

DEPTHS BEING Kevin Magee



“A kindred problem arose with the advent of new velocities, which gave life an altered rhythm.... For example, in posters. ‘These images of a day or an hour, bleached by the elements, charcoaled by urchins, scorched by the sun—although others are sometimes collected even before they have dried—symbolize to a higher degree even than the newspapers the sudden, shock-filled, multiform life that carries us away.’ Maurice

Talmeyr, *La Cité du sang* (Paris, 1901). In the early days of the poster, there was as yet no law to regulate the posting of bills or to provide protection for posters and indeed from posters; so one could wake up some morning to find one's window placarded.... and it is not surprising that a chronicler adds apocalyptic prophecies to this connection and foretells a time when people will have been blinded by the effects of too much electric light and maddened by the tempo of news reporting. From Jacques Fabien, *Paris en songe* (Paris, 1863).” [B2,1].

The window, the screen. The screen, the monitor, displaces the window as sign for the world philosophy would know as exteriority. For the future of the text bearing the poetic: “all that one might have been in this world, one is in another.” (Blanqui, cited by Benjamin, [D7Da]). That other world, neither the one on the other side of the window, nor the electrical connections materializing in the appearance of the appearance on the screen, but the future towards which poetry directs itself, in the event of an actual reading taking place, indeterminately, one poet reading another for the writing to make new writing, that is Blanqui's ‘another world’ (the intention of the original phrase altered beyond recognition). For the future life of the work: “Our continued life depends on that of the planet.” (Blanqui). “The heroism of Baudelaire, who conjures a phantasmagoria of modernity from the misery of the Second Empire.” [D9,2]. Is this sentence that different from the notion of the Desert of the Real? For the latter phrase, artificiality must compensate: “remarkable

propensity for structures that convey and connect—as, of course, the arcades do. And this connecting or mediating function has a literal and spatial as well as a figurative and stylistic bearing.” [E2a,4]. Thus, “an attempt to dictate art forms to technology ... always results in kitsch” [E2a7]). This may well be the function of the digital image, at least for as long as this image does not problematize the conditions of its capture and exposure. The camera would have to turn on itself, which is impossible; tools are not reflexive. The screen, also, is a tool, and tools have no ontology. Can the window, then, never be replaced by the screen? “Articulation results only from doors and windows.” [F8a].

Dark fiber. “This perplexity derived in part from the abundance of technical processes and new materials that had suddenly become available. The effort to assimilate them more thoroughly led to mistakes and failures. On the other hand, these vain attempts are the most authentic proof that technological production, at the beginning, was in the grip of dreams. (Not architecture alone but all technology is, at certain stages, evidence of a collective dream.)” [F1a,2]. Do Haussmann’s Paris boulevards offer an analogy for the communications networks? “I read, in a book which enjoyed great success last year, that the streets of Paris had been enlarged to permit ideas to circulate and, above all, regiments to pass.” (Paris nouveau, etc., 1868 [E4,4].

Benjamin's commentary preceding the citation of a passage from *Capital*: "There is talk of renewing art by beginning with forms. But are not forms the true mystery of nature, which reserves to itself the right to remunerate—precisely through them—the accurate, the objective, the logical solution to a problem posed in purely objective terms? When the wheel was invented, enabling continuous forward motion over the ground, wouldn't someone there have been able to say, with a certain justification, 'And now, into the bargain, it's round—it's in the form of a wheel?' Are not all great conquests in the field of forms ultimately a matter of technical discoveries? Only now are we beginning to guess what forms—and they will be determinative for our epoch—lie hidden in machines." [F2a,5].

