
Walter Benjamin and History

*Andrew Benjamin,
Editor*

Continuum

WALTER BENJAMIN AND HISTORY

WALTER BENJAMIN STUDIES SERIES

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Walter Benjamin and History

Edited by Andrew Benjamin



Continuum

The Tower Building 15 East 26th Street
11 York Road New York
London SE1 7NX NY 10010

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN:HB: 0-8264-6745-8

PB: 0-8264-6746-6

Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

Typeset by Fakenham Photosetting Limited, Fakenham, Norfolk

Printed and bound in Great Britain by MPG Books Ltd, Bodmin, Cornwall

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Acknowledgements

George Didi-Huberman's chapter was first published in *Negotiating Rapture: The Power of Art to Transform Lives* (The Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1996).

Werner Hamacher's chapter was first published in Heidrun Friese (ed.), *The Moment: Time and Rupture in Modern Thought*, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2001), while the German text appeared as ‘“Jetzt”: Benjamin zur historischen Zeit’, in *Benjamin Studies* 1.1 (2002).

Portions of Rebecca Comay's essay appeared in *Research in Phenomenology* 29 (1999) under the title ‘Perverse History: Fetishism and Dialectic in Walter Benjamin’.

A version of Charles Rice's chapter is published as: ‘Immerger et rompre: L'intérieur de Walter Benjamin’, trans. Philippe Simay, in Philippe Simay (ed.), *Walter Benjamin: Métropole et Modernité* (Paris: Editions de l'Éclat, 2005).

Abbreviations

All references to the Convolutes of *The Arcades Project* are given parenthetically, according to Convolute no., without further specification.

- AP* *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1999).
- BA* *Briefwechsel 1938–1940: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin*, ed. Gershom Scholem (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1994).
- BS* *Briefwechsel 1933–1940: Walter Benjamin, Gershom Scholem*, ed. Gershom Scholem (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1985).
- C* *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin 1910–1940*, ed. Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno, trans. Manfred R. Jakobson and Evelyn M. Jakobson (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994).
- CA* Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence 1920–1940*, ed. Henri Lonitz, trans. Nicholas Walker (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).
- CS* *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem*, ed. Gershom Scholem, trans. Gary Smith and André Lefevere (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).
- GB* *Gesammelte Briefe*, ed. Christoph Gödde and Henri Lonitz (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1995–2000).
- GS* *Walter Benjamin: Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1974).
- MD* *Moscow Diary*, ed. Gary Smith, trans. Richard Sieburth (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986).
- OT* *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: Verso, 1998).
- SW* *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, ed. Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1997–2003).

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INTRODUCTION

ANDREW BENJAMIN

Walter Benjamin's concern with history involves a reconfiguration of the way the political and the temporality of history interconnect. His writings on history – both the philosophical reflections as well as the writing of actual histories – sustain a radical critique of the project of Enlightenment philosophies of time. A critique that can be understood as having been undertaken in the name of modernity. The implicit understanding of historical time in Kant's conception of the Enlightenment, for example, presupposes a gradual though inexorable move towards the realization of a specific goal. The goal in question is of course Enlightenment and thus the move towards it interconnects time and perfectibility. As such, this development becomes the formulation of progress. The goal itself is the telos. The problematic nature of this position resides as much in the acceptance of a pre-given goal thought within the determining presence of teleology, as it does in the obviating of conflict as an inherent condition of the movement of history. Fundamental to Benjamin's critique of progress as defining the ambit in which politics and time are interconnected is the centrality that is attributed to forms of interruption. While the question of how that interruption is to be understood is itself an important site of research, what remains the case in the definition of his projects is, on the one hand, the relationship between interruption and discontinuity and, on the other, the modern as premised on an inaugurating interruption. While interruption is central it should not be forgotten that it is far from absolute. Not only do vestiges of earlier configurations remain, it is also the case that the struggle to maintain the advent of the modern has to involve a continual and critical negotiation with the conflation of the new and the temporality of fashion on the one hand and on the other the insistent presence of historicism's reactualization in the form of continuity and arguments for gradual development through time. What is of course fundamental to such arguments is the refusal to take up as a philosophical question the time through which this development is supposed to take place. With historicism, time becomes naturalized. To denature time is a further part of a project marked by interruption.

The intent of this volume is to develop both the detail as well as the implications of Benjamin's extended writings on history. Rather than concentrate simply on the so-called 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' (now known, following the title in the *Selected Writings*, as 'On the Concept of History'), the chapters presented here move between the interconnection

within Benjamin's writings on art and literature and his conception of history, Benjamin's actual writing of history, the use of his work for the writing of specific histories (e.g. architecture), as well as engagements with the philosophical and theological dimensions of the project. Moreover, the volume makes clear that there is no final word on the interpretation of certain passages. The recurring motif of the messianic, for example, is given different configurations. Not only are the details of differing texts analysed; moreover, the volume is concerned with what can be described as specific acts of translation. While it is vital that the texts themselves remain sites of investigation and scholarly concern, it is also essential that the applicability of Benjamin's project be investigated. Its value for the analysis of art, history, literature philosophy, etc. has to be pursued. It is not so much a concern with the work's utility as it is with its possible afterlife.

