perverts what should be the most spontaneous of impulses, the sexual, into a staged and impersonal form of gratification. Sado-masochism is thus the ultimate imposition of order, the abandonment of freedom in the one sphere where the possibility for freedom is

greatest. Pynchon's use of sado-masochistic themes neatly illustrates Susan Sontag's observations in her essay "Fascinating Fascism":

The rituals of domination and enslavement being more and more practiced, the art that is more and more devoted to rendering their themes, are perhaps only a logical extension of an affluent society's tendency to turn every part of people's lives into a taste, a choice; to invite them to regard their very lives as a (life) style. In all societies up to now, sex has mostly been an activity (something to do, without thinking about it). But once sex becomes a taste, it is perhaps already on its way to becoming a self-conscious form of theater, which is what sado-masochism is about: a form of gratification that is both violent and indirect, very mental.¹¹

The sexual partner is divested of animation, exists only as a prop to gratification. This is one of the central issues about which all of Pynchon's fiction revolves, the terms having been set most explicitly in this passage from V.:

As for V., she recognized--perhaps aware of her own progression toward inanimateness--the fetish of Mélanie and the fetish of herself to be one. As all inanimate objects, to one victimized by them, are alike. It was a variation on [. . .] the single melody, banal and exasperating, of all Romanticism since the Middle Ages: "the act of love and the act of death are one." Dead at last, they would be one with the inanimate universe and with each other. Love-play until then thus becomes an impersonation of the inanimate, a transvestism not between sexes but between quick and dead; human and fetish. (V 410)

Imperialistic warfare in Pynchon's fiction becomes the national expression of sado-masochism, of the obsession with imposing order. The OOOOO with Gottfried inside is the phallus, womb, and coffin of, as Blicero says, "that special Death the West had invented." Slothrop is thus the herald announcing that "'American Death has come to occupy Europe'" (GR 722). Throughout the bulk of GR, the reason given for Slothrop's erections anticipating the rocket strikes in London has to do with the behavioral conditioning done by Jamf. But toward the novel's end, this notion is given an interesting twist:

"There never was a Dr. Jamf," opines world-renowned analyst Mickey Wuxtry-Wuxtry--"Jamf was only a fiction, to help him explain what he felt so terribly, so immediately in his genitals for those rockets each time exploding in the sky . . . to help him deny what he could not possibly admit: that he might be in

love, in sexual love, with his, and his race's, death." (GR 738)

Modern warfare, then, can be seen as an expression of the progressive alienation of the individual from the Here and Now, Love and Earth. As we have seen, Benjamin saw men return from the First World War "grown silent--not richer, but poorer in communicable experience" (I 84). He elaborates on this at the end of "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction": "Mankind, which in Homer's time was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, now is one for itself. Its self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order" (I 242). No, Benjamin does not say "sexual pleasure," and perhaps to say that "sexual" is in many ways truer to his thinking will seem fatuous. But the argument is nevertheless an interesting one. "Benjamin's friends all agree," writes Peter Demetz in his introduction to Reflections,

that he was a man of quiet, fastidious, and extremely polite manners, and yet there was in his character and in his thought a half-hidden thirst for violence (more poetic than political), ill according with his life in the library and his later will to believe in revolutionary discipline. His studies of Sorel and his defense of anarchist spontaneity (as suggested in his essay on violence) against any Marxist "programming" of action reveal something in him that precedes all political theory and perhaps has its origins in a mystic vision of a Messiah who comes with a sword to change the world into white-and-golden perfection. His recurrent images of barricades, exploding dynamite, and the furies of civil war (as, for instance, in the essay on Surrealism) have an almost sexual if not ontological quality, and should not be obfuscated by pious admirers who would like to disregard the deep fissures in his thought and personality.¹²

But it is not quite fair to say that Benjamin led a "life in the library." As Demetz himself points out, an "early fascination with the other world of the red lights" is clear in Benjamin's autobiographical "Berlin Chronicle" (R xviii). The vision of Benjamin wandering through the cities of which he was to write, or experimenting with hashish, is anything but that of the stereotypical academic. And it is more than a coincidence that Sontag's essay on fascism should be followed by the one on Benjamin that also provides the title of her collection, "Under the Sign of Saturn." Perhaps she was thinking of Benjamin's concern about the "violation of the masses, whom Fascism, with its Führer cult, forces to their knees" (I 241).

