

The Owl and the Angel

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Abstract: In Hegel's philosophical system, the owl of Minerva is not just a metaphor, but a significant symbol. In the symbolism of Hegel's time, it stood for ideas of enlightenment and political emancipation, including radical, revolutionary, cosmopolitan, anti-monarchical, and even anarchistic ideas. Hegel, however, places the owl in a context that appears utterly un-revolutionary. "The owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of dusk," he writes in the preface to the *Philosophy of Right*, thus summing up his argument that philosophy's task is not to teach the world how it ought to be, nor to issue instructions to the state, but rather to comprehend the world as reasonable.

Not only does Hegel's owl seem to defend the reactionary present state (a state against which she previously fought in the name of reason and freedom), but she also seems to teach us to accept the present with joy. The point is not merely to reconcile oneself with reality, but also to enjoy it. This paper traces a number of explanatory trajectories—philosophical, psychological, and anthropological—in order to elucidate the paradoxical nature of this enjoyment, and compares the figure of Minerva's owl with another flying creature, Walter Benjamin's Angel of History. Such a comparison aims to pave the way towards a new interpretation of Hegel's philosophy of history and time.

Like cabbage-heads in some seedbed of hell
They lay, looking up at us,
The heads of our comrades

Kirill Medvedev

THE owl of Minerva in the Hegelian system is not just a metaphor, but what one might call a heraldic symbol. Existing in a separate category from really existing owls, it presents a simplified image, like other heraldic animals (lions, griffins, falcons, dragons, and so on) whose purpose is to reveal an idea or the essence of a thing. Once it appears in the philosophical bestiary, the owl becomes an irreplaceable, indispensable element in it, and the reader of Hegel is faced again and again with the temptation to lose himself in tracing the trajectory of its twilight flight. Since, in Oscar Wilde's words, the only way to get rid of temptation is to yield to it, the ideas inspired by this image have lost none of their immediacy.

Even before Hegel introduced the owl of Minerva into his philosophy in the position of housekeeper, this symbol was in circulation in the culture of Hegel's time and was well-known to his contemporaries. *Minerva* was the name of a renowned historico-political journal edited by Johann Wilhelm Archenholz,¹ appearing at the turn of the nineteenth century, from whose pages Hegel, Hölderlin, Schelling and many other educated, progressively inclined Germans learned about the most recent world events (D'Hondt 1968: 7-43)—for example, rev-

Translated from Russian by *Timothy Dwight Williams*

1. All issues of the journal from 1792 to 1815 are archived online: <http://www.ub.uni-bielefeld.de/diglib/aufkl/minerva/minerva.htm> (last accessed September 8, 2015).

olution, not only in France but in Haiti (Buck-Morss 2009: 42-47). The owl perched on an open book served as the emblem of the Bavarian Illuminati—a secret society of the Masonic type, founded in 1776 in Ingolstadt (D’Hondt 1998) by the “first citizen of freedom,”² Adam Weishaupt. According to Jacques D’Hondt, author of a “secret biography” of Hegel, the philosopher was loosely involved in the society’s activities, though still quite a young man in 1784, when the Bavarian government placed an official ban on the group.

Secret esoteric societies such as the Freemasons, the Illuminati, and the Rosicrucians at that time faced the crucial task of fighting ignorance and disseminating the ideas of the Enlightenment, but there were, of course, other reasons for the authorities to fear them. Brotherhood had already materialized as a reality in these closed associations—freedom and equality were yet to come. In the wake of enlightenment understood as general intellectual and spiritual emancipation there followed ideas for political emancipation, including radical, revolutionary, cosmopolitan, anti-monarchical and even anarchistic ideas. Amongst other accusations leveled at them, the Illuminati were charged with conspiracy, with the abolition of nation-states as one of its goals.

As a significant symbol, the owl of Minerva reflects the ambiguity of the situation where the ideals of universal knowledge, openness, equality and freedom demand from their chief adherents, conversely, a certain amount of secrecy, the observance of occult rituals, a strict hierarchy, and so on. The necessarily conspiratorial nature of their subversive activity in conditions of pervasive obscurantism has correspondingly given birth to conspiracy theories that explain the lack of transparency in organizations of the Masonic type (cf. Piatigorsky 1997) as resulting primarily from their evil intentions (whether involving the blood sacrifice of children or a global cabal). In the image of the owl of Minerva sitting on a book is embodied the paradox of knowledge itself, necessarily universal and simultaneously necessarily occult: where there is knowledge, there must be a secret supposed to be known. On the one hand, the owl is the bird of reason and light; on the other hand, the “ominous and fearful owl of death,” in Shakespeare’s words, is the ruler of night and darkness, in which murders and sorcery take place.

2. The tombstone of the order’s founder bore the inscription: “Here lies Weishaupt—a respected man of scholarly mind, the first citizen of freedom!” Cf. (last accessed September 12, 2015): <http://www.illuminaten.org/seminararbeit/adam-weishaupt>.

