

Article

In Search of Lost Community: The Literary Image between “Proust” and “Baudelaire” in Walter Benjamin’s Modernization Lament

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Abstract: This essay takes up the encounter between philosophy and literature through a reconsideration of Walter Benjamin’s remarks from “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” about Henri Bergson’s *Matière et mémoire* as an attempt “[t]owering above” other ventures into *Lebensphilosophie* to “lay hold of the ‘true’ experience, as opposed to the kind that manifests itself in the standardized, denatured life of the civilized masses”. Despite his initial affirmation of Bergson’s understanding of experience as connected with tradition, Benjamin criticizes the philosopher’s account for sidestepping “the alienating, blinding experience of the age of large-scale industrialism” in reaction to which, as Benjamin insists, Bergson’s philosophy of memory developed. Yet even as Bergson shuts out the historical import of modernization, according to Benjamin, he also spotlights a “complementary” visual experience “in the form of its spontaneous afterimage”. Benjamin subsequently defines Bergson’s philosophy as “an attempt to specify this afterimage and fix it as a permanent record”, an endeavor that inadvertently “furnishes a clue to the experience which presented itself undistorted to Baudelaire’s eyes, in the figure of his reader”. If the literary critic might be viewed here as weighing in on a long-running antagonism between philosophy and literature, then his assessment is resolute: by praising the self-conscious historicity of Baudelaire’s lyric, Benjamin declares that poetry succeeds where *Lebensphilosophie* fails. Notably, Baudelaire is not the only figure to upstage “ahistorical” Bergson, since Marcel Proust and Sigmund Freud facilitate this victory. To contextualize the second section of “Motifs”, where Benjamin discusses the novelist’s “immanent critique of Bergson” this essay offers a reading of “On the Image of Proust” as a *propaedeutic* to Benjamin’s privileging of “Baudelaire” over “Bergson” in the first section of “Motifs” to broach the destinies of diminished perception before he turns to Freud in the

third section. Drawing upon Freud's thermodynamic model of a selective and protective perceptual-conscious system from *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Benjamin explains how perception calcifies in adapting to industrialism. Notably, however, his "energetics" does not remain bound by closed-system economic premises insofar as he conceives Baudelaire's *correspondances* as an antidote to reification and modernization fatigue. The resulting configuration emerges against the backdrop of a lament about the decline of tradition-infused, long-term experience [*Erfahrung*] that accompanies the rise of isolated experience [*Erlebnis*]. In tracking Benjamin's seemingly melancholic employment of the literary image between "Proust" and "Baudelaire", the essay ultimately focuses on how he amplifies its sociohistorical potential to attest to the dehiscence of tradition as a community-sustaining force.

Keywords: walter benjamin; henri bergson; charles baudelaire; marcel proust; sigmund freud; literary image; modernization lament; longing for community; energetics

1. Introduction

After a couple of decades when Walter Benjamin was, for many of us, the ineluctable touchstone in theoretical discussions about the historicity of experience "after" its categorical deconstruction, shifting preoccupations now follow a new set of stars. A confluence of new materialist vocabularies foregrounds the "co-agential" valence of things as a "corrective" to poststructuralism's allegedly over-weaning obsession with subjectivity, figuration, and indeterminacy. Of course, as is the case with most ostensible correctives, the staunchest converts to the latest reaction formations against deconstruction and other linguistically-turned perspectives informed by Freudian psychoanalysis may have forgotten the lessons offered by prior materialisms and their attendant critiques in the process of letting objects talk back, albeit in their own "vibrant" registers. Long after Immanuel Kant's transcendental earthquake rattled philosophies of perception, the longing for unadulterated materiality has resurfaced with remarkable intensity as if it were a traumatized victim of authoritarian repression.¹

Of course, the "new" materialism has nothing in common with the "old" vulgar Marxist variety, fixated on the "base" over the "superstructure" in the last instance, even if some contemporary Marxists also harbor a grudge against poststructuralism for its "ahistorical" poeticisms, which allegedly diluted the discernibility of political economic realities in the course of stealing Marxism's institutional thunder. While Benjamin's passionate devotion to literary criticism troubles intransigent gestures that awkwardly pit "language" against "materiality",² it is not my aim to prove the anti-poststructuralists wrong here. Instead, I would like to reflect on language matters by revisiting Benjamin's comments

¹ For a sample of writings by prominent contributors to new materialism, see [1] and [2]. For Sara Ahmed's critical assessment of new materialism's alleged status as a "corrective" to poststructuralism, see [3].