Part of the afterlife involves working with the recognition that Benjamin's texts, for all their intellectual bravura, were sites in which what was being worked out was the relationship between politics and time. To neglect the political or to reduce it to no more than its named presence fails to grasp that what is at stake within those writings is a political and philosophical engagement with the exigencies of the present. Part of what comprises the present is a conflict concerning the nature of the present itself. The clash, for example, between historicism and modernity is not a question of choice. Not only is such a conflict staged between different political possibilities, the conflict is itself part of the definition of modernity. As such, modernity is an unfinished project because it is the site of a conflict that defines the modern. Benjamin's work is central in allowing both for an understanding of this complex politics of time as it is in providing some of the resources for its sustained analysis.

1

THE SUPPOSITION OF THE AURA: THE NOW, THE THEN, AND MODERNITY

GEORGES DIDI-HUBERMAN*

*Looking at someone carries the implicit expectation that our look will be returned by the object of our gaze. When this expectation is met (which, in the case of thought processes, can apply equally to the look of the mind's eye and to a glance pure and simple), there is an experience of the aura to the fullest extent . . . Experience of the aura thus rests on the transposition of a response common in human relationships to the relationships between the inanimate or natural object and man. The person we look at, or who feels he is being looked at, looks at us in turn. To perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to meet our gaze. The experience corresponds to the discoveries of the *mémoire involontaire*. (These discoveries, incidentally, are unique: they are lost to the memory that seeks to retain them. Thus they lend support to a concept of the aura that comprises the 'unique apparition of a distance'. This designation has the advantage of clarifying the cult nature of the phenomenon. The essentially distant is the inapproachable: inapproachability is in fact a primary quality of the cult image.) Proust's great familiarity with the problem of the aura requires no emphasis.*

Walter Benjamin, 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire' [1939], SW 4: 338
(trans. modified 1939)

THE SUPPOSITION OF THE OBJECT: 'THAT OF WHICH OUR EYES WILL NEVER HAVE THEIR FILL'

What is the sense today, 60 years after Walter Benjamin, of reintroducing the question, the hypothesis, the *supposition of the aura*? Is not the art contemporary to us inscribed within – does it not inscribe within itself – what Benjamin called 'the age of technological reproducibility' (SW 4: 251–83), an age supposed to have produced the death, the withering at the very least, of the aura? Many historians and critics of twentieth-century art have drawn a lesson from that 'age of technological reproducibility', have

* Trans. Jane Marie Todd.

drawn its consequences for the very *production* of artistic objects.¹ But such reflections on reproducibility, on the ‘loss of originality’ and of ‘origin’, have proceeded as if foregrounding these notions must inevitably make the ‘archaic’ and outdated question of the aura, linked as it was to the world of ‘cult images’, fall away and hence disappear.

But *falling away* is not the same as disappearing. Fortunately, we no longer have to bow to our knees before statues of gods – I note in passing that Hegel already registered this fact at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and that others had done so before him.² But we bow our knees, if only in fantasy, before many other things that hang over us or hold us down, that ‘look at’ us or leave us stunned. As we know, Benjamin speaks of the ‘decline of the aura’ in the modern age, but for him, ‘decline’ does not mean disappearance. Rather, it means (as in the Latin *declinare*) moving downward, inclining, deviating, or inflecting in a new way. Benjamin’s exegetes have sometimes wondered whether his position on the aura was not contradictory, or whether one ought not to oppose his ‘early thoughts’ on the question to his ‘mature’ views, his (quasi-Marxist) philosophy about the destruction of the aura to his (quasi-messianic) thinking on its restoration.³

To that, we must first reply that the notion of aura is diffused throughout Benjamin’s oeuvre. Its incorporation into his oeuvre was a response to a transhistorical and profoundly dialectical experience; therefore, the question of whether the aura has been ‘liquidated’ or not proves to be a quintessentially false question.⁴ We must further explain that while the aura in Benjamin names an *originary* anthropological quality in the image, the *origin* for him does not in any way designate something remaining ‘upstream’ from things, as the source of the river is upstream from it. For Benjamin, the origin names ‘that which emerges from the process of becoming and disappearance’, not the source but ‘a whirlpool in the river of becoming [that] pulls the emerging matter into its own rhythm’ (*OT*, p. 46, trans. modified).