In short, Hegel's owl does not appear from nowhere. In the symbolism of the age, it represents not only reason, but also revolution, around which reason circles dangerously and with increasing intensity. The utterly un-revolutionary context into which Hegel suddenly places the owl is thus all the more bewildering. "When philosophy paints its grey in grey, then has a shape of life grown old. By philosophy's grey in grey it cannot be rejuvenated, but only understood. The owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of dusk," he writes in the penultimate paragraph of the preface to the *Philosophy of Right* (Hegel 1967: 13), thus summing up his argument that philosophy's task is not to teach the world how it ought to be, and give instructions to the state, but to "comprehend *what is* [...] for *what is*, is reason" (Hegel 1967: 11).

Hegel's owl, it seems, is no anarchist or revolutionary, no conspirator seeking to change the world, but an old defender of the same state against which she once stood in the name of reason and freedom. Philosophy finds its proper place within God and the state as the "moral universum." More rational than ideals is the grey old reality, with which one must become reconciled. This reconciliation is furthermore not renunciation or simply acceptance of the inevitable. Reason "is just as little content with the cold despair which submits to the view that in this earthly life things are truly bad or at best only tolerable, thought here they cannot be improved and that this is the only reflection which can keep us at peace with the world: There is less chill in the peace with the world which knowledge supplies" (Hegel 1967: 12). This peace is by no means coerced; on the contrary, it brings joy: "To recognize reason as the rose in the cross of the present and thereby to enjoy the present (*Gegenwart ... sich zu erfreuen*), this is the rational insight which reconciles us to the actual, the reconciliation which philosophy affords to those in whom there has once arisen an inner voice bidding them to comprehend, not only to dwell in what is substantive while still retaining subjective freedom, but also to possess subjective freedom while standing not in anything particular, but in what exists absolutely" (Ibid.).

A number of passages in this quotation attract our attention and merit some closer thought. First of all, the rose on the cross is, like the owl of Minerva and in equal measure, an ambiguous symbol: if the owl evokes the Illuminati, the rose on the cross is the emblem of the Rosicrucians. Hegel's works are full of deliberate allusions to the secret societies of his time. In their philosophical interpretation, these images take on new and unexpected meaning. Moreover, Hegel is not the sort of author who piles on metaphors gratuitously: the rose on

the cross in the preface to the *Philosophy of Right* is freighted with rich significance.

On the one hand, this powerful image hints to us that the present is a kind of cross, possibly a heavy one, to which reason then becomes attached, or perhaps out of which reason grows, as something extraneous, but beautiful and alive (like a rose). The contrast here is important: the cognition that reconciles us with reality, would not permit us to enjoy the present if it were not at the same time a heavy cross we must bear.

In an earlier passage in the preface, Hegel paraphrases the moral of Aesop's fable of the Boasting Traveler and, acting as if the sense of such a play on words were self-evident, transforms "*Hic Rhodus, hic saltus*" (Here is Rhodes, jump here) into "*Hier ist die Rose, hier tanze*" (Here is the rose, dance here) (Hegel 1967: 11). Philosophy invites us to dance, expressing the joy of sympathetic reason and reconciliation with reality, not somewhere, sometime, but precisely here and now. The dance with the roses on the cross of the present is the culmination of the celebration of universal understanding. "Here is the rose, dance here" could be Hegel's answer to the anarchistic motto attributed to Emma Goldman, "If I can't dance, it's not my revolution." It is not in some distant, ideal revolution, but in the reality of the actually existing state that sympathetic reason begins joyfully whirling in its ritual dance.

On the other hand, the cross symbolizes death in Christian culture. Crosses adorn and designate graves. The cross as a sign thus testifies to the dead's status as truly dead; we should remember, however, that in Christianity, the finality of death in fact represents immortality and eternal life for the dead: the deceased rest in peace, and only those dead who are not dead, the *undead*, the living dead continue wandering about, restlessly. In an analogous manner, the Hegelian "cross of the present" represents the end of time itself. "[P]hilosophy is *its own time apprehended in thoughts*," Hegel says, meaning the present: it is impossible to "overleap his own age, jump over Rhodes" (Ibid.), impossible to leap over death. For philosophy, any time which is *not present* (and that means any time, because the present is not a time, but a ceaseless transition into nonbeing) is always already dead in some sense. Hegel's cross of the present on the grave of time is crowned with the roses of knowledge. Philosophy spins around this grave in a macabre dance. Reason, the funeral wreath, is given over to mourning, and reconciliation is indistinguishable from the peace of the graveyard.

