Theories and Methodologies

Benjamin Dreams of Anarchy

SARAH RICHTER

Angelus Novus is difficult to see. You can't see *Angelus* because, as its cursed steward, the Israel Museum, likes to remind us, Paul Klee's 1920 work on paper is delicate, photosensitive, and can't be in public for long. They say they can't display *Angelus* or can display it only under extremely specific circumstances, for example, loaning it out to the Bode Museum in Berlin this spring and summer, like some gold star for German Zionism amid the brutal remaindering of Palestine, in the recursion of genocidal regimes, a recursion that can only be cut with the dissolution of both the Zionist entity and that "series of operations of the border . . . called 'Europe'" (Nadal-Melsió 21). So when the Bode Museum announces their pleasure at the exhibition of *Angelus* alongside Walter Benjamin's manuscripts, including "On the Concept of History," and that they will do so "as an exception"[1] ("Angel"), we must say this: the only just home for *Angelus Novus* is Portbou, in Catalonia. For it was in Portbou that *Angelus* witnessed the death of its last legitimate host, a host who is to this day buried there in a mass pauper's grave, his bones mixed up with all the others.

What I'm reading infuriates me, so I throw myself out the house to walk quickly around Providence, where I live, in a practice the critic would have recognized. Rage becomes something like an image: *Angelus* is on display. An action erupts in the museum. Someone, masked, pulls the object from the walls. Doors held open. Guards elsewhere. A car's out front ready to speed to Benjamin's grave. All this is dreamlike, as I can both see and write it while walking. I walk faster, feeling the image in me like a furnace.

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How easy it is to be instrumentalized. How nice to be a small happy weapon of the state and to take pleasure in your use, which anyway is always the use and abuse of others, never of yourself, in that perfect sleight of sovereignty's hand. *Politically Red* reminds us that the moment of danger Benjamin feared was of instrumentalization—of violence extended and concealed by a contract or a negotiation, by the rational agreements of sane actors in good faith, or by concessions, compromises, and the brutal workings of necessity. Insofar as violence takes shape as a promise—"future violence [is] inscribed in every single act of violence" (Cadava and Nadal-Melsió 94)—there can be no agreement with power to end violence; any agreement will reinscribe and thus expand violence in that perfect operation of the performative.[2] In response to the ordinariness of such use, Benjamin tried to write texts that would not be available for any determinate end, whose grammar anticipated this inevitable encounter with violence by becoming uninstrumentalizable. That is the writerly legacy to which *Politically Red* responds, and to which its militant literary communism is owed. Eduardo Cadava and Sara Nadal-Melsió's, like Benjamin's, is a politics that refuses instrumentality by multiplying revolutionary means, by following revolution's scattered, broken line, its dis- and rearticulation across a constellation rather than a single form. Such an endlessly rearticulated revolutionary form is a mediate practice, is a practice of endless mediacy and endless collective use. As such, it is both a politics and, in the words of Benjamin, a language. This language must be made "definitely and reliably unusable for the counterrevolution" even at the risk of its unavailability for communism (qtd. in Cadava and Nadal-Melsió 121).

If there's a secret heart to their book—Eduardo Cadava and Sara Nadal-Melsió might disagree—it's their work with Benjamin's "Critique of Violence," a text whose arcane legalese demands not only to be decrypted but to be read historically. Following Benjamin's own cues, the authors decode the text, as if it were a puzzle, or search its seams, as if it were a textile or a tomb. There they find the sold-out strikes and the comrade's fuckups and the names of the dead too holy to refer to by name. They find a communism that cannot be referred to as such. Those are Benjamin's ellipses—"..."—that shelter the dead so that they might be mobilized without also being instrumentalized—enacting "a form of preservation that relies on partial destruction" (122). It is as if Benjamin "builds a refuge in the text for something of another order," Sara tells us (Reading Group). That is its justice.

Angelus Novus remains difficult to see, even now, even when rendered by the cool overhead light of a German art institution, even when described in solicitous dispatches as "the gem of the Israel Museum's permanent collection," even when affixed to white gallery walls through a complex system of T-screw security plate locks, lead anchors, mounting brackets, and plexiglass, not to mention cameras, guards, and doors ("Angel"). *Angelus Novus* remains difficult to see because, as Cadava and Nadal-Melsió know, the angel is not only an oil transfer or a monoprint or a work on paper but a box, a pedagogical box, whose opening and resistance to opening teaches us to think politically. With the box comes old philosophical questions about what is inside or outside any given order, and yet *Angelus*, as an image, "has remained closed much longer than most others" (136). Again, justice.