Hence decline itself is part of the ‘origin’ so understood, not the bygone – albeit founding – past, but the precarious, churning rhythm, the dynamic two-way flow of a historicity that asks, without respite, even to our own present, ‘to be recognized as a restoration, a restitution, and as something that by that very fact is uncompleted, always open’ (*OT*, p. 46, trans. modified). The ‘beauty that rises from the bed of ages’ – as Benjamin writes with reference to Proust and the *mémoire involontaire* – is never outdated or liquidated; reality never ceases to ‘sear the image’; remembrance continues to offer itself as a ‘relic secularized’. And since silence is fundamentally auratic in its manifestation – as Benjamin writes of Baudelaire – modern or even postmodern man, the man of ‘technological reproducibility’, is obliged, in the midst of the noisy labyrinth of mediations, information and reproductions, sometimes to impose silence and submit to the uncanniness of what comes back to him as aura, as thirst-inducing apparition (*SW* 2: 510; *SW* 4: 334–7; *SW* 4: 177). Let us say, to outline our hypothesis, that whereas the

value of the aura was *imposed* in the religious cult images – that is, in the protocols of dogmatic intimidation within which the liturgy has most often brought forth its images – it is now *supposed* in artists' studios in the secular era of technological reproducibility.⁵ Let us say, to dialecticize, that *the decline of the aura supposes* – implies, slips underneath, enfolds in its fashion – *the aura as an originary phenomenon of the image*. It is, to be faithful to Benjamin in the productive instability of his exploratory vocabulary, an 'uncompleted' and 'always open' phenomenon. The aura and its decline are thus part of the same system (and have undoubtedly always been so in every age of the aura's history: we need only read Pliny the Elder, who was already complaining about the decline of the aura in the age of reproducibility of antique busts).⁶ But the aura persists, resists its decline precisely as *supposition*.

What is a supposition? It is the simple act – not so simple in reality – of placing below (*ova supponere*: placing eggs to be incubated). It means submitting a question by *substituting* certain parameters of what is believed to be the response. It means producing a *hypothesis* – also 'underneath' – which then becomes capable of offering not only the principal 'subject' of a work of art, but also its deepest 'principle'.⁷ Can we, then, *suppose the aura* in the visual objects that twentieth-century art, from Piet Mondrian to Barnett Newman to Ad Reinhardt, for example, offers to our view? We can at least try. We are prepared to admit that the construction of such a supposition remains awkward – cumbersome, heavy with the past in one sense, too facile, even dubious, in another.

In the first place, it is cumbersome for any discourse of specificity: isn't the aura, which designated that dimension of 'other presence' literally required by the age-old world of cult images, condemned to obsolescence as soon as a visual object is in itself its own 'subject'? Hasn't modern art emancipated itself from the 'subject', the 'subject matter' – whether 'natural', 'conventional' or 'symbolic' – which Erwin Panofsky placed at the foundation of any comprehension of the visual arts?⁸ To that we must reply that there are other ways of understanding 'subject matter' – the 'subject' as 'matter' – than the way proposed by Panofskian iconology. Moreover, our supposition is cumbersome only for those historical or aesthetic discourses closed upon their own axioms. In fact, discourses of specificity usually present themselves as (pseudo)axiomatic, and the consequence of their closure – their tone of certainty, has often been to pronounce supposedly definitive death-sentences. The modernist will say, for example, that 'the aura is dead', the postmodernist, that 'modernism is dead'; and so on. But the supposition of the aura is not satisfied with any sentence of death (historical death, death in the name of a meaning of history), inasmuch as that supposition is linked to a question of *memory* and not of history in the usual sense, in short, to a question of living on (*survivance*, Aby Warburg's *Nachleben*). It is within the order of reminiscence, it seems to me, that Benjamin raised the question of the aura, as Warburg had raised that of the

Pathosformeln: beyond, therefore, any opposition between a forgetful present (which is triumphant) and a bygone past (which has, or is, lost).

As a result, the supposition of the aura must confront the very dubious alibi of the ideologies of restoration: resentment of all sorts in the face of modernity, the redemptive 'return' to the values of the art of the past, nostalgia for religious subject matter, a claim made for 'spirituality' and 'sense' against all 'deconstructions' or 'destructions' effected by twentieth-century art.⁹ Let us add that the middle position between these two extreme discourses – putting the past to death or restoring the past – is not much better than when it tries to reconcile the iconographism of Panofskian subject matter with the radical abstraction of artists such as Newman or Reinhardt. While something like an auratic quality may *live on* in the works of these painters, may even *underlie* them, this cannot mean it *lives on as such*. To try to 'reiconographize' abstract art, or to reinject into it *as such* notions like 'ecstasy', 'spirituality', 'mysticism', etc., would be to make a muddle of everything. Kazimir Malevich was *not* a painter of icons. Mondrian was *not* (or rather, decided to stop being) a symbolist theosophical painter. Newman was *not* a Kabbalist, and Reinhardt was *never* a theologian, not even of negativity.