The owl of Minerva flying at twilight arrives at just such a picture of completed, and therefore comprehensible and accessible, time. Instead of resolving how to take action and creating projects for the or-

ganization of the future, philosophy takes a look backward, acting like a monochrome painting: grey on grey nicely captures the graveyard atmosphere. As if the dust of ashes drew not a rose but the owl sitting on a graveyard cross in Caspar David Friedrich's painting "Owl on a Grave Marker." In fact Friedrich's whole series of sepia depictions of owls, completed in the period between 1836 and 1839, after the artist was devastated by paralysis and could no longer work in oil painting—"Owl Flying Against a Moonlit Sky," "Owl in a Gothic Window," "Landscape with Grave, Coffin, and Owl," could serve as great illustrations for this passage in Hegel.

Incidentally, the last of the illustrations mentioned, "Landscape with Grave, Coffin, and Owl" (1839), appears on the cover of Rebecca Comay's book *Mourning Sickness: Hegel and the French Revolution* (2011), which undertakes an interesting effort to rethink the relationship between Hegelian philosophy and its historico-philosophical context. Comay's analysis starts with the concepts of trauma, mourning and melancholy.³ The author expands upon these concepts, taken from Freud, by applying them to German culture more broadly and German philosophy in particular. The diagnosis, declared in the title, of mourning sickness, originates in contemporary mass culture: it is the name for the lamentations and collective affect that the media provokes in connection with certain world or national events, such as the death of a celebrity.

In Comay's view, the common mournful and melancholic tone of German classical thought is determined by references to a traumatic event which had not in fact taken place in Germany. It is mourning the loss of something that was never there. Revolution—the embodiment of the ideas of the enlightenment in reality, transforming the political life of society in its entirety—had occurred nearby, in France, and the Germans, active readers of magazines and newspapers, had merely observed it at a safe distance, as people look, in Herder's words, "from a secure shore at a shipwreck far off in the open sea" (Herder 1971: 336), drawing lessons from the mistakes of someone else's history.⁴

3. Hegel's relationship to the French Revolution in terms of melancholy are also examined by Artemy Magun, though he places greater emphasis on the idea of negativity (Magun 2013: 187-192).

4. In the drafts of the *Briefe zu Beförderung der Humanität*, Herder writes: "And if Providence itself put this spectacle before our eyes, if it, after a long preparation, allowed it to happen in our time, that we might see it and *learn* from it—who does not want to learn from it and will not thank God for the fact that it is happening abroad and that we are involved in it only as a newspaper report, unless, as already mentioned, some evil genius is not going to plunge us reck-

Comay calls this type of situation, when revolution appears not as a really lived experience, but as a sublime spectacle of catastrophe, simultaneously splendid and appalling, a “Kantian theater,” noting the duality or even duplicity of Kant’s position: on the one hand, sympathy with the ideals of Enlightenment and republicanism (which Kant, introducing the distinction between spirit and letter, proposes to support as regulative ideas within monarchical government) (Comay 2011: 166-167), and on the other, rejection of revolution as such, inasmuch as it goes *against the law* — not only against a particular juridical or moral law, but against the principle of law in general, against universal formal law. The execution of the sovereign, who was the guarantor of law, exposes the pure arbitrariness that underlies its very form (Comay 2011: 36-37).

German culture knows revolution only in translation, Comay underscores, following Marx, who, in the *Communist Manifesto*, for example, ridicules German philosophers and “literati” for their unconvincing attempts to “bring ... the new French ideas into harmony with their ancient philosophical conscience,” implemented “in the same way in which a foreign language is appropriated, namely, by translation” (Marx, Engels 1848). According to Marx, the most important element is lost in translation, namely the class struggle; political revolution is emasculated by being transformed into a revolution of the spirit, of ideas, of morals—a conceptual, theoretical revolution. “Not true requirements, but the requirements of Truth” are raised up as goals; “not the interests of the proletariat, but the interests of Human Nature, of Man in general, who belongs to no class, has no reality, who exists only in the misty realm of philosophical fantasy” (Ibid). Such “foul and enervating literature” represents the product of so-called “true” German socialism, which, being a “silly echo” of French criticism, lets its real historical chance pass it by and remains faithful to its calling—to serve as the “bombastic representative of the petty-bourgeois Philistine” (Ibid).

In her discussion of the temporality of translating the French Revolution into the language of German culture and philosophy, Comay frequently notes its paradoxical nature: the past had not yet occurred here, but the future is already precluded—having failed to appear, never having materialized, it nevertheless got left behind. In response to Marx’s

lessly headlong into what is happening? Here we are allowed to gather all of our German common sense, to look it over with empirical scrutiny, to reasonably use everything good, and throw out, according to justice and prudence, everything reprehensible” (Herder 1971: 337).

witty remark, in the introduction to his *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, that the Germans “have shared the restorations of modern nations without ever having shared their revolutions” and that “we only once kept company with freedom, *on the day of its interment*” (Marx 1843), Comay, however, observes that Hegel himself anticipates such a criticism—and not so much in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* as in the *Philosophy of Right*. The “strange temporality” in which the future is left in the past but the past has not taken place (the revolution has not yet come to pass, and now will never do so), finds its adequate expression in Hegelian philosophy which places before it the task of signifying the present—and in particular the actually existing state—as an anachronism (Comay 2011: 144). This form of life, beneath which is buried the freedom that never materialized, has already become old in the here and now.