² In the 1931 fragment entitled, "In Almost Every Example We Have of Materialist Literary History", Benjamin emphasizes the "enjoyability of all works of art: not simply because they can be explained but because—thanks to these explanations—they become the repositories not only of abstract or specific truth-contexts, but of truth-contents that are shot through with material contents" ([4], p. 547).

from “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” about Henri Bergson’s “early monumental work”, *Matière et mémoire*, as an attempt “[t]owering above” all other ventures into *Lebensphilosophie* to “lay hold of the ‘true’ experience, as opposed to the kind that manifests itself in the standardized, denatured life of the civilized masses”. Oriented toward biology, *Matter and Memory*, in Benjamin’s summary, “regards the structure of memory [*Gedächtnis*] as decisive for the philosophical structure of experience [*Erfahrung*]”, where *Erfahrung* refers to long-term, tradition-infused experience in contrast with momentary or isolated experience [*Erlebnis*]. Benjamin agrees with Bergson that “[e]xperience is indeed a matter of tradition, in collective existence as well as private life. It is a product less of facts firmly anchored in memory [*Erinnerung*] than of the accumulated and frequently unconscious data that flow together in memory [*Gedächtnis*]”. Despite this initial concurrence with Bergson, Benjamin nevertheless criticizes the philosopher for “[rejecting] any historical determination of memory. He thus manages to stay clear of that experience from which his own philosophy evolved, or, rather, in reaction to which it arose. It was”, as Benjamin deduces, “the alienating, blinding experience of the age of large-scale industrialism” ([5], p. 314).³

It is telling that “Bergson” does not function in the “Motifs” essay merely as Benjamin’s straw dog. The literary critic’s misleadingly brief comments about *Matter and Memory* also serve to introduce a pivotal thesis about a vulnerable perceptual faculty under siege by industrialism’s proliferating sensory pressures. Even though Bergson shuts out the historical import of these perceptual demands, he also spotlights a “complementary” visual experience “in the form of its spontaneous afterimage”. Benjamin subsequently defines Bergson’s philosophy as “an attempt to specify this afterimage and fix it as a permanent record”, an endeavor that inadvertently “furnishes a clue to the experience which presented itself undistorted to Baudelaire’s eyes, in the figure of his reader” ([5], p. 314). This mixed praise of Bergson thus contrasts with Benjamin’s untrammled admiration for Baudelaire, who, in addressing an audience that is decreasingly capable of reading lyric poetry, self-ironically mirrors a historically determined attenuation of perception that an “ahistorical” Bergson naively enacts. If Benjamin might be viewed here as weighing in on a long-running antagonism between philosophy and literature, then his judgment is resolute: by praising the self-conscious historicity of Baudelaire’s lyric, Benjamin declares that poetry succeeds where *Lebensphilosophie* fails.

The comments about Bergson in the opening section of the “Motifs” essay affirm Benjamin’s commitment to theorizing the subject-shaping import of fluctuations in the production and reception of cultural forms, a sociohistorical preoccupation that once spoke to a Marxist desire to think “materially”. I have previously attempted to unpack what *materiality* might mean for a writer such as Benjamin who

³ Given the trajectory of Benjamin’s Bergson commentary in the first section of the “Motifs” essay, it is amusing to see that Zone Books has cited his praise of Bergson’s “monumental work” as one of the blurbs for the 1991 edition of the English translation [6], ending the quotation just before the criticism. In *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life*, Howard Eiland and Michael Jennings identify the “prominent Neo-Kantian” Heinrich Rickert’s course entitled “Studies in Metaphysics in Conjunction with the Writings of Henri Bergson” as the source of Benjamin’s criticism of the French philosopher. Eiland and Jennings note that Rickert’s “teaching started from a critique of both positivism (the Comtean notion that data derived from sensory experience is the only valid source of knowledge) and vitalism (the philosophical focus on ‘life itself’ that had emerged from the critique of rationalism espoused by Schopenhauer and Nietzsche).” Rickert was, as the authors assert, “ultimately critical of Bergson’s ahistorical philosophy of life”, a criticism that Benjamin reiterates in the “Motifs” essay ([7], p. 33 and p. 685, note 22).

so unabashedly intermixes melancholic, paradoxical, historical materialist, primitivist, and mystical formulations in his essays [8],⁴ frequently structured, not as didactic expositions but as evocatively ordered fragments, or “thought figures” [*Denkbilder*] that demand literary analysis in their own right. In that context, I contended that his orchestration of messianic and primitivist tropes celebrates the return of a repressed potential for communion between moderns and “nature”, which, in keeping with Benjamin’s understanding of natural history, encompasses manufactured objects, cultural practices, and urban spaces. While this configuration seems to follow an ontotheological script, its conspicuous literariness conveys a longing for transcendence that determinately negates a philosophy seeking to operate, in Hannah Arendt’s phrasing, as a discourse of truth. For if Benjamin cares about *truth* in any conventional sense of the term, then it cannot be equated with knowledge “proved” through a reliable methodology; it flashes up suddenly as a rekindled poetic sentience or, alternately, a revolutionary hope buried under the rubble of urban concentration, rationalized production, and history narrated as progress. Rather than expanding knowledge through systematic investigation, these flashes owe their brief intelligibility to inadvertent lapses of consciousness, which, in Benjamin’s portrayal, literary images both refract and fill.