Even if we reject the suggestion that an undefinable sexual element lurks behind all of Benjamin's writing, still it is true

that the basic terms he establishes in "The Work of Art" for the political usurpation of the reproducible visual arts provide a number of useful insights into Pynchon's use of sado-masochistic themes.¹³ Benjamin's worries about film and photography in this essay are explicitly anticipated in "The Author as Producer" in his discussion of "New Matter-of-fact" photography:

For it has succeeded in transforming even abject poverty, by recording it in a fashionably perfected manner, into an object of enjoyment. For if it is an economic function of photography to restore to mass consumption, by fashionable adaptation, subjects that had earlier withdrawn themselves from it--springtime, famous people, foreign countries--it is one of its political functions to renew from within--that is, fashionably--the world as it is.¹⁴

Photography can thus be a means of reinforcing the status quo: social conditions can be depicted in a beautiful, static manner that withdraws them from the sphere of social change. The other major problem posed by this passage is that of "mass consumption." Benjamin was always attracted by the possibility of the anarchistic violence of the revolutionary masses--of the spontaneous dissolution of the individual into the mass. But he was also, and to a greater extent, obsessed with the problem of how to retain uniqueness when confronted with the somnolent, homogeneous masses. The decline of the story and the rise of information, the decline of the value of individual experience, are certainly factors that encourage political somnolence and social homogeneity, but they do so crudely when compared with the masses' passive apprehension of the film.

The crucial argument in "The Work of Art" is that film, because of its inherent reproducibility, because no "original" exists, does not possess an "aura."¹⁵ And "the instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice--politics" (I 224). Like "The Storyteller," this essay cannot be read without an understanding of Benjamin's consistency in seeing "a new beauty in what is vanishing" (I 87). For what withers away in the age of mechanical reproduction is, not merely the aura, but art itself. Whether it be the fascists aestheticizing politics or the communists politicizing art, either way the concept of art is irreversibly transformed.

Unmistakably, reproduction as offered by picture magazines and newsreels differs from the image seen by the unarmed eye. Uniqueness and permanence are as closely linked in the latter as are transitoriness and reproducibility in the former. To pry an object from its shell, to destroy its aura, is the mark of a perception whose "sense of the universal equality of

things" has increased to such a degree that it extracts it even from a unique object by means of reproduction. Thus is manifested in the field of perception what in the theoretical sphere is noticeable in the increasing importance of statistics. (I 223)

Through film, through the "sense of the universal equality of things," uniqueness and freedom are lost. As Benjamin suggests and Pynchon posits, this can even affect sexuality:

How many other men, shuffling out again into depression Berlin, carried the same image back from Alpdrücken to some drab fat excuse for a bride? How many shadow-children would be fathered on Erdmann that night?

It was never a real possibility for Pöckler that Leni might get pregnant. But looking back, he knew that had to be the night, Alpdrücken night, that Ilse was conceived. They fucked so seldom anymore. It was not hard to pinpoint. That's how it happened. A film. How else? (GR 397-98)

Here the capabilities of mechanical reproduction have precisely the same outcome as the adoption of sado-masochistic scenarios: individuality is destroyed; the distinction between man and machine begins to fall away; freedom is abandoned. The abandonment of freedom, mankind's progressive self-alienation, receives its ultimate expression in modern warfare:

Imperialistic war is a rebellion of technology which collects, in the form of "human material," the claims to which society has denied its natural material. Instead of draining rivers, society directs a human stream into a bed of trenches; instead of dropping seeds from airplanes, it drops incendiary bombs over cities; and through gas warfare the aura is abolished in a new way. (I 242)

V

Feedback, smile-to-smile, adjustments, waverings: what it damps out to is we will never know each other. Beaming, strangers, la-la-la, off to listen to the end of a man we both loved and we're strangers at the films, condemned to separate rows, aisles, exits, homegoings.