How difficult is it to distinguish the quotation from Marx from Benjamin's writing before it, writing as near to the quoted passage as possible, so that the commentary nearly reproduces the original. The researcher reads the reference, "Passage is from Marx, *Kapital*, vol. 1 (Hamburg 1922), p. 347n.," and reflexively scans the entire passage for where the quotation marks begin and end, the mirroring of the anterior text is that accomplished, thus accomplished. Complicating matters is the problem of translation. The Marx-in-German cited from the Hamburg 1922 text is not the Marx-in-English referenced in the footnote provided by the editors on page 963 of the Harvard Benjamin-in-English: "Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling (1887; rpt. New York: International

Publishers, 1967), p. 362n. 'Form of the tool,' at the end, translates *Körperform des Werkzeugs* (literally, 'bodily form'), and this is the term taken up by Benjamin in parenthesis." Marx-in-English, 1887: "It is only after considerable development of the science of mechanics, and accumulated practical experience, that the form of the machine becomes settled entirely in accordance with mechanical principles, and emancipated from the traditional form of the tool that gave rise to it." What is the German for the 'form of the machine' if 'form of the tool' translates literally as 'bodily form' or 'corporeal form'? 'physical form'? 'material form'? The unhanding of the machine-form from the hand-tool that made it, and the manufactured form enters into its artificial life fraught with the problems of value and commodity identity (the appearance of the appearance, or "artificially compressed durability and tenacity"? [F3,7]).

Can the 'moment of mutation' from material to immaterial forms be stated as the end of a process, at the end of a process, or does the objectifying process itself consist of a continual movement between one and the other condition? Is the immateriality of the made thing ever completely separate from the materiality of its making?

In F3,2, art (in quotation marks) is identified as a category "which the nineteenth century ... imposed on the creations of intellectual productivity." This is a devastating critique of romanticism, though classicism can hardly be claimed as its

other. The poles are being torn apart, though in other places Benjamin allows the voice of Valéry to speak against the spontaneous impulse and for tradition, classicism, “the fatal notion of rejecting the deepest understanding of technical procedures, ... the consciously sustained and orderly carrying through of a work ... —all for the sake of the spontaneous impulses of the individual sensibility. The idea of creating works of lasting value lost force and gave way, in most minds, to the desire to astonish; art was condemned to a whole series of breaks with the past. There arose an automatic audacity, which became as obligatory as tradition had been.” (‘Autour de Corot’ [B8,2]).

If machinic processes problematize the existence of an ‘individual sensibility’ (‘the individualism of the consumer’?), does it follow the possibility that ‘works of lasting value’ are also lost? This would appear to be the association here, monumentalist. Ephemerality as strategy to evade assigned values? (Is Mandelstam writing as a classicist, or migrant, when he suggests that poetry never actually enters the narration of historical structures which is culture?). Poetry as the work of language migration, which can be said to exist only in the space where one language tries to translate another. The appearance of the appearance that the word-work is for as long as it exists only in the language in which it is written, if it can be said to exist there, as object, value, commodity identity, if the moment of the mutation can never be grasped when the graphic sign inscribes

its phonetic shadow and surrenders the corporeality of the voice intersecting with the sign past of forms to the apparition of a separate life, an artificial life, circulating, disseminating, as text and written work carrying time and labor, caring for time and labor.

Even without the machine, how could 'individual sensibility' stand as anything more than a convenient notion to support the suture of the signature? All that is authorial in the impulse and will to make from a mass of materials some form or another gives to time the shape and condition of the language existing at the historical moment as much as that moment can be interpreted by the one receiving it, the signature declaring that someone received it, even a signature as absent of a life around 1350-1400 as Langland's, "How can I see my time?" Should it be accepted that in addition to other struggles the work of making a cultural artifact and making it available to the time in which it is made is also a site of class conflict, would ephemerality or monumentalism serve that work? What is served by the work? What is sought by the work to serve? Interpretation is a struggle for assigning the formal and social interests served by the work. The more-than-itself where all indeterminacy floods intention and appropriation is posed as possibility might be what is meant by the 'timeliness' of the work of art.