Readers of the *Philosophy of Right* fall into two groups—those who consider it an eloquent testimony to Hegel's rejection of his youthful ideals of revolution and an apologia for the Prussian state, and those who see in the work a continuation of the emancipatory project under conditions of external reaction and censorship by that same Prussian state. Comay unequivocally belongs to the second group: in her interpretation, Hegel remains unconditionally true to the event of the revolution—the event that did not take place and was allowed to slip away. Comay is convinced that the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and the *Philosophy of Right* are two sides of the same intellectual scenario regarding the Spirit, and that the often-bewildering conservative pathos of the *Philosophy of Right* and, probably, many other works in the history of political philosophy, represents the result of “an endless negotiation with the censors” (Comay 2011: 144).

In defending Hegel the revolutionary against Hegel the reactionary, it is possible to base the argument on the fact that the rational reality Hegel refers to in the controversial passage on reconciliation is not exactly reality as we generally understand it. Thus, in the *Science of Logic*, Hegel makes a distinction between reality and existence and defines reality as the unity of essence and existence. As Engels underscores, “according to Hegel certainly not everything that exists is also real, without further qualification. For Hegel the attribute of reality belongs only to that which at the same time is necessary” (Engels 1946). As concerns the Prussian state of which the *Philosophy of Right* is commonly believed to be a vindication, according to Engels, Hegel's stance with regard to it rather signifies that “this state is rational, corresponds to reason, insofar as it is necessary; and if it nevertheless appears to us to be evil, but still, in spite of its evil character, continues to exist, then the

evil character of the government is justified and explained by the corresponding evil character of its subjects. The Prussians of that day had the government that they deserved" (Ibid.).

By strongly accenting the "strange temporality" of Hegelian philosophy, Comay, for her part, gives this classical Marxist reading an innovative Benjaminian twist: "'Actualization' (*Verwirklichung*) in this sense can mean nothing other than the *deactivation* of the existent and the reactivation and reenactment (in every sense) of the thwarted futures of the past. Actuality thus expresses precisely the pressure of the virtual: it opens history to the 'no longer' of a blocked possibility and the persistence of an unachieved 'not yet'" (Comay 2011: 144-145). In this "temporal convolution" the author discerns "something resembling the messianic structure of 'hope in the past'" (Ibid.). The Prussian state in this reading is presented as perhaps a real, but not an essential form of life. It is the cross of the present, upon which grows the rose of knowledge, on which there perches at twilight the owl of philosophy, and underneath which is buried the future itself. In the grave of time lies that which has not yet had a chance to be born. The present as anachronism both blocks and at the same time marks a whole series of missed opportunities. If we extend this thought further, then any moment in the present could be a revolution.

This interpretation of Hegel's philosophy undoubtedly draws profound inspiration from reading Benjamin. It would seem that we have no grounds whatever for juxtaposing the two authors: if Hegel's thesis on the rationality of reality is treated as an apologia for the status quo, ("for *what is*, is reason"), what can be further from the thought, persistently developed by Benjamin, that what is, is a catastrophe? Nonetheless, Comay manages to make a persuasive case for this parallel. In Benjamin's view, the main threat to humanity is represented not by the coming apocalypse, but the stability and preservation of what is: "That things are 'status quo' *is* the catastrophe" (Benjamin 2002: 184). The critical moment does not cease presenting itself as long as things maintain their position or follow their course (Benjamin 2002: 185). Every minute of the present in which the status quo is preserved, buries the future in the past and transforms history into ruins. "Catastrophe—to have missed the opportunity," writes Benjamin (Benjamin 1999: 474). It is this territory of missed opportunities and hope buried in the past where his meeting with Hegel takes place.

The owl of Minerva completes her flight at precisely the moment when everything has already happened, and what has occurred cannot be changed, or (what amounts to the same thing) when nothing has already happened, when the opportunity has been missed, that is, now.

In an essential way, the owl of Minerva is a witness to the catastrophe. As Mladen Dolar suggests,⁵ a condition for the existence of philosophy and its activity of drawing grey on grey is, in Hegel, a devastating, catastrophic event—the end of the world or apocalypse—only after which event can thought arise, as if from ashes. In fact, being, in order to be, requires this primeval catastrophic event: the end of the world precedes its beginning. To begin from the very beginning, it is necessary at the beginning to reach the end. Of decisive importance is the point of transition (an empty point) from being (pure being) to nothingness (and vice versa). Hegel describes this transition in various ways, everywhere, it may be said, in all of his works, but particularly precisely and tersely at the beginning of the first chapter of the first book of the *Science of Logic*, where he declares that *pure being and pure nothingness are one and the same thing* (Hegel 2010: 59). It is crucial to note that here, “one and the same” signifies not indifference but absolute engagement, the truth of which—becoming—contains a delicate temporal nuance: “being has passed over into nothing and nothing into being—‘has passed over,’ not passes over” (Hegel 2010: 59-60). Becoming unfolds in the post-apocalyptic modality of “always already,” and thought, which in this process ceases to identify itself with being, carries from the outset a mark of the irremediability of (non-)happening.