Far away in another corridor a loud drill-bit strains, smokes, just before snapping. Cafeteria trays and steelware rattle, an innocent and kind sound behind familiar regions of steam, fat at the edge of souring, cigarette smoke, washwater, disinfectant--a cafeteria in the middle of the day.

There are things to hold on to. . . . (GR 663)

The "we" of the first paragraph is Katje and Enzian; the man they loved is Blicero. As in his meeting with Tchitcherine on the bridge, there is a fissure here between Enzian and some one whose life has much in common with his own. But the disparateness in the first paragraph is oddly balanced by the second. Taken individually, each element of the latter is unextraordinary, even ugly, yet together they form a sensuous network in which each loses its individual existence. The scene is a comfortable, unique, almost ritualistic one: it possesses an aura. The final sentence, the last of the frame, is anything but ironic, echoing Enzian's words of four pages earlier: "There are things to hold to. None of it may look real, but some of it is. Really!" (GR 659).

The next section begins with the statement that we "will want cause and effect" (GR 663), after which the narrative voice again becomes heavily ironic. The distinction thus established is again between spatial and linear modes of perception. Throughout GR, all concepts of linearity--indissolubly bound with the idea of progress--collapse again and again. The vision is precisely the same throughout the "Theses," but especially here: "Social Democratic theory, and even more its practice, have been formed by a conception of progress which did not adhere to reality but made dogmatic claims" (I 260). And so in GR, where "progress" is applicable to the individual as well as to the strictly political sphere, Blicero plans his transcendence: "But his eyes are too dangerously spaced beyond the words, stunned irreversibly away from real Gottfried, away from the weak, the failed smells of real breath, by barriers stern and clear as ice, and hopeless as the one-way flow of European time. . . . (GR 724).

The central problem addressed in both the "Theses" and GR is the same: how to subvert linear time by applying a spatial understanding to it. Benjamin writes: "The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again" (I 255). Thus any attempt to subvert linear time, to capture the past, no matter how successful it may seem, will in the end fail. Pynchon fictionalizes this theory in a passage about Thanatz:

He lost Gottfried, he lost Bianca, and he is only beginning, this late into it, to see that they are the same loss, to the same winner. By now he's forgotten the sequence in time. Doesn't know which child he lost first, or even--hornet clouds of memory welling up--even if they aren't two names, different names, for the same child . . . but then in the crash of others' flotsam, sharp edges, and high-spin velocities you understand, he finds he can't hold on to this thought for long: soon he's floundering in the open water again. But he'll remember that he held it for a little, saw its texture and color, felt it against

the side of his face as he woke from a space of sleeping near it--that the two children, Gottfried and Bianca, are the same. . . . (GR 671-72)

In this structure, Benjamin (not unlike Proust) finds the salvation of the past:

Thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well. Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock, by which it crystallizes into a monad. A historical materialist approaches a historical subject only where he encounters it as a monad. In this structure he recognizes the sign of a Messianic cessation of happening, or, put differently, a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past. (I 262-63)

Slothrop, too, could redeem the past after seeing the Rainbow, when "he could make it all fit" (GR 626), but perhaps more interesting here is the idea of a cessation of happening. In *V.*, the lights go out on Benny twice--just after he shoots the alligator he has pursued into Fairing's Parish (V 123), and when he and Brenda are running through the streets of Valletta: "Presently, sudden and in silence, all illumination in Valletta, houselight and streetlight, was extinguished" (V 455). Hugh Godolphin goes to the South Pole because he "'had begun to think that there, at one of the only two motionless places on this gyrating world, I might have peace to solve Vheissu's riddle'" (V 205). In GR, Byron learns Silence (GR 650), and at the dinner party Mexico tries to sabotage, "the listener starts actually hearing the pauses instead of the notes" (GR 713). At novel's end, the screen goes blank. And we also learn that

at night now and then, in some part of the dark hemisphere, because of eddies in the Soniferous Aether, there will come to pass a very shallow pocket of no-sound. For a few seconds, in a particular place, nearly every night somewhere in the World, sound-energy from Outside is shut off. The roaring of the sun stops. (GR 695)

Anyone who should fall under this pocket suddenly finds himself with an extraordinary receptivity, "hearing, for the first time, the mighty river of his blood, the Titan's drum of his heart" (GR 697). Among the places this pocket is likely to fall is "exactly around a seated individual in a working-class restaurant where they hose the place out at 3 every morning" (GR 695). Joining the stranger at this table is

better than cringing the rest of your life under the great Vacuum in the sky they have taught you, and a sun whose silence you never get to hear.