The uneasiness and misunderstanding that today pervade all aesthetic discourse are no doubt linked, at least in part, to the fact that this discourse generally cannot understand the nonspecificity – the anthropological dimension – of twentieth-century artworks except by returning to the use of age-old categories more or less tied to the religious world. There is an analogy – an anthropological, but also a phenomenological and metapsychological analogy – between Dante's description of a pilgrim who, looking at the veronica in Rome, 'cannot satisfy his hunger',¹⁰ and Benjamin's definition, in the context of Baudelaire, of the aura as 'that of which our eyes will never have their fill' (SW 4: 337). In both cases, what is offered to our view *looks at its viewer* (Benjamin called this 'the ability to meet our gaze'). In both cases, this relation of the gaze implies a *dialectic of desire*, which supposes alterity, lost object, split subject, a non-objectifiable relationship.¹¹

Given the highly problematic terms 'gaze' and 'desire', there is no longer any reason to be satisfied with the sententious – judicatory – vocabulary of art criticism, or to seek 'grace' in a vocabulary of empathy or transcendence. The difficulty of our problem lies in this: in opposition to a discourse of specificity that pronounces and carries out its dogmatic death-sentences (the aura is dead, so much the better), and to a discourse of nonspecificity that invents eternal and ahistorical entities (let us seek transcendence, let us seek the sadness of the veronica in a Newman painting), we must in each instance formulate something like a 'specificity of the nonspecific'. Let me explain: we must seek in each work of art the articulation between *formal singularities* and *anthropological paradigms*. We must therefore articulate two apparently incommensurate orders. And the point of articulation between

these two orders may lie – our second hypothesis – in the dynamic of *labour*, in the process of making art. We must seek to understand *how* a Newman painting supposes – implies, slips underneath, enfolds in its fashion – the question of the aura. *How* it manoeuvres the ‘image-making substance’ in order to impose itself on the gaze, to foment desire. *How* it thus becomes ‘that of which our eyes will never have their fill’.

THE SUPPOSITION OF TIME: ‘THE ORIGIN IS NOW’

What the usual aesthetic positions lack for approaching the problem of the aura, then, is a temporal model capable of accounting for the ‘origin’ in the Benjaminian sense, or the *Nachleben* in the Warburgian sense: in short, a model capable of accounting for the events of memory, not the cultural facts of history. ‘In a certain sense’, Georges Bataille wrote, ‘every problem is that of a *use of time*’.¹² To speak of ‘dead’ things or ‘outdated’ problems – in particular with respect to the aura – or to speak of ‘rebirths’ – even when it concerns the aura – is to speak from within an order of consecutive *facts*, an order that knows nothing of the indestructibility, transformability and anachronism of memory *events*.¹³ This is the least apt ‘use of time’ for understanding the relics (*survivances*), declines and resurgences proper to the aesthetic domain. Even a circular model such as that of eternal return disputes the validity of the naive belief in the ‘return of the same’.¹⁴ Thus we can see in the model of history-as-forgetting and that of history-as-repetition, models so often implicit in the discourses of modern art, a continued implementation of the most idealist model of art history. I am referring to the Vasarian model, which asserted in the sixteenth century: ‘The Renaissance is forgetting the Middle Ages now that it is repeating Antiquity.’¹⁵ To say today that we must forget modernism so that we can repeat the ecstatic or sacred origin of art is to use exactly the same language.

If we thus refute peremptory death-sentences as well as nostalgic rebirths, *what time must we suppose* from now on? We should not be surprised to rediscover, if not the constructed model, then at least the flash of an intuition in Benjamin himself. That intuition has also remained outside contemporary commentaries on the decline of the aura and the loss of originality. Yet, it is part of the same system as the Benjaminian supposition of the aura and of the *origin* understood as a reminiscent present where the past is neither to be rejected nor to be reborn, but quite simply to be brought back as an *anachronism*.¹⁶ Benjamin designates this notion by the less than explicit expression ‘dialectical image’.

Why ‘dialectical’? Because Benjamin, the author of ‘On the Concept of History’ (*SW* 4: 389–97), was seeking a logicotemporal model that could take contradictions into account, never taming them but rather concentrating and crystallizing them into the density of any unique artistic

production. He was seeking a model that could retain from Hegel the 'prodigious power of the negative' and yet reject Hegel's reconciliation and synthesis of Spirit. With the dialectical image, Benjamin proposed an open, undogmatic – even relatively drifting – use of the philosophical dialectic, which he distorted, like other writers and artists of his time: Carl Einstein, Bataille, S.M. Eisenstein, and even, in another register, Mondrian.¹⁷

Why an 'image'? Because, the image designates something completely different from a *picture*, a figurative illustration. The image is first of all a *crystal of time*, both a construct and a blazing shape, a sudden shock:

It's not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, an image is that in which the Then and the Now come into a constellation like a flash of lightning. In other words: image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is a purely temporal, continuous one, the relation of the Then to the Now is dialectical: is not progression but image, suddenly emergent. Only dialectical images are genuine images. (N2a, 3)

This strange definition has at least two consequences, and it is crucial to clarify them if we are to address the problem of twentieth-century art, its position in relation to the aura, and its role in the relation between the 'Now' and the 'Then'. First, Benjamin's definition valorizes a *parameter of ambiguity* essential to the structure of any dialectical image: 'Ambiguity', writes Benjamin, 'is the manifest imaging of dialectic' (*AP*, p. 10).¹⁸ In this way, he lays claim to certain aesthetic choices (the only authentic image is one that is ambiguous), while at the same time dissociating the dialectical operation from any clear and distinct synthesis, any teleological reconciliation.