Yet if the self-conscious historicity of Baudelaire’s poetic percipience upstages Bergson’s “ahistorical” abstraction, then so do both Marcel Proust and Sigmund Freud. With its intensive focus on the literary formalization of spontaneous memory, Benjamin’s “On the Image of Proust” from 1929 (revised in 1934) [10] reads compellingly as a *propaedeutic* to Benjamin’s privileging of Baudelaire over Bergson in the first section of “Motifs” to broach the destinies of diminished perception. What comes to the fore in Benjamin’s “Proust” is the novelist’s self-conscious enunciation of involuntary memory as a literary image that reveals the limits of the philosopher’s conception of pure memory.

After reprising Proust’s “immanent critique of Bergson” ([5], p. 315) in the second section of “Motifs”, Benjamin in the third section draws upon Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* in order to illustrate how Bergson’s conception of pure memory reiterates a modern defense against sensory enervation in the era of experiential fragmentation. Freud’s model of a perceptual-conscious system that presupposes a thermodynamic economy of psychophysical energies distended between conservation and entropy helps Benjamin to visualize reification as a protective adaptation against sensory overdrive; however, what I will hereafter refer to as Benjamin’s “energetics” does not remain bound by Freudian thermodynamics insofar as he conceives the literary image as both a reaction against and an antidote to modernization fatigue.

Against the backdrop of a lament about the decline of *Erfahrung* that accompanies the rise of *Erlebnis*, in what follows, I will identify the “energies” that are “lost” or “regained” between Benjamin’s “Proust” and “Baudelaire”. My principal aim is to show how this trajectory promotes the literary image’s sociographic potential to supersede *Lebensphilosophie* in attesting to an historical moment distinguished by the dehiscence of tradition as a community-sustaining force. A point worth revisiting in this connection is how, despite Proust’s Bergson critique, Baudelaire’s *correspondances* nevertheless achieve a greater degree of sociohistorical dimensionality in Benjamin’s assessment than the novelist’s meticulously stylized *mémoire involontaire* because the former retain a relation to ritual elements ([5], p. 316). The key to this contrast, as I will argue, may be discovered in Benjamin’s

⁴ On Benjamin’s “melancholy dialectics”, see Max Pensky [9].

eneration of a “Baudelaire” who counters the alienation inscribed in Freud’s model of a defensively individuated perceptual consciousness by heroically leaving himself open to modernity’s sensory onslaught. This openness allows the poet not merely to acknowledge but also to gesture *past* industrialism’s numbing impact upon his readers to the prehistorical community they might have comprised before rationalization.

2. Modernization-as-Loss: Benjamin’s Lament

Enraptured by the fits and starts of long-term experience in decline, Benjamin’s reflections on the disintegration of religious traditions, auratic singularities, long-term experience, and an oral (storytelling and counsel receiving) culture revamp a wide-ranging Western lament about the spirit-dampening toll of adaptation to the shifting technologies and frenetic paces of industrialized production. In her analysis of the modernization lament as a periodizing devaluation of the current era, Rebecca Saunders underscores how this form supplies a logic of both loss and continuity in “[placing] an object or event at an inaccessible remove” while “[declaring] an absolute fidelity to it”. The lament is, in this respect, a *chronotope* that residualizes the surpassed, as Saunders points out, while nevertheless leaving a “back door” open for the return of the repressed. By positing an object that might not have been “owned” before it was ostensibly “lost”, laments allow, moreover, for a kind of “retroactive possession” that constructs the very desire it serves ([11], pp. xvi–xvii).