For the work that bears the signature of its archaic and pre-technological procedures, its usefulness could be its backwardness emerging from the condition of refusal and resistance to machinic insinuations and dominations inherent in the code factory where there is a will to produce manufactured identities, avatars, projections, masks—the play of being in an artificial world. The flawed infinity of numerical data streams and the digital image and the space that it is constructed from them. See, for example, “On the Uselessness of Mathematics for Assuring the Stability of Buildings” (Paris, 1805). [F4,3].

What could be more primitive than to resist and even attempt to oppose the subsuming artificiality of forms and discourses, as the primitive is almost always overpowered by technologies of the will to master and command. By primitive might be meant nothing more archaic than ‘individual sensibility,’ especially if that person or thing attempted to make works that would serve the interests of a nascent social class and politics, especially a revolutionary politics. Art is never served by politics. The catastrophe of the politicization of art in the twentieth century. But Benjamin writes that art itself was a category imposed on the work of the intellect in the nineteenth century, and the philological standard, that a primitive work like Langland’s doesn’t know whether or not it is art, as though it were made by a kind of folk Dante, when the contrast might help remove Dante from the petrified forest of the museum and academy, where the display operates as a distancing device which makes an object

of history when it is history itself—as if there were such a thing or thing-in-itself—that is needed now to infuse and transform into something greater than itself the moment of the mutation, the unheard-of event, arriving. “We cannot simply oppose the way the thing is ‘in itself’ and the way it appears from our constrained, partial perspective: this appearance has more weight than the thing in itself, because it designates the way the thing in question is inscribed into the network of its relations with others.” (Žižek, 182). Whether the subject in question is a book or person or period of time, nothing can be known of the subject other than the appearances that know themselves as interpretations. Does interpretation have to mean philology? The phrase spoken from the podium in Cleveland, “panorama of waste and anarchy,” a nineteenth-century language addressed to twenty-first-century wars on the frontiers bordering empires. The translation of the Light for the Enlightenment in Negri’s article on Leopardi comes from standing in the Decembrist museum in Chita and viewing the eighteenth-century volumes of Rousseau, Diderot and Voltaire in a bookcase, and they were not behind glass. The uncanny moment when one can almost touch an idea. Artifacts arranged in a room, exposed to time and decay, as though whatever life that once existed in them could come again to life only at the moment of their disintegration and combination into new forms, “functional moments in the life of the economy.” [F2,9]. In the museum in Chita the poem by Pushkin on the wall celebrating the Decembrists and the phrase in that poem appropriated by the workers movement in 1917.

Or does a phrase such as Žižek's, "the shattering effect of the digitalization of our daily lives," concede too much to the new that only appears new, when the following passage about iron might apply equally to electric light and its simulated landscapes? "In the perspective of historical reflection, these are 'ferments' of a disquieting instability. No other building material offers anything remotely similar. We stand here at the beginning of a development that is sure to proceed at a furious pace.... The ... conditions of the material ... are volatilized in 'limitless possibilities.'" (A.G. Meyer, *Eisenbauten*, p. 11. [F3a,1]). The exclamation after the citation, "Iron as revolutionary building material!" might be interpreted as either 1934 Vertov or an ironizing of this specimen from the nineteenth-century's collective dream, anticipating a critique of the contemporary internet arcades, "whose walls have only secondarily the function of partitioning the hall; primarily, they serve as walls or facades for the commercial spaces within them." [F4,4]. Are the communications networks their *sinthome*, *nettimed* manifestations of a remote past that the dreaming collective cannot get free of without first freeing itself. From what? From the conception of the new? That final line in "L'Invitation au voyage" suffused in the brittle glow of the same enamel as the sentences of Flaubert, although the latter at least was able at last to write simply, visiting Jerusalem, about history and civilization, and the wars of the ages, noting in passing, in his diary, "big holes in the wall ... the top floors of the tower have disappeared." "The technical absolutism that is fundamental to

iron construction—and fundamental merely on account of the material itself—becomes apparent to anyone who recognizes the extent to which it contrasts with traditional conceptions of the value and utility of building materials [‘stone and ashlar, clay and tile, timber and beam’].” [F3a,4]. “The ‘triumph of exposed ironwork’ in the age of the genre: ‘It may be ... the ... enthusiasm for machine technology and the faith in the superior durability of its materials that explains why the attribute ‘iron’ is used ... whenever ... power and necessity are supposed to be manifest. Iron are the laws of nature, and iron is the ‘stride of the worker battalion’; the ... union of the German empire is supposedly made of iron, and so is ... the chancellor himself.’” Dolf Sternberger, *Panorama* [‘of waste and anarchy’] (Hamburg, 1938), p.31. [F8,5].