Second, Benjamin's definition valorizes a *critical parameter*, revealing the dialectical image's enormous potential for intervening in theoretical debates (art, according to Benjamin, goes straight to the heart of problems of cognition). To produce a dialectical image is to appeal to the Then, to accept the shock of memory while refusing to submit or 'return' to the past; for example, it is to welcome the signifiers of Theosophy, the Kabbalah or negative theology, *awakening* these references from their dogmatic sleep as a way of deconstructing and criticizing them. It is to criticize modernity (the forgetting of the aura) through an act of memory and, at the same time, to criticize archaism (nostalgia for the aura) through an act of essentially *modern* invention, substitution and designification. Benjamin dismissed with the same gesture myth and technology, dreaming and waking, Carl Jung and Karl Marx. He returned to the fragile moment of *awakening*, a dialectical moment in his eyes because it lies at the evanescent, ambiguous borderline between unconscious imagery and necessary critical lucidity. That is why he conceived of art history itself as *Traumdeutung*, 'dream interpretation', to be elaborated on the Freudian model.¹⁹

This historical and critical supposition, which I evoke all too briefly here,²⁰ allows us to move beyond or displace a number of sterile contradictions that have disrupted the aesthetic domain in the matters of modernity and memory, and especially the pictorial *materiality* inherent in the adventure of abstract art and its notoriously *idealist* references. Nearly all the great artists, from Wassily Kandinsky to Jackson Pollock, from Malevich to Reinhardt, from Mondrian to Newman, from Marcel Duchamp to Alberto Giacometti, have too quickly irritated or delighted their interpreters by their use, sometimes light-hearted, sometimes profound, of 'spirituality', 'original art', orthodox theology, Theosophy, even alchemy ... And most historians spontaneously forget that a philosophical, religious, or ideological claim on the part of an artist does not in any way constitute an *interpretive key* to his oeuvre, but rather requires a *separate and joint interpretation* – that is, a dialectically articulated interpretation – of the aesthetic interpretation as such.²¹ Whether they *are* 'materialists', or 'idealists' – and in general they never ask themselves the question in those terms – whether they *claim* to be 'avant-garde' or 'nostalgic', artists *make* their artworks in an order of plastic reality, formal labour, which must be interpreted for what it *offers*. This means it must be understood in its capacity as a *heuristic* opening, and not in terms of an *axiomatic* reduction to its own 'programmes'. That is another reason art history is related to *Traumdeutung*. Let us note that artists' writings, parallel to artworks themselves, very often manifest the same *critical ambiguity* supposed in the relation Benjamin called the 'dialectical image'.²²

From this perspective, the case of Newman seems to me exemplary and of flawless clarity. We know that in 1947 Newman's artworks and declarations led Clement Greenberg to form a suspicious judgement, typical of what I have called the model of specificity, a model trapped within the vicious circle of history-as-forgetting (modernism as the forgetting of tradition) and history-as-rebirth (antimodernism as return to tradition). Greenberg's suspicion was directed precisely at Newman's use of certain words stemming from philosophical and religious traditions: 'intangible reality', 'uniqueness', 'ecstasy', 'transcendental experience', 'symbolical or metaphysical content'. And Greenberg found such uses 'archaic', he said, permeated by 'something half-baked and revivalist in a familiar American way', something he found excessive and pointless for artistic activity as such, pointless, in short, for its 'specificity'.²³

Newman gave a vehement response to these arguments: according to him, they stemmed from an 'unintentional distortion based on a misunderstanding'.²⁴ What misunderstanding? That of imagining, in an extremely traditional frame of mind all in all, that the relation between certain words (coming from an age-old tradition) and a certain pictorial tradition must inevitably be expressed in terms of a 'programme', that is, in iconographical terms. Newman refuses the idea that the use of the word 'mystical' corresponds to a 'principle' for him or to an a priori, that is, to his assumption of a pre-existing belief. He refuses to be seen as a 'programme-maker',

laying claim to a transformed and transforming – today we would say deconstructive – use of these words from the Then. And how does he transform and deconstruct the meaning of such words, if not by taking on the Now of a singular, absolutely new, and *originary* experience, of a pictoriality that dismisses in a single gesture the figurative past and the stylistic present of abstract, albeit ‘purist’, art? That is why, in his response, Newman does not hesitate to rub together, hence to ‘irritate’ – as a way of decomposing their accepted usage – the words ‘ecstasy’ and ‘chaos’, the expressions ‘transcendence’ and ‘nonmaterial stenography’, and the (at the very least interesting) expression ‘materialistic abstractions’. This is a way of positing himself, if not exactly as a ‘master in contradictions’, as Thomas Hess said,²⁵ then at least as a master of the *dialectical image* in Benjamin’s sense.