What if there is no Vacuum? Or if there is--what if They're using it on you? What if They find it convenient to preach an island of life surrounded by a void? Not just the Earth in space, but your own individual life in time? What if it's in Their interest to have you believing that? (GR 697)

Much of the novel poises here, at the convergence of the Here and Now in a preterite place where you can discover that your life is no longer surrounded by a void. The cessation of the sun's roaring is thus a moment of complete anarchy when the ordinary strictures of time and space, and, most important, those of the political world, Their world, are suspended. Earlier, we learn of the Fire of Paradise, "operationally extinct," but still surfacing occasionally: "Places where the motors never come close enough to be loud, and there are trees outside along the street. Inner rooms and older faces developing under light falling through a skylight, yellower, later in the year" (GR 119). Pynchon's project of redemption depends on an understanding of time that allows for the reception of transparent moments when the ordinary flow of time is no barrier to an almost instinctive understanding of the past.

There has been much debate about the meaning of Benjamin's discussion of Messianism, an issue raised at six points in the "Theses." One is in reference to the cessation of happening; another reference is in Thesis II: "Our coming was expected on earth. Like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a weak Messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim" (I 254). Yet another is in Thesis VI:

In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it. The Messiah comes not only as the redeemer, he comes as the subduer of Antichrist. Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious. (I 255)

Benjamin's interest in each of these passages, as in so much that he wrote, is the rescuing of the past from the overwhelming flow of time. But no man is the Messiah: any attempt to subdue Antichrist, to capture the oppressed past, is doomed to fail because homogeneous, empty time cannot be subverted for more than just a moment. In this way, the Messianic power of any generation is "weak."

A similar structure of weak Messianism pervades GR. This is dealt with most clearly when Roger and Jessica go to a church one evening before Christmas (GR 127ff). After a heavily ironic paragraph that tells of the impossibility of redeeming the

world, the narrative is shifted into second person, and we are counseled to embrace the New Baby anyway: "As if it were you who could, somehow, save him. For the moment not caring who you're supposed to be registered as. For the moment anyway, no longer who the Caesars say you are" (GR 136). Later in the novel there is this description of the bugs at Sure Bummer's: "The bugs' atmosphere ends about an inch from the floor, an ideal humidity, darkness, stability of temperature. Nobody bothers them. There is an unspoken agreement about not stomping on bugs in Sure's place" (GR 621). This echoes an earlier description of the world of "Christmas bugs":

A tranquil world: the temperature and humidity staying nearly steady, the day's cycle damped to only a soft easy sway of light, gold to antique-gold to shadows, and back again. The crying of the infant reached you, perhaps, as bursts of energy from the invisible distance, nearly unsensed, often ignored. Your savior, you see. . . . (GR 174)

In Thesis XVIII A, Benjamin writes that the historical materialist "grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one." Thus he establishes a conception of the present as the "'time of the now' which is shot through with chips of Messianic time" (I 263). Again, Benjamin has provided terms for understanding the ways Pynchon uses his own version of the Jetztzeit or "chronometric Now." "The more you dwell in the past and in the future," Pynchon writes, "the thicker your bandwidth, the more solid your persona. But the narrower your sense of Now, the more tenuous you are" (GR 509). This is the theory by which Slothrop disintegrates. Later he becomes "a crossroad" (GR 626). He exits from the novel in a photograph on the cover of an album by The Fool:

There is no way to tell which of the faces is Slothrop's: the only printed credit that might apply to him is "Harmonica, kazoo--a friend." But knowing his Tarot, we would expect to look among the Humility, among the gray and preterite souls, to look for him adrift in the hostile light of the sky, the darkness of the sea. . . . (GR 742)