Does the note on ‘Exhibitions’ strike near a criticism of the contemporary international multimedia festival? “Industrial exhibitions as secret blueprint for museums. Art: industrial products projected into the past.” [G2a,6]. ““Think of the total work of art ... the century wanted to generate a vision of the human cosmos, as launched in a new movement.” “But these ‘premature syntheses’ also bespeak a persistent endeavor to close up the space of existence and of development. To prevent the ‘airing-out of the classes.’” [G2,3].

“Europe is off to view the merchandise,’ said Renan— contemptuously—of the 1855 exhibition.” Paul Morand, 1900 (Paris, 1931), p. 71. [G4,5].

“This year has been lost for propaganda,’ says a socialist orator at the congress of 1900.” Paul Morand, 1900 (Paris, 1931), p. 129. [G4,6].

Gloss on Marx’s ‘Well grubbed, Old Mole!’: “The mole is ... not the emblem of a single character. It is the emblem of a whole social period: the period of industry’s infancy, the Cyclopean period.... It is the ... allegorical expression of the absolute predominance of brute force over intellectual force.... Many estimable analogists find a marked resemblance between moles, which upturn the soil and pierce passages of subterranean communication,... and the monopolizers of railroads and stage routes.... The extreme nervous sensibility of the mole, which fears the light..., admirably characterizes the obstinate obscurantism of those monopolizers of banking and of transportation, who also fear the light.’ A. Toussenel, *Spirit of the Beasts of France*, trans. M. Edgeworth Lazarus (New York: Fowlers and Wells, 1852), pp. 140, 142.)” [G11,4].

The chapter on Baudelaire, where the arcades recede into facades for buildings that form, verbal forms—“tormented forms, bold forms”—resist and refuse, if the work of cultural construction is always a reconstruction, even a reparation, ‘the

narration of historical structures,' and for the role of the reader activated by Benjamin in this part of his book, an allegory for poetry arrives in the person of the enigma known more or less as the 'author' from the time that the first portraits of poets were printed on the title page of their books in the fifteenth century. "Courbet complained of the trouble he had completing the portrait of Baudelaire; the subject looked different from one day to the next." [J16a,9].

"The antithesis between allegory and myth has to be clearly developed. It was owing to the genius of allegory that Baudelaire did not succumb to the abyss of myth that gaped beneath his feet at every step." [J22.5]. This would include the myth of the poet. That the figure of the poet has no center, no essential belonging, may be suggested by the paragraph on sculpture, painting and film, quoting from the Salon de 1846: "The spectator who moves around the figure can choose a hundred different points of view, except the right one." [J22a,2]. A comment on the method of the Arcades Project itself, where voices from marginal and authoritative texts alike orbit around the the center of gravity that is the subject, viewing in the Baudelaire chapter the poetry as production site, unless this viewing is itself being questioned by the same method, as though the spectacle and its multiple views have problematized—thrown into crisis—whatever was once thought to have been the activity of reading a book of poems. "The very notion of the 'whole universe' thus presupposes the position of an external

observer, which is impossible to occupy. To put it in Gilles Deleuze's terms, what this means is absolute perspectivism: the distorting partial perspective is inscribed into the very material existence of things." [Žižek, 181]. The method of the Arcades Project, when it arrives at Baudelaire's book, reproduces the effect of the 'distorting partial perspective' by removing the act of reading from the practice of control over the material, in this case a book of poems, whose objective existence is established by the multiple and conflicting perspectives attempting to articulate the problem of its appearance in the world.