It is significant that all of Newman’s writings between 1945 and 1949 – that is, during the gestation period that saw the implementation of his most novel, most decisive, and most definitive pictorial problematic²⁶ – manifest most acutely a *thinking of the origin* that has nothing to do with a nostalgia for the past, but that concerns precisely the productive collision between the Now and an unexpected, reinvented Then. His thinking has nothing to do with an aim of restoration or ‘rebirth’, but engages the very issue of a radical modernity.²⁷ Hence, the new (origin as whirlpool) requires us to think from top to bottom of art history itself, that is, the relation an artist *now* maintains with the past (origin as source). That is why, in ‘The Plasmic Image’, Newman devotes so much time to rethinking primitive art, in a mode more anthropological than aesthetic, valorizing ‘ecstasy’, ‘desire’ and ‘terror’ at the expense of beauty itself. According to him, the poor comprehension and use of such primitive art – recourse to the criterion of the ornamental, for example – have waylaid the entire modern notion of abstraction.²⁸

Hence, the new (origin as whirlpool) requires *beginning* not with something like the idea of a golden age – represented here by Greek art – but on the contrary with its *destruction* (a direct and explicit echo of the state of the ‘civilized’ world in 1945, when the painter felt he was truly ‘beginning’ his work).²⁹ The origin, as Newman proposes it in a very dialectical notion, is first of all the *destruction of the origin*, or at the very least its distortion, its ‘making strange’. That is why the artist of today can feel much closer to a fetish from the Marquesas Islands, about which he understands nothing, than to a Greek statue which nonetheless constitutes his most intrinsic aesthetic past. The collision between the Now and the ‘decomposed’ Then logically leads to the ‘barbarian’ – Newman’s term – decomposition of traditional aesthetic categories; and the timeless quality of our ‘imaginary museums’ had been wrongly conceived in terms of those categories. Thus, for heuristic purposes, Newman attempts certain conceptual discriminations – ‘plasmic’ versus ‘plastic’, ‘sublime’ versus ‘beautiful’³⁰ – that are designed above all to deconstruct our own familiarity with the art of the past.

In the end, what is the origin (origin as whirlpool) if not the wrenching implementation of that *critical ambiguity* that Benjamin implicitly characterized with the notion of dialectical image? What does it mean to originate in the whirlpool of an artistic practice, if not to appeal to a certain memory of the Then in order to decompose the present – that is, the immediate past, the recent past, the still dominant past – in a determined rejection of all ‘revivalist’ nostalgia? Interpretations that spontaneously use the temporal categories of influence, or the semiotic categories of iconography, go astray when they try to make Newman a spokesperson for, or an heir to, the ‘Jewish tradition’.³¹ We must rather hypothesize that a certain kind of *critical memory* – of the Jewish tradition among other things – permitted Newman to create the collisions and destructions he was seeking in order to *originate* his pictorial practice in what he saw as the sclerotic present of abstraction.

In short, the critique of the present – the appeal to categories such as ‘primitive art’ or ‘the sublime’ – also included a critique of all nostalgia. Newman was laying claim to the Now to the utmost degree. I believe that, without betraying Newman, we could paraphrase his famous title of 1948, ‘The Sublime is Now’ by saying that, for him, the *supposition of artistic time* implies the dialectical and critical proposition that *the origin is now*. It is from within the reminiscent Now that the origin appears, in conformity with a fundamental anachronism that modernist criticism has as yet been unable to take on. ‘The image we produce is the self-evident one of revelation, real and concrete, that can be understood by anyone who will look at it without the nostalgic glasses of history.’³²

THE SUPPOSITION OF PLACE: ‘THE APPARITION OF A DISTANCE’

And that ‘revelation’ – an ancient, ambiguous and critical word in relation to all formalist specificity – is characterized by Newman strictly as a *revelation and a conversion of space*. This is a way of radically transforming the usual sense of the word and at the same time giving it back its material and phenomenological specificity, which, for my part, I shall call a *supposition of place*. In an admirable text written in 1949, Newman gave the first description of an experience of this kind. It took place among the ‘simple walls made of mud’ of the Indian tumuli in Ohio. The title of the text, ‘Ohio, 1949’, is simply the name of the site and the numeral designating the time.³³ But we should add that, despite the article’s brevity, Newman also thought of titling it ‘Prologue for a New Aesthetic’, which says a great deal about the theoretical stakes of that altogether phenomenological and private description.

It was an unexpected, overpowering experience – and not a programmatic decision based on some aesthetic axiom. It was literally the experience

of an *apparition*. In that excursion of Newman's among a few archaic walls stripped of any ornamental or aesthetic pretension, it was none other than 'the self-evident nature of the artistic act, in its utter simplicity' that suddenly appeared to the American painter.³⁴ But, in order to be approached by words, that experience of 'simplicity' required – or better yet, revealed – the productive ambiguity of a two-way flow or two-beat rhythm, a *dialectic*. To speak of that space made of crude patches is to speak contradictorily, to crystallize at least two contradictions: on the one hand, the experience was that of a *here ... and beyond*; on the other, it was that of a *visibility ... and beyond*. Here, there is 'nothing that can be shown in a museum or even photographed; [it is] a work of art that cannot even be seen, so it is something that must be experienced there on the spot'.