Comay also sees Hegel as a philosopher of catastrophe, but in addition, she radically reads him as already expressing Benjaminian awareness of the unpostponable urgency of revolutionary interference in the course of history and the need for a break with the catastrophic continuum of the present (Comay 2013: 251-259). Reconciliation with reality, read this way, dialectically crosses over into its opposite, into irreconcilability, which emerges, however, not as a romantic rejection of reality, but as its deactivation, its abolition through completion, through the “always already” of the transition from being into nothingness. This transition becomes double and in its natural, immediate form is cast off or overcome; the negation of negation takes place. That which buries the future in the past is itself old, grey, and dead. As if we could do away with it and start over, find what was lost, let the un-happened to happen.

Like Hegel’s owl of Minerva, Benjamin’s Angel of History—the *Angelus Novus* from Klee’s painting—is a witness to the world ca-

5. I am borrowing the idea of catastrophe, of apocalypse as the founding event of being and thought in Hegel’s philosophy from Mladen Dolar, who has been kind enough to share with me an unpublished passage in which the Hegelian subject is described as a catastrophe survivor.

tastrophe. With his eyes wide open and his lips rounded, he looks into the past, from whence none return. A storm wind blows back in his face from heaven. “The storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the rubble-heap before him grows sky-high” (Benjamin 2015): the precipitate movement of the angel into the future looks more than anything like falling down. Instead of a series of events succeeding each other, he observes “one single catastrophe, which unceasingly piles rubble on top of rubble and hurls it before his feet” (Ibid.). He would like to stay, “to awaken the dead and to piece together what has been smashed,” but the storm is so strong that he cannot even fold his wings. Benjamin’s reader almost feels the pain of the fallen angel experiencing his clumsy, brutish, birdlike body.

The owl of Minerva and the angel of history, two images whose mediation is vital to our understanding of modern historical subjectivity, have much in common. Both the angel and the owl have feathered wings. They are both flying creatures. Both turn their gaze backward, into the past, at what has already been (un)consummated. Both see in front of them something grey: the angel of history ruins and rubble, the owl of Minerva dust and ashes. Both are unable to change or fix anything. They are united by the irreversibility of real or imagined loss, inability to interfere in the catastrophic march of events or influence it, to replay history. They are birds of grief, mourning and melancholy. And yet, such a description does not exhaust their shared psychoemotional content. Behind the obvious background of desolation, something else is hidden.

As we find our way toward this something else, we should once again remember the dance with roses and the fact that Hegelian reality at the moment of our reconciliation with it not only makes itself understandable, but gives cause for enjoyment. The end of the world watched over by the owl of Minerva, the end of history, the end of time, represents a sorrowful picture of the withering of life, but in point of fact, the philosophizing animal’s passion is not for life but for truth. That animal’s main organ of feeling is reason. As translator T.M. Knox writes in the notes to the English edition of the *Philosophy of Right*: “If the actual is rational, then however tragic the actual may seem to be, reason will be able to find joy in it, because it will find itself in it as its essence.”⁶ The thesis on the rationality of reality thus contains a certain kind of “imperative to enjoy.” In making this reconciliation, we are not renouncing the pleasure principle in favour

6. Hegel 1967: 303, note by T.M. Knox.

of the reality principle, in order to receive some safe and happy grey life in return. On the contrary, at the world's twilight, when the Hegelian spirit embodied in the nocturnal bird abandons the dead body of history, some primary, unconscious desire of ours suddenly uncovers its element.