Dante as a figure that stands on the threshold of the change from scribal to print cultures and the apotheosis of the book of poetry as nothing less than revelatory scripture reproduced for the ages in the solid, physical, material object around which the centuries of commentary and conversion into tradition circle and recycle, without the book itself disintegrating. Baudelaire as a figure located by Benjamin in the heroic age of the book, where the threat of the arrival of a new book could motivate Gautier to write: "Today, the name of Baudelaire is brandished before us; we are told that when he publishes his poems, Musset, Laprade, and I will dissolve into thin air." [J18,3].

Perhaps it is not the poet that burns out, which is the prediction with which Gautier ends his paragraph, but the disintegrative energies unleashed by the arcades (Capital as its own gravedigger), which, if they are to be viewed from another

perspective than that of the threat of destruction, the same perspective as that from which Gautier views even the rumor of a Baudelaire, and instead as a development and advance in the history of cultural production, where the works of the ages may eventually materialize in a space of supra- or hyper-dimensionality, and where among other technological accomplishments the conception of time can be returned to human language and the strictest linguistic objectivity imaginable practiced in its works of the intellect which are never only art.

Mandelstam wrote that the poetic word stores history far more authentically than the manifold narrations which serve the construction of culture, whether bourgeois or proletarian culture. Poetry refuses to refer in either sphere, or in any sphere of identity definition imposed on the force of time in signs, and this is why Benjamin locates in the production of Baudelaire a contradictory figure, and why the shout of 'Demyan, Demyan!' has faded in the archive of false and wrong readings of poetry, although such false and wrong readings tend to be resurrected in times of acute historical crisis, so it is a shout that needs to be remembered, recorded in the transcript of the debate where Trotsky attacked it, and if Trotsky can no longer be read, at least in the way his texts have been read before, then reading Mandelstam translates Trotsky across the strict borders of discourses. The accusation used against him was correct: Mandelstam was a Trotskyist in his opposition to the

appropriation of the poetic for immediate political uses, such as the construction of cultural definitions, monumentalism.

What is uncanny about the raising of the statue in Vladivostok is that in the effort to remember and restore the suppressed contribution of a Western classicist to contemporary Russian culture, the false figure or partial figure of this poet returns while concealing within it the political history which no broadcast can be imagined projecting across this vast landscape spanning the Baltic and Black Seas to the Pacific. The discourse of the internationalism of the Left Opposition must continue to be suppressed, though it is buried in figure of Mandelstam, which figures, since the exact date of his death is unknown, and whose remains exist somewhere near Vladivostok in a mass grave. There is no possibility of a relic being reconstituted here. "The morning wind disperses the clouds of myth. Human beings and their affairs are exposed to view. The prerevolutionary dawn glimmers in this poem." [J22,4]. Funereal cypresses: "Barely sixty people followed the hearse in the sweltering heat; Banville and Asselineau, under a gathering storm, made beautiful speeches that nobody could hear. With the exception of Veillot in L'Univers, the press was cruel. Everything bore down on his remains. A gale dispersed his friends; his enemies ... called him 'mad.'" [J121.4].

Benjamin is always struggling with nostalgia, inherent perhaps in the figure and the time-period of his research, when the reverse

of the nostalgic should be to aspire to reconfigure the paradigm of Mandelstam's denunciation, exile and dispersion among the multitude. "The depths being the multitudes." [J22,6]. "The sense of 'the abyssal' is to be defined as 'meaning.' Such a sense is always allegorical." [J24,1]. "It is a secularized space: the abyss of knowledge and of meanings. What constitutes its historical index?" [J24,2]. The monument in Vladivostok repeats the myth of the poet, and repeating the myth of the poet, suppresses the allegory of modernism in Russia, her revolutionary classicism. "Modernity—anticlassical and classical. Anticlassical: as antithesis to the classical period. Classical: as heroic fulfillment of the epoch that puts its stamp on its expression." [J38a,1].

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