Famously, *Angelus* faces the past. Yet he also, from the vantage of the art object, faces the spectator, making "us," whoever we are, that "one single catastrophe," which cannot be redeemed or delivered or made whole (Benjamin qtd. in Cadava and Nadal-Melsió 135). Canonically, angels are nothing more than messengers. But *Angelus* too is wrecked by time, the time of the message he fails to deliver. He is thus martyred by the violence of history; in fact, he is a perpetual martyr; he watches that skyward pile of limbs grow without remit; and if we are the past he faces, we watch a failed angel from the vantage of death: his look embeds the dead in us. We watch him leave us ruined, connected by horrified eye contact. That is the art-historical feint Benjamin wrote into Klee's monoprint in that famous last text before leaving for Portbou. But the angel's eyes, as Cadava and Nadal-Melsió remind us, do not do what

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Benjamin suggests. Yes, his shoulders and wings face us, squared, frontal; his neck and chest reiterate, almost perfectly, the right angles of the picture plane. But his eyes flicker stage left. "If we take Benjamin at his word, the angel's body faces the past," they write, but "the eyes in Klee's monoprint are clearly looking to the side, toward the margins of the work" (137), and perhaps, if his gaze is to be followed, toward the monoprint's border—that precise place where oil meets substrate, and where the image's density accumulates in layers, traces, and washes of color. Cadava and Nadal-Melsió follow his eyes as they refuse any equivalence or exchange. If *Angelus* lies before us, holding a broken message, he does so with his eyes averted. Some gazes can never be returned.[3]

It wasn't until winter that I saw the house in the heart of *Angelus Novus* (fig. 1). I had not seen it before, nor read about it elsewhere. I knew the angel's curled hair made of scrolls; I knew his body as that of the chimera, taloned and winged, face neither lion nor man. He was—is—an icon of the left (see Werckmeister), but amid *Angelus*'s "rudimentary mechanicity—intersecting lines, triangles, tubes, and scrolls" (Wills 166), I had not yet seen that box + triangle (a house) held in his chest. And because I had not seen the house, whose walls square his neck, and whose roof exceeds his shoulders, and whose keyhole entrance punctures his sternum, I also had not seen its wings. Yes, the house has wings—improbable wings, secondary wings stretching out from the angel's solar plexus. ("A secret heliotropism," I hear; yes, the shack seems to glow; if the angel's shoulders mark a horizonal point, one Klee carefully straightens, that shack lies half interred, half exposed.)[4] Famously, by some calculus of wings and wind, *Angelus* cannot act—as Frederic Jameson writes, "the angel's wings have very much the same problems as the boat's sails—they must be adjusted to catch the wind, to profit from the wind of history that is to propel them." Yet "this particular angel has been maladroit," and he is "held open like an umbrella broken in a storm" (189). If that shack is to be believed, there's a secret recursiveness in the angel of history, "the box that Klee's *Angelus* is" (Cadava and Nadal-Melsió 137). As those wings mark and redouble the angel's powerlessness, they bear another message, hidden within the first: if you cannot act, if the winds have caught your arms and you cannot put them down, you can still house.[5]

Since winter I've wondered if Benjamin looked at *Angelus Novus*, which he kept close to him for as long as he could, and wondered what lived there, in the shack.

If *Angelus* is a box, or a system of boxes, of boxes within boxes, it is a box "full of time" (142). Cadava and Nadal-Melsió read *Angelus* like Benjamin reads the crates in his essay "Unpacking My Library," as pamphlets, manuscripts, and letters emerge for new use. If in unpacking his boxes Benjamin registers the materiality of time, he does so not to catalog but to enjoy that "endless and incomplete excavation," an excavation that registers the sediments of time that are buried within something as presumptively equivalent and unitary as a box (Cadava and Nadal-Melsió 134). *Politically Red*'s practice of reading—for silences, displacements, massifications, reversals—knows that reading historically means knowing that every box holds its own speeds, its own processes of formation and deformation, and its own desires and promises, whose protection the box is responsible for. There is always the possibility that an image might remain locked until a very precise moment.[6] That moment cannot be known in advance.

How to read an endless box, an encrypted system of boxes, a box within a box? Descend into them like a crypt whose inhabitants cannot be measured, known, or named.

Benjamin was also a collector and, like all collectors, held out for the possibility that he might, rather than hold onto his objects, escape into them. If the box is full of time, as Cadava and Nadal-Melsió write, it is also full of mediacy. The problem of the house, canonically, is its use and abuse by a patriarch, settler, landlord, plantation owner, or boss; the house becomes his medium of violent instrumentalization. Yet the angel holds instead the broken promise that we might take back what was ours, in fact, what was

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Fig. 1. Paul Klee. *Angelus Novus*. 1920, *Wikimedia Commons*.