The angel of history, in turn, is revealed to be an unambiguously melancholic figure. As Jonathan Flatley writes, it is not only "that Benjamin himself—born, as he noted, 'under the sign of Saturn'—tended toward depression is well known, and the problem of melancholy recurs regularly in his work" (Flatley 2008: 64), but materialist method is itself melancholic, inextricably linked as it is with loss. A prominent tradition of Benjamin interpretation is focused on melancholy and depression; its most important voice is that of Gershom Scholem. Scholem analyzes in particular an enigmatic short fragment written by Benjamin on Ibiza in August 1933, entitled "Agesilaus Santander" (Scholem 1976: 198-237). This fictional name, supposedly bestowed on the author by his Jewish parents to supplement his real name, belongs not so much to Benjamin himself as to his "personal angel." In the Jewish tradition, each person possesses such an angel: he represents the person's hidden or celestial self. No less important, according to Scholem, is the fact that this combination of the name of the king of Sparta, Agesilaus, and the name of the north Spanish city Santander conceals the anagram "Der Angelus Satanas," signifying a union of "angelic and demonic forces" (Scholem 1976: 217). Scholem traces the dynamics of how the demonic motifs, inspired not only by mysticism and theology, but also the poetry of Baudelaire, develop in Benjamin's angelology, and claims that the *Angelus Novus* from Thesis IX in *On the Concept of History* is the same Satan who figures elsewhere in Benjamin's work, though concealed under a different name. The word "Novus" (new)—given that the real, "old" name of the angel is already designated and known—indicates an uncanny repetition and the return of the same. It is truly a fallen angel, a dark bearer of evil rather than good. His Satanic nature, in Scholem's view, is underscored by his "claws and knife-sharp wings": "No angel, but only Satan, possesses claws and talons" (Scholem 1976: 222). For Benjamin, the encounter with this demonic angel is a secular epiphany, but, Scholem concludes, its secular nature does not prevent the image from playing a deeply mystical role, as it expresses the "occult reality" of Benjamin himself, a melancholy accumulation of various irreparable losses.

It is difficult to disagree with Scholem's version, and yet there is a philosopher who takes it upon himself to face that challenge, painstaking-

ingly refuting the most self-evident and convincing arguments in his interpretation—Giorgio Agamben.⁷ In his reading, the angel of history is not a melancholic figure, but a messianic one. Agamben directs our attention to the following passage from Benjamin's fragment: "He [Agesilaus Santander] wants happiness: the conflict in which lies the ecstasy of the unique, new, as yet un-lived with that bliss of the 'once more,' the having again, the lived" (Scholem 1976: 208). Scholem, of course, did not neglect to discuss this passage, but for him the happiness that the angel wants consists of a mystical connection with lost objects, where for Agamben happiness lies in salvation and redemption. If Benjamin's "personal angel" is a demon, then it is by no means the demon stigmatized by Judeo-Christian religious tradition, it is not Lucifer, whose fierce claws are kissed by witches at their Sabbaths. Agamben proposes to examine the other meaning of the word "demonic," originating in classical Greek ethics, which Agamben reads as the doctrine of happiness: "For the Greeks, the link between the demonic (*daimonion*) and happiness was evident in the very term with which they designated happiness, *eudaimonia*" (Agamben 1999: 138). Agamben agrees that the old and the new angel are the same character, but he rejects its depressive-melancholic, occult, and Luciferian qualities. Instead, in Agamben's reading, the angel is "a bright figure who, in the strict solidarity of happiness and historical redemption, establishes the very relation of the profane order to the messianic [...]" (Agamben 1999: 145).

These counter-intuitive conclusions may, of course, seem bewildering to some who, following Scholem, could point to the angel's feral claws as endowing him with a diabolical nature, but for them Agamben also has an answer: Satan is not the only angel with claws. In the European iconographic tradition it is Eros, more than Satan, who joins together angelic and demonic features—and he, too, incidentally, is often depicted with feral claws. It is no accident that Benjamin himself, in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, refers to a painting by Giotto, in which Cupid is shown "as a demon of wantonness with a bat's wings and claws" (Benjamin 2009: 226). As Agamben remarks, the new angel in Klee's painting has arms and claws that make him resemble a predatory bird. The claws reveal not the demonic, but the "destructive—and simultaneously liberating—power of the angel" (Agamben 1999: 142). Thus we are dealing with no depressive melancholic, but a real *exter-*

7. I owe this reference to Sami Khatib, from whom I learned that the Angel of history is happy when brushed again the grain.

minating angel.⁸ Agamben references yet another text, in which Benjamin cites Klee's angel and speaks of "a humanity that proves itself by destruction": "where origin and destruction come together, [the demon's] rule is over" (Agamben 1999: 150, quoting Benjamin 1986: 273), he writes in the essay "Karl Kraus," as if disputing in advance the interpretation placed on his work by his friend Scholem. The theme of destruction, emphasized by Agamben, plays a crucial role here.⁹ Destruction does not contradict happiness and love, quite the contrary: the place where destruction and origin meet is the moment of redemption. It must be admitted that understood in this way, the desire of Benjamin's angel is close to the drive to reach the end in order to begin again, with which Hegel's owl flies at twilight toward death—another creature with long, sharp claws, naturally. The owl and the angel are birds of the apocalypse. They do not simply observe catastrophe, but find in it their own element and the beginning of a new life. Beyond mourning, sorrow and melancholy, they share a strange enjoyment.