Slothrop himself becomes a chip of Messianic time, occasionally breaking back into the continuum of time and space. His power for redemption is weak: at the end he plays the harmonica and kazoo, somewhat effective, but finally unsuccessful, subversive instruments which appear throughout the text. This interpretation of Slothrop is reinforced by the last moment Blicero and Gottfried, with all the religious overtones his name carries, face each other alone:

If there is still hope for Gottfried here in this wind-beat moment, then there is hope elsewhere. The

scene itself must be read as a card: what is to come. Whatever has happened since to the figures in it (roughly drawn in soiled white, army gray, spare as a sketch on a ruined wall) it is preserved, though it has no name, and, like The Fool, no agreed assignment in the deck. (GR 724)

For both Pynchon and Benjamin, taking advantage of these stray moments is no easy task; it requires the utmost attention. Losing oneself in time is akin to losing oneself in space: "Not to find one's way in a city," writes Benjamin in "Berlin Chronicle,"

may well be uninteresting and banal. It requires ignorance--nothing more. But to lose oneself in a city--as one loses oneself in a forest--that calls for quite a different schooling. Then, signboards and street names, passers-by, roofs, kiosks, or bars must speak to the wanderer like a cracking twig under his feet in the forest, like the startling call of a bittern in the distance, like the sudden stillness of a clearing with a lily standing erect at its center.¹⁶

Until the next moment has arrived, we do not know what it will bring. A chip of Messianic time may appear anywhere. Thus at each moment we must be ready for the coming of the Messiah, or the fall of the Rocket. The "Theses" ends here:

We know that the Jews were prohibited from investigating the future. The Torah and the prayers instruct them in remembrance, however. This stripped the future of its magic, to which all those succumb who turn to the soothsayers for enlightenment. This does not imply, however, that for the Jews the future turned into homogeneous, empty time. For every second of time was the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter. (I 264)

VI

Peter Demetz calls Benjamin's "The Destructive Character" an "ironic self-exploration" (R xv). "Because he sees ways everywhere," Benjamin writes, "[the destructive character] always positions himself at crossroads. No moment can know what the next will bring. What exists he reduces to rubble, not for the sake of the rubble, but for that of the way leading through it."¹⁷ Benjamin saw European civilization in ruins; he was both irrevocably attached to and repulsed by all that happened around him. Intellectually, he always positioned himself at crossroads, never committing himself to any religious or political creed. This is indeed a destructive stance, allowing no room for plans, goals or progress of any kind. The way leading through the rubble is finally nothing but wanderings back through the ruins, combing back through the past, waiting

for it to come alive in the present. Slothrop's disintegration is similarly destructive: it attests to the failure of an entire way of life. Both Pynchon and Benjamin look for something to affirm in this world, and both turn to the Here and Now. But this affirmation is so fragile that it cannot, by its very nature, influence the political world in any meaningful way.

In "The Critique of Violence," Benjamin envisions political history as the oscillation of lawmaking and law-preserving violence,¹⁸ thus paving the way for his more extreme statement in Thesis VII: "There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is not free of barbarism, barbarism taints also the manner in which it was transmitted" (I 256). As Fredric Jameson comments,

Benjamin's slogan is a hard saying, and not only for liberal and apoliticizing critics of art and literature, for whom it spells the return of class realities and the painful recollection of the dark underside of even the most seemingly innocent and "life-enhancing" masterpieces of the canon. For a certain radicalism also, Benjamin's formulation comes as a rebuke and a warning against the facile reappropriations of the classics as humanistic expressions of this or that historically "progressive" force.¹⁹

There is little doubt that, had Benjamin lived to see the enthusiastic reception of his work over the last twenty or so years, he would not have been overjoyed. Yes, he would have thought that he was finally getting some of the credit due him, but he knew better than anyone else that, for every text that becomes part of an established canon, there exist many others that have been passed over.