What does this mean? That the *visible* spectacle, objectifiable and describable, of the landscape opens to something I shall call an experience of the *visual*; and that *space* – the objectifiable coordinates within which we situate an object or ourselves – opens onto an experience of *place*.³⁵ When Newman describes the 'feeling that here is the space', we must understand that the *here*, the *here* of the place, only works to deconstruct the usual certainties we have of the space when, spontaneously, we seek to objectify it. That is why the affirmation of that *here* goes hand in hand with an acerbic critique of 'the clamour over space' with which all of art history has assaulted our ears, from the time of the Renaissance perspective to the so-called 'pure' space of Mondrian.³⁶

The axiomatics and aesthetics of space are one thing: a shared experience objectified into a specific fact in the history of plastic styles. The experience of place as Newman approaches it here is something else again: it is, he says, a 'private', not a shared, experience, a *subjective event* and not a measurable fact. The end of 'Ohio, 1949' communicates the essential feature, through the very surprise it elicits in the reader: what Newman is speaking of in that experience of archaic places – the Egyptian pyramids will now seem to him little more than pretty ornaments in comparison – is nothing other, he writes, than 'the physical sensation of time'. Why, suddenly, fall back on time? Once our stupor has passed, we begin to understand what is at issue: Newman, very probably without knowing it, has just given a first, strictly Benjaminian, definition of the *aura*: 'a strange weave of space and time' (SW 2: 518). And we gradually understand that almost all the phenomenological qualities Benjamin had evoked in his definitions of the aura are found not only in what Newman *articulated* about his temporal experience of place, but also in what he *produced*, precisely beginning in the years when, from the response to Greenberg to 'Ohio, 1949', his pictorial and theoretical problematic was definitively set in place.

What is the aura, and more precisely, what is that 'strange weave of space and time'? Benjamin responds with a formula that has remained famous: it is the 'unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be' (SW 4:

255).³⁷ And, in that definition, there is of course the *apparition* or ‘revelation’ Newman speaks of. There is also that *uniqueness*, that ‘simplicity’ Newman experiences so intensely among the vestiges of archaic Indian architecture. But, to understand better the phenomenology at play here, we must, I think, move back to the visual and pictorial experience for which the artist’s texts serve as displaced witnesses and readable aftereffects. We must therefore confront that *uniqueness* from the near side of the ‘atmospheric’ experience of the lived landscape,³⁸ must approach it, that is, in the concrete procedure to be observed in the key artwork of that entire period, the painting *Onement I*, and more particularly, the 1947 drawing that served as its heuristic starting-point.³⁹

Newman’s entire production in 1947 was limited to two paintings and two drawings.⁴⁰ *Onement I* – which was first an untitled ink drawing, its title coming precisely from the pictorial result it went on to produce – is of modest dimensions, but in it there appears, definitively asserted, the famous principle of the ‘zip’, which characterized the artist’s later ‘style’. It thus functions as Newman’s first ‘absolute image’,⁴¹ obtained directly, without modification or rectification, in immediacy and in apparition, so to speak. The experimentation proper to the drawing – which we find in earlier graphic studies – now finds something like its decisive and definitive *opening movement*: the white opening in the centre of the drawing in fact achieves, in a more general way, a procedural opening that will lead Newman to use adhesive strips in the paintings, strips that both *reserve* and *reveal* the zips of paint elaborated on vast neutral backgrounds.

The opening I am speaking of thus possesses this first characteristic of the aura, which Benjamin defined as a ‘unique apparition’. It possesses the quality of *uniqueness* that Newman laid claim to as the ‘absolute beginning’ of his oeuvre, a genesis without a preconceived programme.⁴² This becomes even clearer in Newman’s assertion that the vertical zip, far from dividing the visual field, instead constitutes it as an indivisible unity.⁴³ Finally, the very title *Onement I* – one would have expected *Uniqueness* or *Oneness*, and hardly the Roman numeral I next to a word that apparently means the same thing – powerfully suggests by its very strangeness the condition of *singular uniqueness* that Benjamin recognized in every auratic image.

A second characteristic of the aura can be recognized, albeit more subtly, in the 1947 drawing: this is what Benjamin called the *apparition of a distance*. The distance in question is not in any way the ‘foreshortened’ object we perceive at the very end of linear perspective. The drawing *Onement I*, in fact, does not objectify any spatiality of distancing (we need to oppose spatial *distancing* to *distance* as the phenomenological property of place). It even subverts all the usual values related to the superposition of figure and ground: hence, the black of the drawing no more withdraws behind the white vertical shape than the white withdraws behind the two patches of black ink. *Onement I* can thus in no case be interpreted figuratively, as

a double door left ajar before us: first, because the edges of the central zip ‘ooze’ or ‘bleed’ as a result of the the procedure of adhering, then removing – ripping off – the material strip, which is designed to reserve the white of the drawing’s support while the ink is being spread; and second, because the saturated zones of black, far from being uniformly compact, reveal a disintegration in the brushstroke, a loss of adhesiveness that makes the gesture itself visible, and with it, a fraying of the brush-hairs. These are the marks, the voluntary traces of the procedure, which the pictorial version of *Onement I* will push to the extreme, decisively asserting the incompleteness of the painting.⁴⁴