We could try to explain this enjoyment in a number of ways. The first would be a philosophical explanation. The owl and the angel enjoy as they find themselves drawn into a vertiginous vortex of double negation. In the owl's case this is expressed in the fact that reality, or the present as the simple negativity of time, annulling everything that is not itself, in turn also becomes obsolete and annuls itself in each of its constitutive moments. The owl rejoiced at the catastrophic nature of the transition point from being into nothingness, as the owl coincided with this point on the path to the beginning that can be followed through to the end only by slipping through the needle's eye of death. In the angel's case, it is the joy of victory over the demon, the happy possibility of the destruction of destruction itself, thereby becoming joined together with origination, that is, again finding the beginning of the path through its end. For the owl and the angel, the end of history is connected with the redemptive destruction of the destructive force that operates in history. It is a purely dialectical, difficult enjoyment, accessible only to a select few.

The second kind of explanation would be psychoanalytical: the secret of the owl and the angel is that their principal drive, the death drive, finds itself actualized in history's most catastrophic development. As

8. *El ángel exterminador* (Sp.) is the title of a well-known Surrealist film by Luis Buñuell, which refers to some Biblical stories, particularly the apocalypse, as well as the Old Testament story of the Angel of Death.

9. Sami Khatib develops this theme in his extensive study of Benjamin's messianism and nihilism as a revolutionary philosophical method (Khatib 2013).

Comay writes, elucidating the link established by Freud between the repetition compulsion (for example, daily rituals through which a traumatic event is unconsciously reenacted) and the death drive: "... the compulsion to repeat expresses a desire for inanimate existence and ultimately for nonexistence: it is a desire to return to a time before the beginning—to go back not for the sake of regressing but in order to take it over again, to do it otherwise. The desire for repetition is essentially the desire for difference. This is why Lacan will underline the link between the death drive and sublimation. It is only the encounter with death that clears the slate for a new beginning: every creation is an ex nihilo creation" (Comay 2011: 148). Death is needed and desired, then, in order to return, to repeat (but also remake) history. Moreover, examined from the point of view of psychology, happiness and melancholy are not, strictly speaking, mutually exclusive. In keeping with Freud's theory, as Artemy Magun underscores, "there is, in both mourning and melancholy, a manic, joyous phase, in which the individual celebrates his sovereign solitude, liberation from the object, both external and internal" (Magun 2011: 51). What if the owl and angel have already moved into this manic phase, and take sovereign joy in their solitude and freedom?

Finally, an anthropological explanation can also be found for the enjoyment of the owl and the angel. They are not only simultaneously witnesses to and participants in the catastrophe (of the end of the world and of missed opportunities), but are also those who *survived* the catastrophe. They are the last birds. They fly over when all the other animals have already died. They are survivors, and survival, in the words of Elias Canetti, "is a kind of pleasure" (Canetti 1984: 230). A central chapter of his book *Crowds and Power* is concerned with the nature of this pleasure, compared to which "all grief is insignificant" (Canetti 1984: 227); Canetti describes survival as the "moment of power": "Horror at the sight of death turns into satisfaction that it is someone else who is dead. The dead man lies on the ground while the survivor stands" (Ibid.). The feeling of absolute power arises from this exaltation over the dead, who can no longer stand in your path. It is important that "whether the survivor is confronted by one dead man or by many, the essence of the situation is that he feels *unique*. He sees himself standing there alone and exults in it; and when we speak of the power which this moment gives him, we should never forget that it derives from his sense of uniqueness and from nothing else" (Ibid.). The survivor "knows of many deaths"—he has seen his comrades and his enemies, whom he risked his life with, fall. There is a pile of dead men around the survivor. He, however, has managed to avoid death,

and is therefore the “victor,” “favoured of the gods,” and a “hero” (Kant 1984: 227-8). From this perspective, grief and mourning for the fallen appear to be rather a mask, a screen for that same manic happiness of “sovereign solitude” and liberation to which the owl and the angel are subject.

Enjoyment, happiness, and pleasure are not so much affects as a certain kind of ontological modes, not unlike Heideggerian horror. They in fact immediately border on horror in certain conditions, or rather, since the words “immediately border on” make no sense in the Hegelian context (since any border is already a form of mediation), they pass over into each other. If for Canetti horror at the feeling of imminent death precedes the survivor’s triumphant joy, then for Hegel it accompanies the consciousness of absolute freedom. That is the political condition discussed in the concluding part of the sixth chapter in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*’s second section, “Absolute Freedom and Terror.” In it, Hegel discusses the Enlightenment, which “will taste the fruits of its deeds” (Hegel 1977: 354). The Enlightenment is followed by revolution, which in turn is followed by terror. When there is no god, and the previous form of rule and social stratum have been done away with, the “undivided Substance of absolute freedom ascends the throne of the world without any power being able to resist It” (Hegel 1977: 357). In the experience of revolution, the “common sense” and “utility” with which the Enlightenment linked itself suddenly devolve into the madness and potlach of terror.