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never anyone's; like the angel, that shelter is a figure of "reproducibility" and reproduction for the mass yet to come (140). We make each building our incalculable means.

And the name of the house? In 1928, in *One-Way Street*, Benjamin tells a dream of emergent sanctuary.

> In a dream I saw a barren terrain. It was a marketplace of Weimar. Excavations were in progress. I, too, scraped about in the sand. There the spire of a church steeple emerged. Delighted, I thought to myself: a Mexican shrine from the time of pre-animism, from the Anaquivitzli. I awoke laughing. (Ana = *àvà*; vi = vie; witz = Mexican church [!]).
>
> (qtd. in Cadava and Nadal-Melsió 299–300)

Cadava and Nadal-Melsió translate the German—"Da kam die Spinze eines Kirchturms hervor" (Benjamin, *Einbahnstrasse* 27)—succinctly. Yet in Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter's translation, or perhaps beautiful mistranslation, "the tip of a church steeple" comes, as if from the earth, "to light" (Benjamin, *One-Way Street* 61).

There are many ways to read Benjamin's dream, and indeed people do, as a failed if not impossible encounter between Mexica communism and Marxism: *Anaquivitzli*, the made-up name of an indigenous Mesoamerican people, whose ruins Benjamin uncovers in his dream, summons and betrays indigeneity in its ethnological, archeological, and scientific deformation of the sacred. Heriberto Martínez Yépez reminds us that Benjamin at one point studied Nahuatl, the language of the Mexica, with a German ethnologist in a room of stolen fetishes. Cadava and Nadal-Melsió read the dream otherwise, as not only "dreamlike condemnations of history" by which extraction and ruination of indigenous worlds will be registered on the surface of the earth but also a linguistic key that emerges in the red unconscious, the commonwealth dreamworld that arrives incomplete (Cadava and Nadal-Melsió 303). Nahuatl, whose structure of agglutination surfaces as displaced and denatured Greek (*àvà*), French (*vie*), and German (*witz*), cuts the grammar of Europe and forces it into another composition. The name of the coming communism will be made through law-annihilating afformation. It will not be called communism. Nor will it be called anarchy, though the name, *Anaquivitzli*, borrows its sound, making it into a key, "one of its passwords, the shibboleth" that ends the book (331).

The shack's embedded heliotropism—the point at which the spire meets light—is a place not of speech but of violence. Benjamin's dream-word for it is *scharrte* ("scraping," "scratching"; *Einbahnstrasse* 27), evoking both violence and sound. ("[B]ut I sound better since you cut my throat," writes Fred Moten [*Hughson's Tavern* 23]). If the angel arrives, it's through what Moten calls "phonic materiality," the extragrammatical or paralinguistic baggage any text both bears and disavows as its means (*In the Break*, e.g., 292).[7] Judith Butler knew it as the social residue held in every utterance, but there are other ways, too, of understanding this sociality's irreducible materiality and its fundamentally mass-like character. For Moten and Butler—who both work between the performative and the Benjaminian afformative—language is not only marked by time but cut by time's inhabitation in each utterance (as scar, as mark, as dust), and it is this duration, this disordered, unauthorable, social persistence, to which *Angelus* (and his justice) is owed (see Hamacher 1148). If the angel speaks of justice, or speaks on behalf of justice, his voice does not belong to him. Moten hears him in the grain of Angela Davis's voice, though I've heard it's Samih Al-Qasim's.[8]

If we can't reawaken our dead, we can find them buried in language. The structure of justice is that of language, Werner Hamacher contends, insofar as language holds the possibility of being radicalized at every iteration by the matter it bears and conceals (1145).

There are many angels in Benjamin's oeuvre, each with a distinct mode of speech and style of performance. Working among them, André Lepecki marks a transformation of the angel-as-concept from 1931 to 1940, from the journal, also named *Angelus Novus*, that Benjamin planned but never published with Gershom Scholem to his angel of history. Writing to Scholem, Benjamin described the angel as

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a perfect messenger of God, who makes the angel solely for the deliverance of an unadulterated message. Then, voilà—in the instantaneous present tense of language, the angel disappears. As a performer, this angel is the ideal of aesthetic-semiotic servitude, as Lepecki writes: he is not only "a perfect messenger" (146) in an endless chain of evaporating angels, of angels replacing other angels, but also "an absolutely neutral and ahistorical messenger of events" (144) whose "mix of total servitude and self-erasure" (146) and whose "endless ahistorical executions" (147) are tantamount to "the willful slaughter of the performer's only life" (148). All angels are mediums. But the angel of history, unlike the servile angel, is impossibly weighted by the sediment he bears. He falters and spins and crashes into fate; he fails in his errand, and the materiality of that failure is a kind of persistence. He leaves a trace or he bears a trace; perhaps he is the trace. Nathaniel Mackey might call him the angel of dust.[9]