Though the lament’s ur-generic form stretches beyond the Western tradition, what is distinctive about the pathos that reverberates through “modern” laments is, as Saunders suggests, an orientation toward an anterior unifying experience that has been, at once, contaminated and attenuated by the sociomoral, cultural, and spiritual fall-out of industrialization.⁵ Yet whether or not this long-lost experience is associated with solidarity in the name of mutual survival, or a religiously-glued rural tranquility, modernization laments operate formally at a hair’s breadth apart as they “ontotheologize” an anterior ideal of communal integration that loses presence over time.⁶

An ongoing lament about modernity conceived as a period, as well as a site of irreversible transformation and lack, was already well rehearsed on both sides of the political spectrum by the time we arrive at Benjamin’s “Baudelaire” in Paris as the capital of the 19th century. In 1887, the German

⁵ The rhetorical gestures that align modernity with a sense of loss do not always “announce themselves to be elegies or laments”, as Rebecca Saunders observes, though they “may be indeed be powered by their very obscurity” ([11], p. xii). Whether or not a lament is recognized as such, Saunders writes, its form establishes both the event and relative mournability of loss. Saunders additionally emphasizes how “lamentation ratifies discourse with the affective potency of death”, thus endowing signification with “a formidable emotional intensity” that can “infect judgment, incite exorbitant response”, and even “goad” action as its “melancholy, angry, and dreadful moods” “spread from performers to witnesses”. Ultimately, then, it is this emotional intensity that empowers laments to disorder the Symbolic by resisting resolution and preempting the prospects for compensation ([11], p. xvii).

⁶ Based on his translation of the root *munus* as a collectively obliged gift, Robert Esposito aligns *communitas*, not with property or possession but, instead, with “a debt, a pledge, a gift that is to be given and that therefore will establish a lack” ([12], p. 6). Though this figuration of community locates loss in the future rather than the past, this future refers back to an originary obligation/debt [*munos*] “that constitutes us and makes us destitute in our mortal finiteness” ([12], p. 8). Esposito’s emplotment of the longing for community bears the potential to become ontotheological and melancholic if the collective is represented as failing its shared sense of the inaugural obligation.

sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies served up a paradigmatic rendition of the modernization lament when he characterized the decline of organic *Gemeinschaft* [community] before the onslaught of rationalizing *Gesellschaft* [society]. Tönnies distinguishes between a “real and organic” *Gemeinschaft* unified by rural life, family, and “natural will”, on the one hand, and an “imaginary and mechanical” *Gesellschaft* distinguished by an urban-classed, individuating mentality guided by “rational will”, on the other. While the “older” *Gemeinschaft* type involves an “intimate, private, and exclusive” as well as a “lasting and genuine” living together, the “younger” *Gesellschaft* ethos comprises “public life”, or “the world itself” ([13], p. 33).

Tönnies privileges community as a “natural totality” that retains movement and action in relation to its interdependent parts over the mechanical totalities put forward by science which “transforms all conditions and forces into movements” that it subsequently quantifies as “labor performed”, thereby “[reducing] the living to the dead in order to grasp its conditions and relations” ([13], p. 36). To the extent that this formulation echoes Marx’s understanding of the quantitative homogenization of labor time that produces “abstract” value and “deadens” labor, Tönnies anticipates early 20th century Marxist theses about *reification*, which expand the longing for community to a collective subject-forming level: *Gemeinschaft* once generated the vital force that rationalized *Gesellschaft* “deadens” or depletes.

Tönnies’ sociopsychological formations reanimate Plato’s Republic (a forerunner of *Gemeinschaft*) as well as Hegel’s “Family-Society” versus “Civic Society” ([14], p. viii) while shaping Max Weber’s and Gyorgy Lukács’ formulations of *Zweckrationalität* (goal-oriented rationality or instrumentality). Weber translated the non-rational *Gemeinschaft* mentality into an *affectual* type of association “wherein means and ends become fused” and action is dominated by feeling pressing for release in increasingly “rational” modes; he also posited a non-instrumental *traditional* type whereby means become ends in themselves, habitually at times, at the expense of evaluation ([15], p. 20).

Looking back to the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the German philosophical and sociological traditions brim with wariness about an industrialized capitalism that abandons the workers it coercively exhausts as well as reactionary anti-liberal nostalgia for self-sovereignty located in a traditional idyll where solidarity based on shared religious values held sway. Tönnies’ dichotomy canonizes a melancholic *topos* that resonates with myriad decline narratives circulated by a long line of modernization critics who worried about spiritual or cultural disintegration as “Civilization” overtakes “Culture” and “Society” displaces “Community”; as Taylorism’s (and then Fordism’s) ruthlessly divide-and-conquer spatiotemporalities consumed dignities and qualities; or as the culture industry and mass consumerism disintegrated faith, tradition, civility, memory, solidarity, individuality, spontaneity, and, last but not least, the capacity for genuine connection, or “true feeling”.