Critics of Pynchon, as well as those of Benjamin, would do well to keep this last point in mind, for the deliberate eschewing of institutional and ideological commitments represents much more than a shared eccentricity. Institutions propagate traditions, and traditions constantly threaten to overwhelm the present, as both Pynchon and Benjamin define it. For both, any institutional ties represent a kind of slavery, a deliberate abandonment of freedom. But by no means does either of them pretend to stand outside this structure; thus in the very fact of publication, in writing with the hope of being published, they both admit that they themselves participate in a system of oppression, unable to incorporate the anarchy of individual moments fully into their own lives. This participation probably accounts in part for the melancholy that marks the work of both men. And perhaps it is this melancholy that finally turns them both to the past, to look for value in that which has been passed over. Having found what they think

is valuable, each weaves it into a net of fragile and usually overlooked possibilities. But the self-doubt is never absent. If Benjamin was mocking himself in "The Destructive Character," perhaps Pynchon's ironic self-exploration is to be found in the passage about the pockets of no-sound: "There's nothing so loathsome as a sentimental surrealist" (GR 696).

"Only in contrast to the helpless compromises of 'sentiment,'" Benjamin writes in "Surrealism" in 1929, "are certain central features of Surrealism, indeed of the Surrealist tradition, to be understood."²⁰ Here Benjamin invokes "Stavrogin's Confession" from The Possessed, which

contains a justification of evil in which certain motifs of Surrealism are more powerfully expressed than by any of its present spokesmen. . . . For Stavrogin is a Surrealist avant la lettre. No one else understood, as he did, how naïve is the view of the Philistines that goodness, for all the manly virtue of those who practice it, is God-inspired; whereas evil stems entirely from our spontaneity, and in it we are independent and self-sufficient beings. (R 187)

Thus Benjamin sees in Surrealism a "cult of evil" that "centers about a violation of children" (R 187), a theme familiar enough to readers of Pynchon. Yet besides joining him in a sanely executed suicide, Benjamin shares little with Stavrogin. For all his waverings, Stavrogin is the consummate man of action by comparison with Benjamin, who, though calling for "the revolutionary intelligentsia . . . to make contact with the proletarian masses" (R 191), was himself devoted to solitary contemplation. But not of abstract questions: "we penetrate the mystery only to the degree that we recognize it in the everyday world, by virtue of a dialectical optic that perceives the everyday as impenetrable, the impenetrable as everyday" (R 190). In this optic can occur a "profane illumination," a concept which seems to anticipate the encounter with a monad posited in the "Theses." Benjamin attempts to link this profane illumination, as well as the entire Surrealist movement, to the Revolution: "[Breton] was the first to perceive the revolutionary energies that appear in the 'outmoded,' in the first iron constructions, the first factory buildings, the earliest photos, the objects that have begun to be extinct" (R 181). But this cannot be taken at face value because, though Benjamin is perhaps speaking of revolutionary action, his own attachment to things, as evidenced by such a work as "Unpacking My Library,"²¹ strikes the reader as flowing more from a kind of antiquarian attachment than from any feeling we would usually define as revolutionary. And even here in the essay on Surrealism, which is fittingly subtitled "The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia," Benjamin reveals that the revolutionary action he is thinking of will not lead to the creation of a new political order:

And that means pessimism all along the line. Absolutely. Mistrust in the fate of literature, mistrust in the fate of freedom, mistrust in the fate of European humanity, but three times mistrust in all reconciliation: between classes, between nations, between individuals. And unlimited trust only in I. G. Farben and the peaceful perfection of the air force. But what now, what next? (R 191)

The answer is that of Rimbaud, of the Surrealists: a life of Saturnine wanderings, both physical and intellectual. It is only through posturing and positioning, always searching for a new perspective on the world, constantly complicating one's own thinking, that Pynchon and Benjamin see room for growth, for change.