Does the angel speak of anarchy or does anarchy inhabit the angel? Is there a difference? And might the shack, unseen as it is, harbor a place where the dead and the living might meet and collude, and where that collusion—fundamentally indeterminate and unknowable—might be protected, so that it can take place? Benjamin's boxes, after all, "are more militant than antiquarian," as in, committed to getting us to choose our own concealment, displacement, and massification (Cadava and Nadal-Melsió 148). Communism as self-sacrifice, the giving away of a self that was not ever yours to begin with. And if all sharing is loss, communism is the collectivization of loss, the sharing of loss, and the making of loss a resource.

Even the Bode Museum isn't the Bode. Before it was known as the Bode, it was the Kaiser-Friedrich Museum, named after the emperor. In 1933, the temporary director of the Kaiser-Friedrich, temporary because the museum was rapidly transforming, made one innovation in a long-running theme: he demanded that every gallery save one be painted white. Such uniformity seemed "necessary to me," he wrote. White walls would keep the museum "flexible, i.e., allow changes at any moment without having to pay attention to the particularities of the rooms" (Klonk 125).[10] A better word for flexibility might be forgetfulness, insofar as the Bode provides a technology by which accumulated violence, the means and source of wealth, might be disavowed ad infinitum. Each room like all the others. All art in a process of exchange.

No doubt the museum will do everything in its power to prevent the defacement of *Angelus*. And box cutters, bread knives, Stanley knives, homemade triple-bladed Stanley knives, hammers, sledgehammers, lighters, stones, and syringes of sulfuric acid are no match for the museum.[11]

Remember Benjamin's invocation of the mythological Korah's hoard in "Critique of Violence," given at the precise point of the essay in which he must, for there is not much left to do, tell a story of a revolution that can overturn a violently imposed order without reinstituting the law. Importantly, the agent or author of this revolution is the collective and impersonal force known as the earth, on which the Korahites, a propertied people, walk. Suddenly, what was extracted and mined, what was covered up and disposed of, what was destituted, negated, and refused as mere means, opens. A chasm in the dirt. A caesura and a strike. Benjamin would describe this cut as "a non-action" that "cannot be described as violence at all" (*Toward the Critique* 43), insofar as the earth both summons the cut and is cut by it. The people of the Korah are swallowed whole, becoming less than what Jacques Derrida called *khōra*, that nothing that "gives place" (99–100).

No place can be given or taken here as no gravestone—no law or word—marks their absence.

Portbou could be anywhere—is everywhere, like Palestine.

What else to do? Once we arrive with our angel, we—

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Notes

1. Now read the words again: "as an exception." See Agamben, *State* and *Homo Sacer*.

2. For more on the performativity of Benjamin's concept of the law, see Hamacher.

3. That's Sara's phrase, in response to the bedtime scene in the 1973 film *El espíritu de la colmena* (*The Spirit of the Beehive*), which I had just seen on thirty-five millimeter.

4. In Benjamin's words, "As flowers turn toward the sun, by dint of a secret heliotropism the past strives to turn toward that sun which is rising in the sky of history" ("Theses" 255).

5. "What kind of politics is possible in the interplay between singularity and the impersonal, when intentions and agency remain indeterminate and moved by the 'wind of history' without ever being fully able to control the setting of the sails?" (Cadava and Nadal-Melsió 57).

6. Benjamin: "The historical index" of images "not only says that they belong to a particular time, it says, above all, that they attain to legibility only at a particular time" (*Arcades Project* 462–63; qtd. in Cadava and Nadal-Melsió 153).

7. I am also thinking, here, with Moten's movement nonperformance and afformativity. See *In the Break*, and in particular "Visible Music" (171–232, esp. note 63 [292–98]). For more on nonperformance and afformativity, see Moten, "Blackness"; and Hamacher.

8. Al-Qasim's poem "Enemy of the Sun" circulated for decades in Black Panther literature, misattributed to George Jackson (Thomas 236–53).

9. Frere-Jones writes, "Mackey says the name simply came to him, without any specific referent."

10. I am always indebted to Alhena Katsof; in this case, she told me about the Bode's history and provided this reference.

11. Every person who used these techniques was caught (see Goss).

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