Marx decried reification in the treatment of humans as things whereas commodities inversely assume a vital aura, or animist glow, more “alive” than the “deadened” labor that created them, and this *topos* markedly shaped critical modernization laments between the World Wars and thereafter. Expanding upon Max Weber, Gyorgy Lukács, Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, and Herbert Marcuse depicted reification as an adaptive mechanism: a repercussion of the totalizing scale of rationalized production, which is to say, the abstractly quantifying organization of socioeconomic relations in order to optimize workplace efficiency, promote the circulation of commodities, mold reliable worker and consumer habits, and advance the interests of capital, and the accumulation of wealth as such. Even if Benjamin does not employ the term *reification* [*Verdinglichung*], his

Erfahrung decline narrative exhibits symptoms of this critical anxiety about rationalized production petrifying the senses to the detriment of cognitive flexibility, social responsiveness, affective mutuality, and revolutionary spirit.

The ongoing appeal of decline narratives and their innumerable liberal, anti-liberal, neo-liberal, and post-liberal variants orients my return to Benjamin's image politics here.⁷ While his figurations of community do not precisely line up with Tönnies' religious tradition-suturing idyll, which appealed more properly to anti-liberal reactionaries rather than the labor-sympathetic inheritors of Marx, Benjamin's literary criticism nevertheless appraises the defenses against industrialization which siphon off tradition-limned *Erfahrung* and collective memory as regenerative sources of communal "energy". Benjamin does not view these defenses as merely corrosive, however, since they yield imaginative forms that register and resist the alienating impact of modernization. To the extent that Bergson shares the German literary critic's preoccupation with the interrelations between perception, memory, and imagination, the references to Bergson in "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" do not tell the whole story about Benjamin's intellectual debt to the French philosopher. In what follows, I will therefore review Bergson's conceptions of perception and memory before I identify the various threads that "On the Image of Proust" and "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" respectively contribute to Benjamin's mosaic of modernity as a reification machine.

3. Community Lost: Benjamin's "Proust" after Tönnies and Bergson

After chastising Bergson for failing to acknowledge the historicity of his analysis of perception and memory, it is curious that Benjamin does not press the same charges against Freud as he turns to *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* for an image of modern perception under siege. Given the paramount importance of perception in *Matter and Memory*, which serves as a hinge between a body preparing for action and a memory that insinuates the whole, it might have been otherwise. For what Bergson holds in common with a generation of modernization critics is a marked investment in *spontaneity*, *introspection*, and *imagination* as the spirit-side antonyms of means-to-an-end practicality.

To be sure, Bergson's critical relationship to philosophy tangles any move to mobilize him as its allegorical stand-in. In the course of "[n]egotiating a path between materialism and speculative philosophy", Andrew McGettigan writes, "Bergson criticizes a dominant yet incomplete scientism by questioning the assumption that perception is directed towards knowledge" ([24], p. 28). To refute the "false problems" philosophy inherited from the adherents of realism and idealism, he sets out to demarcate differences in *degree* (or intensity) from differences in *kind* while placing matter, pure perception, action-oriented perception, memory-images, habitual memory, pure memory, duration, and spirit on a continuum that allows coalescences and divergences between them to emerge. According to this schema, then, perception is concerned with action, bodily memory "organizes the sensory-motor

⁷ Among the academic left, following in the footsteps of Max Weber, Gyorgy Lukács, and Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, Fredric Jameson [16], Gilles Deleuze [17], Michael Hardt [18], Lisa Duggan [19], Jodi Dean [20], and Jonathan Crary [21], among innumerable other examples, populate this mostly pessimistic terrain, which now proliferates laments about the irreversible consequences of environmental damage, or, as Roy Scranton [22] articulates it, learning how to *die* (as opposed to *live*) in the anthropocene. For a non-leftist elaboration on political theories of *decay* versus *decline*, see Frances Fukuyama [23].

system, but 'true memory' prolongs the past into the present of immediate perception and produces experience as a duration (*durée*)" ([24], p. 28). In the "continuous flow" of pure duration, "we pass insensibly from one state to another: a continuity which is really lived, but artificially decomposed for the greater convenience of customary knowledge" ([6], p. 186).

Bergson ostensibly sidesteps the pitfalls of transcendental idealism in postulating a "pure perception", which differs from matter by degree and not kind, since "*there is in matter something more than, but not something different from, that which is actually given*". To assert that pure perception "[stands] toward matter in the relation of the part to the whole", as Bergson argues, "amounts to saying that matter cannot exercise powers of any kind other than those which we perceive. It has no mysterious virtue; it can conceal none" ([6], p. 71). In "pure perception we are actually placed outside ourselves; we touch the reality of the object in an immediate intuition" ([6], p. 75). At the same time, even if perception, "in its pure state, is a part of things", it also "measures our possible action upon things, and thereby, inversely, the possible action of things upon us" ([6], pp. 56, 64). Action *hones* memory, "so that it presents nothing thicker than the edge of a blade to actual experience, into which it will thus be able to penetrate" ([6], p. 106).⁸ Reciprocally, memory insinuates itself into perceptions in what Bergson calls *recognition* to designate the "concrete processes by which we grasp the past in the present" ([6], p. 90).