The fruits of the Enlightenment that allow the spirit to open up for itself the space of absolute freedom look like vegetables—self-consciousness suddenly sees before itself the guillotine and decapitated heads piled up like cabbages: “The sole work and deed of universal freedom is therefore death, a death too which has no inner significance or filling, for what is negated is the empty point of the absolutely free self. It is thus the coldest and meanest of all deaths, with no more significance than cutting off a head of cabbage or swallowing a mouthful of water” (Hegel 1977: 360). As Comay writes in her commentary on this passage, “Absolute freedom *is* terror. It is the infinite melancholia of a self that knows no other” (Comay 2011: 68). The world of objects, detached from self-consciousness and opposed to it, has lost the certainty of its reality; the “independence of real being” has been transformed into a “corpse” (Hegel 1977: 358). Spirit thus finds itself entrusted to its own self, to its “sovereign solitude,” and now death as a free, but choiceless reality frightens it: “the *terror* of death is the vision of this negative nature of itself” (Hegel 1977: 361). Such terror would appear to have nothing in common with the philosophical owl’s enjoyment in recon-

ciliation as it flies at the end of time, and yet it gives birth to pleasure: “so does absolute freedom leave its self-destroying reality and pass over into another land of self-conscious Spirit where, in this unreal world, freedom has the value of truth. In the thought of this truth spirit refreshes itself, in so far as *it is* and remains *thought*” (Hegel 1977: 363). The “fury of destruction” that embodies negative freedom (359), like the night owl, also has wings.¹⁰ Between terror and pleasure (the latter attributed by Hegel to the birth of a new form of “moral spirit”) runs this boundary, or rather transition. Sovereign freedom brings this transition into being, thereby revealing itself in its new, euphoric, manic mode. To rejoice in the new, it was necessary to pass through its devastating and catastrophic trial, encountering solitude and death themselves under the name of freedom. Freedom is necessity, that is, reality, that is, reason.

The encounter that takes place at this juncture between the “revolutionary” *Phenomenology of Spirit* and the “reactionary” *Philosophy of Right*, closing—or opening (it amounts to the same)—the Hegelian system, once more convinces us of its irreproachable consistency. The owl of Minerva pierces its way through from the end to the beginning like the Benjaminian Angel who wishes to destroy destruction itself. So what if this path is not accessible to people at all, but only to clawed, winged creatures, since it goes through the abyss between reality and freedom—the abyss into which historical humanity irreversibly disappears? Hovering or hanging over this abyss, revealing from a bird’s eye view the picture of the apocalypse that has just occurred, is accompanied by oscillations between depression and euphoria, terror and joy, melancholy and happiness.

The problem, as I see it, lies in the fact that the amplitude of these oscillations develops, if anything, according to a psychotic scenario. The situation of losing not simply the other, but the whole world, without any hope of reassembling it, is a typical one for psychotics. As has already been noted, the survivor, the Spirit of revolution, the owl and the angel find themselves in complete solitude at the critical moment. It is precisely solitude, that is, the incommunicability of the experience of knowledge, which gives that experience a psychotic quality. Solitude is a crooked mirror, looking into whose reflection leads the viewer to mistake power for freedom (it is no accident that Canetti’s book ends with a chapter on the paranoia of Judge Daniel Paul Schreber). Should not the survival of a witness to the world catastrophe itself be witnessed by

10. The goddesses of vengeance, the Furies or Erinyes of Greco-Roman mythology, are often depicted with snakes for hair, black canine snouts, or batwings.

someone else, by others? Only then, when in the gap between thought and the disappearing world there appears community, does the Hegelian “terror of death” transform into what Georges Bataille called “joy in the face of death” (Bataille 1979).

According to Bataille, the practice of joy in the face of death can only take place in a collective, shared fashion. The isolated individual ceases to exist when it happens, as the boundaries of individuality break down: “Having got into the game with death, he has already gone outside the limits of himself, into the glorious community who laugh at the misery of their fellows and, with each moment driving out and destroying his predecessor, he triumphs over time as it continues to reign over his neighbors ... community is necessary to him in order to feel the glory of that moment that tears him from existence. The feeling of connection with those who have been chosen to unite their great intoxication, is only a means of noticing that loss is glory and victory, that the dead man’s end signifies renewed life, a flash of light, an alleluia” (Bataille 1979). The triumph of the participant over time “that reigns over his neighbors” resembles the negation of negation, rejoiced in by the owl, and the destruction of destruction wherein the angel finds happiness. But to make the “fury of destruction” itself disappear, it seems an entire flock of owls and host of angels would be required. Hegel is, in his own way, conscious of this problem and designates the way out of it dialectically, through the formation of the moral Spirit, or the State: thus that is how we arrive in the end at the *Philosophy of Right*. Community, however, does not appear as a central theme for philosophy until the twentieth century, in the wake of a series of catastrophes that bring down entire States. What kind of inhuman community can take up the challenge of our still post-apocalyptic world? Let this difficult question lie at the foundation of further investigations and communities, in which Hegel and his wise owl will no doubt emerge once again as participants.

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