We may speculate about what Pynchon may publish next, but Benjamin's career gives us no clue: Pynchon recently passed the age at which Benjamin committed suicide. To apply Benjamin's discussion of death in "The Storyteller" to his own life, he is forever to be a man who committed suicide at the Spanish border at the age of forty-eight. His suicide so shocked the authorities at the border that they allowed his travelling companions to emigrate illegally (I 18). If Benjamin is right, if the meaning of life is revealed in death, then it is perhaps Pynchon who has the final word on Benjamin's inadvertently valiant suicide:

"Dying a weird death," Slothrop's Visitor by this time may be scrawled lines of carbon on a wall, voices down a chimney, some human being out on the road, "the object of life is to make sure you die a weird death. To make sure that however it finds you, it will find you under very weird circumstances. To live that kind of life. . . . (GR 742)

But if a movie is ever made of Benjamin's life, perhaps the final frame will not be of his suicide, but of him stepping into the Paris night, thinking of the great Arcades project he would never have the chance to finish, trying to lose himself as he had in so many cities before, seeking what Pynchon has Slothrop find just a few years later in the Rue Rossini:

the best feeling dusk in a foreign city can bring:
just where the sky's light balances the electric
lamplight in the street, just before the first star,
some promise of events without cause, surprises, a
direction at right angles to every direction his life
has been able to find up till now. (GR 253)

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Notes

¹ Marcus Smith and Khachig Tölölyan, "The New Jeremiad: Gravity's Rainbow," Critical Essays on Thomas Pynchon, ed. Richard Pearce (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1981) 171.

² Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," Illuminations, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1968) 261.

³ Both also in Illuminations.

⁴ Thomas Pynchon, V. (1963; New York: Perennial, 1986) 290.

⁵ Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," Illuminations, 159.

⁶ Hannah Arendt, "Walter Benjamin: 1892-1940," Illuminations, 19.

⁷ The personal similarity between Benjamin and Pynchon's heroes is quite interesting. In "A Berlin Chronicle" in Reflections, cited below, Benjamin gives this self-characterization:

It is likely that no one ever masters anything in which he has not known impotence; and if you agree, you will also see that this impotence comes not at the beginning of or before the struggle with the subject, but in the heart of it. Which brings me to the middle period of my life in Berlin, extending from the whole of my later childhood to my entrance to the university: a period of impotence before the city. This had two sources. First was a very poor sense of direction; but if it was thirty years before the distinction between left and right had become visceral to me, and before I had acquired the art of reading a street map, I was far from appreciating the extent of my ineptitude; and if anything was capable of increasing my disinclination to perceive this fact, it was the insistence with which my mother thrust it under my nose. (4)

⁸ Benjamin, "The Image of Proust," Illuminations, 213.

⁹ Zohn's translation:
My wing is ready for flight,
I would like to turn back.

If I stayed timeless time,
I would have little luck.

(I 257)

10 Thomas Pynchon, Gravity's Rainbow (New York: Viking, 1973; Penguin, 1987) 151.

11 Susan Sontag, "Fascinating Fascism," Under the Sign of Saturn, (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1980) 104-05.

12 Peter Demetz, Introduction, Reflections, trans. Edmund Jephcott, ed. Peter Demetz (New York: Harcourt, 1978) xli.

13 Like the "Theses," "The Work of Art" generates a good deal of controversy. Ostensibly, Benjamin's argument is that film can be used to lead the masses to political action. But the essay makes much more sense when read from the opposite perspective: his arguments all too clearly suggest that the hypnotic effect of film is of much greater service to those already in power who wish to manipulate the masses. Considering that "The Work of Art" is contemporaneous with Leni Riefenstahl's greatest work, it is difficult to believe that Benjamin could have had any faith in the revolutionary character of film. His position is perhaps just that, a position, taken for the sake of a new perspective, for imagining an ideal in order to call an existing order into question.

14 Benjamin, "The Author as Producer," Reflections, 230.

15 Benjamin's definition of "aura": "a 'unique phenomenon of a distance however close it may be'" (I 243).

16 Benjamin, "Berlin Chronicle," Reflections, 8-9.

17 Benjamin, "The Destructive Character," Reflections, 303.

18 Benjamin, "The Critique of Violence," Reflections, 300.

19 Fredric Jameson, The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1981) 299.

20 Benjamin, "Surrealism," Reflections, 186.

21 In Illuminations.