In the second chapter of *Matter and Memory* devoted to the "Recognition of Images", Bergson distinguishes between "two extreme forms of memory in their *pure* state": a voluntary memory "conquered by our effort", which "remains dependent upon our will" and an "entirely spontaneous" memory that "is as capricious in reproducing as it is faithful in preserving" ([6], p. 88). Pure memory "records, in the form of memory-images, all the events of our daily life as they occur in time; it neglects no detail; it leaves to each fact, to each gesture, its place and date". The conceptual "purity" of spontaneous recall derives from its miraculous power of capture, not in response to any "practical application", but "by the mere necessity of its own nature" ([6], p. 81). I call this power miraculous, because Bergson contends that "[s]pontaneous recollection is *perfect from the outset*; time can add nothing to its image without disfiguring it" ([6], p. 83, my emphasis). What is striking, then, is that this potential is, at once, eidetic and imaginative: spontaneous memory preserves a precise perceptual content without sedimentation or subtraction while retaining its theoretical distance from matter.

In addition, "spontaneous" memory, as Bergson defines it, is hidden, and motor (habit-based) memory is not capable of activating it on demand, apart from an "exceptional" instance in which repetitive memory is supported by spontaneous recollection: "The only regular and certain service which the second memory can render to the first is to bring before it images of what preceded or followed situations similar to the present situation, so as to guide its choice". Though Bergson equates this "service" with the "association of ideas", he nevertheless insists that, in no other instances, will the memory that recalls "obey" the memory that repeats. Indeed, to the extent that "we cannot count upon its reappearance", our preference is "to construct a mechanism which allows us to sketch the image again, at need" ([6], p. 88).

⁸ Hence, as Bergson remarks, "[t]he true effect of repetition is to decompose and then to recompose, and thus appeal to the intelligence of the body" ([6], p. 111).

The exception proves a rule, for it re-entrenches Bergson's valuation of unpredictable recall over "repetitive" or "habitual" memory, described as an accretion of ready preparations "to an ever growing number of possible solicitations" and as a consciousness "always bent upon action, seated in the present and looking only to the future" ([6], p. 82). While he names the first "memory par excellence", he relegates the second to the status of "*habit interpreted by memory* rather than memory itself" ([6], p. 84). This hierarchy is key for Benjamin as well as Benjamin's "Proust", since it rarefies the spontaneous memory that retreats, becomes still more "fugitive", where rote memory prevails.

To call up the past in the form of an image, we must be able to withdraw ourselves from the action of the moment, we must have the power to value the useless, we must have the will to dream. Man alone is capable of such an effort. But even in him the past to which he returns is fugitive, ever on the point of escaping him, as though his backward turning memory were thwarted by the other, more natural memory, of which the forward movement bears him on to action and to life ([6], pp. 82–83).

This frequently quoted passage from the second chapter of *Matter and Memory* prioritizes spontaneous recollection as a corroboration of human exceptionality. While highlighting its ineffability, Bergson also connects spontaneous recall to the power to dream, the ability to appreciate the useless, and a withdrawal from action—a conjuncture that appears to devalue practicality. Moreover, in the same movement with which Bergson affirms the freedom of sudden recall, he also posits its vulnerability, not merely to the forces that prompt action (the *vita activa*), but to "the forward movement [bearing] [humans] on to action and to life".⁹ Not surprisingly, perhaps, the philosopher honors a non-linear, anti-instrumental *vita contemplativa*, which transcends a "more natural memory", disposed toward action; at the same time, even though he contends that pure memory is "co-extensive with consciousness" ([6], p. 151), he considers it "unnatural" in comparison with habitual memory. Bergson complicates this apparent opposition in his discussion of recognition, whereby memory contours or even facilitates perception. The problem that Bergson seemingly bypasses at this point is that if pure memory "records" intact perceptions, which bear matter's imprint, then how do the memory-images that focalize them theoretically buck this tether?