Phenomenologically speaking, the auratic *distance* invoked by Benjamin can be interpreted as the *depth* that Erwin Straus, then Maurice Merleau-Ponty, constituted as the fundamental sensorial paradigm of ‘distance’ and place, a concept far from any ‘spatial depth’ that could be objectified by measurement or by perspective.⁴⁵ If in *Onement I* Newman breaks definitively with any objectifiable depth of space, he reconnects, it seems to me, with the ‘physical sensation’ of a *depth of place*. In that sense, Hubert Damisch was quite right, evoking Newman – but also Pollock – to challenge the ‘so-called rejection of the so-called convention of depth’.⁴⁶ Like all great American painting of the period, Newman’s effort requires a ‘specific optics’ whose theory and phenomenology remain to be set forth.

In *Onement I*, that phenomenology certainly includes a version of closeness, given the restricted dimensions of the drawing.⁴⁷ But, as Benjamin says, ‘however close the apparition’, a *distance* suddenly irrupts within it. It irrupts here in the *reserve*, in the *retrait*⁴⁸ contrived (and not drawn, outlined, or situated) by Newman. In that sense, it places us squarely before a kind of *dialectic of place* – close/distant, in front of/inside, tactile/optical, appearing/disappearing, open/closed, hollowed out/ saturated – which confers on the image its most fundamental auratic quality. It is an inchoate rhythm of black and white, a ‘physical sensation of time’ that gives to the image-making substance the *critical ambiguity* that Jean Clay, speaking of Pollock and Mondrian, so aptly named ‘flat depth’.⁴⁹

Why is that ambiguity of the place rhythmic, appearing and disappearing at the same time? Because something in it *passes through* – infiltrates, mixes with, permeates – and disintegrates any certainty about space. This something is again the *aura*, which we must not understand in terms of a third characteristic, which returns to the most archaic and ‘physical’, the most *material* sense of the word *aura*. This meaning is that of breath, of the air that surrounds us as a subtle, moving, absolute place, the air that permeates us and makes us breathe. When in *Onement I* Newman reveals the reserve of the support by stripping off the zip the way one might pull a gag off someone’s mouth, he creates not so much a spatial form as a *rush of air*. When his brush heavy with ink presses on the paper, it does not so much draw as *exhale* its pigmentary matter; when he lifts it slightly off the support,

it *inhales*, creates a kind of subtle *voluminosity* – Merleau-Ponty’s word – which, above the paper, again produces a kind of *rush of air*. The aura of this drawing would thus be related to something like a respiration.⁵⁰ And all Newman’s later drawings only reinforce that impression of *breathing surfaces* which produce, as their graphic traces, the subtle rhythm of scanning – not serial or atmospheric but *auratic* scanning.

THE SUPPOSITION OF THE SUBJECT: ‘I’M THE SUBJECT. I’M ALSO THE VERB’

To speak in these terms, I readily admit, amounts to speaking in *anthropomorphic* terms of a kind of painting that asserts, and this is obvious, that it is radically *abstract*. It is not ‘man’ that Newman thematizes in *Onement I* – it is ‘place’ itself and the (auratic) conditions for its visual dialectic, its phenomenology.⁵¹ Yve-Alain Bois is right to insist on a certain anti-anthropomorphism in Newman and, as a result, to relativize the influence of Giacometti on the genesis of the painting *Onement I*.⁵² For it is precisely with *Onement I* that Newman’s paintings definitively cease to contain the vitalist and genetic ideograms recognizable in the works of the preceding years, *Gea* (1945), or *Genetic Moment* (1947), for example. If *Onement I* indeed offers this ‘genetic movement’ of which all critics speak – taking their cue from the painter himself – it does not in any case offer itself as the iconography of a biblical or kabbalistic subject matter in which we would have to recognize the ‘division’ between darkness and light accomplished by YHWH, or the reddish-brown associated with the Hebrew play on the words ‘Adam’ and ‘*adamah*’ (earth), or the ‘uniqueness’ of Adam and Eve according to the Zohar, or even the uniqueness of the ‘one and only’ God of monotheism.⁵³

All these readings, which in spite of themselves pull Newman’s art towards narration, the symbol and the anthropomorphic figuration, very quickly go astray in embracing the idea of a *programme*, which the artist found so repugnant. These readings are only aftereffects of readability and resemantization. Bois is thus right to restore to Newman’s art its pure phenomenological dimension, its visual dimension of *being there* – or, as I would say, of *being in place*.⁵⁴ But, immediately, anthropomorphism itself is found to be dialectically reimplicated in that operation: not eliminated (outdated, vanished), but transformed (reinvented, resupposed). A modernist critic might no doubt decree the end of anthropomorphism in Newman’s abstract art; but it is better to suppose that with their specific manner of abstraction Newman’s paintings require that we ourselves transform our spontaneous concept of anthropomorphism, that is, the relation between ‘shape’ and ‘humanity’.

Newman himself formulated this problematic relationship, which he certainly sensed was fundamental to his entire oeuvre. He named this

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