After conceding that recognition renders memory "inseparable in practice from perception", Bergson nevertheless insists that spontaneous memory on a theoretical level remains "absolutely

⁹ Bergson's phrasing here evokes Benjamin's criticism of narratives of progress as evinced in thesis IX from "On the Philosophy of History" about the angel of history facing the past where the wreckage piles high while being haplessly hurled forward by the storm winds of progress. In his consideration of the continuities between Bergson and Benjamin's critique of dialectical historicism, McGettigan maintains that Bergson locates the production of perceptual-consciousness in the present; however, because perception would be passive and merely reactive without its memory-image supplement, memory serves to expand agency. It is important to both Benjamin (and Proust before him) that the past as memory continues to exist for Bergson—that it does not disappear into "non-being", as McGettigan phrases it, even though not every memory enters experience as memory-image. To the extent that the Bergsonian past "has a determining relation to the present" while depending "on the present for its actualization", the present as perception and the past as memory reciprocally refine each other in keeping with the needs of the moment, which is why, as Bergson admits, "neither pure perception nor pure memory is encountered in practice". It is by virtue of the reciprocity between perception and memory, as McGettigan argues, that Benjamin's concept of historical materialism dispenses with progress in the name of actualization, and thus remains indebted to Bergsonian premises ([24], p. 29).

independent of matter” ([6], p. 73), perhaps to safeguard it as the imaginative province of artists, dreamers, and collectors of useless things. This theoretical independence is decisive for the plot of *Matter and Memory*, which aligns pure memory with duration and becoming to locate it, ultimately, “in the domain of spirit”, on the farthest end of the continuum from matter ([6], p. 240). If “matter” goes missing somewhere along the continuum between perception and memory, then Bergson’s theoretically pure memory concept is the venue of this expropriation; he thus paves the way for Benjamin to interpret Proust’s “immanent critique of Bergson” ([5], p. 315) as foregrounding pure memory’s “unnatural” valence through the contrived spontaneity of *mémoire involontaire*—in other words, as a paradoxical enunciation of literary artifice.

Commissioned to translate *À la recherche du temps perdu* with Franz Hessel in 1925, Benjamin’s fondness for Proust is no secret.¹⁰ This appreciation dovetails with the lineages of the “human motor” trope, which configures materialist physiological and social scientific ideas about the limits of the body as a malleable or exhaustible source of productive energy. In his intellectual history of the human motor, Anson Rabinbach touches on Pierre Janet’s research in the late nineteenth century, which bore the influence of his studies with Jean-Martin Charcot as well as Hermann von Helmholtz’s thermodynamic physiology. Janet’s psychology focused on “neuropaths” who “betrayed their actual feelings by declaring that ‘they were born tired and that their disease has never been anything but fatigue’” ([25], p. 154 citing [26], p. 86).

Rabinbach styles Proust the quintessential “neurasthenic” of his era, a bed-writer who likely served as a perfect case study for his epidemiologist father, Achille-Adrien Proust. Along with Gilbert Ballet, Proust the scientist sought to chart “middle class” neurasthenia’s symptoms, causes, and cures ([25], p. 158). The elder Proust’s and Ballet’s sketches of neurasthenic “stigmata” evoke an image all too familiar to those who remember Edgar Allen Poe’s portrait of a ghoulish Roderick Usher: along with “an exaggerated sensitivity of the skin to pressure” (hyperasthenia), neurasthenics were said to suffer “from ‘aboulia’—a diminution of the will—of the intellectual and moral faculties”. In addition, “[n]eurasthenics slept badly”, thereby trading dreams for exacerbated exhaustion. Proust and Ballet also observed an “aggravation of all morbid troubles”, even on those occasions when the neurasthenic slipped into comatose sleep ([25], p. 150 citing [27], p. 89).

“Neurasthenic” Proust enters into the intersecting annals of reification criticism and fatigue literature through his images of 19th century bourgeois *ennui* and his self-ironically stylized melancholy about the futility of seeking to re-presence the past. The literariness of this melancholic pursuit is redoubled by Benjamin in “Zum Bilde Prousts”, which has been translated as “On the Image of Proust” [10]. Carol Jacobs’ more precise translation of *Zum* as *toward* respects what I want to call Benjamin’s “meta-ontotheological” interest in foregrounding the discrepancy between actual memory (life) and literary image (text) that Proustian artifice accentuates as it generates an idealized image of the past with the aim of reproducing its irruptive force. Jacobs’ preference for *toward* also heeds Benjamin’s recognition of the asymptotic limit to the ambition of finding language that does justice to the ruse that allows critics to conflate the narrator of *In Search of Lost Time* with autobiographical “Proust”. There can be no “justice” of this sort, according to Jacobs, and particularly to a literary text that so overtly exaggerates the impossibility of reactivating the fullness of bygone days. Proust’s

¹⁰ McGettigan reports that, “only the early volumes appeared before the publisher went bust” ([24], p. 31).

“‘original’ passages too were always mere metaphor”, as Jacobs contends, and “[i]nterpretation repeatedly returns us to the figurations of its own language” ([28], p. 51). She therefore perceives the admixture of genres in Benjamin’s essay as formal means of disclosing a parallel between the difficulty of expressing his own experience of the literary text and the inaccessibility of the memories that *À la recherche du temps perdu* summons for both reader and narrator.

As the double action of the titular genitive insists, Benjamin commits himself to delineating an image of “Proust” as both reader and writer while simultaneously examining Proust’s literary image as a stylistic refraction of bourgeois society in 19th century France, which also serves to deconstruct the idea of “true” memory as a basis for history. “Toward the Image of Proust” finds Benjamin reflecting critically on Proust’s adaptation of the opposition between *mémoire volontaire* (active, intellectualized, and habitualized memory) and *mémoire involontaire* (unexpectedly resurgent, latent and mimetic memory). The petite Madeleine episode from the first volume of *In Search of Lost Time* thus serves as a *mise-en-abîme* of the novel as a whole, not because it illustrates *mémoire involontaire*, but while it assiduously unweaves the ostensible opposition between voluntary and involuntary memory. Benjamin looks to Proust to emphasize how the literary artifice that convenes the defense-breaching spontaneity of *mémoire involontaire* effectively *overwrites*, in both senses of the term, an “actual” memory in order to convey its explosive force along with an impression of its “purity”.

Benjamin disingenuously asks whether or not involuntary recollection “is much closer to forgetting than what is usually called memory?” The perspective that unveils involuntary memories as the “ornaments of forgetting” also compares Penelope with a Proust, who “turned his days into nights, devoting all his hours to undisturbed work in his darkened room with artificial illumination, so that none of those intricate arabesques”, unraveled by day, “might escape him” ([10], p. 238). In the inverted Penelope analogy, Jacobs perceives Benjamin mapping a movement between “life” and “purely ornamental poetry” ([28], p. 41). Though “life” for Benjamin’s Proust “seems to assert an original priority over the fictional text” through which the involuntary memory provides access, according to Jacobs, “each new sentence progressively distances itself from this concept, until life and memory are replaced by a woven (textual) work of forgetting” ([28], p. 41).

Even as Benjamin reads Proust as enacting a quest for self as a re-appropriation of the past, a manifestly deconstructive Jacobs insists on the self-consciously *non-identitarian* tenor of this “Proust”, where “[t]he sign functions as a trap, as a feigned representation of a reality (of life) existing prior to it and serving as its origin.” Though Proust’s imagery “promises access to that origin”, for Jacobs, it “inevitably turns out to be empty” ([28], p. 45). Benjamin hereby confronts us with the void at the roots of the implied author’s yearning for childhood happiness again and again, “so that the image of his own writing may”, as Jacobs remarks, “arise out of the discrepancy marked between life and literature” ([28], p. 47). In this metafictional economy, memory unavoidably “serves as a bridge to the image rather than to life” insofar as the image “never presents itself directly as the object of experience” ([28], pp. 51, 53), but only as “a relationship between particular images”. Hence, “[t]he image comes forth as this fictional path becomes marked *as* fiction, as the text which points to its origins is shown always to have been image” ([28], p. 51).

It might add to Jacobs’ analysis to propose that Benjamin’s Penelopean imagery highlights the *fatal performatives* (what Jacobs calls “traps”) at work in Proust’s “excessive” ornamentation, which deconstructs the authority of his opposition between *mémoire volontaire* and *involontaire* by

accentuating the art involved in conveying mimetically-enriched “spontaneity”.¹¹ At the same time, if involuntary memory brings into being a new rather than a suppressed content, as Benjamin intimates, then this explicit constructivism not only de-authorizes the distinction between “intellectualized” and “immediate” memory but also underscores memory’s creative power to imagine community in (or as) “a time when memory was not yet image” ([28], p. 55) and the textual image was not the source of “a voided life” ([28], p. 57).¹² Benjamin’s sociographic “Proust” breathes energy into a dream world in which the literary image reproves reified “life” by sublimating it.

Benjamin messianizes “Proust” in the “dialectics” he outlines between “hymnic” and “elegiac” forms of happiness: “The one is the unheard-of, the unprecedented, the height of bliss; the other, the eternal repetition, the eternal restoration of the original, first happiness” ([10], p. 239). This dialectic transfigures the “apocalyptic” and “restorative” lineages of Jewish messianism, which intersect throughout Benjamin writings as the idea of a slate-cleaning destruction of the current order coincides with the restorative motif of lost Paradise regained, where “Paradise” signifies a divinely-forceful, poetically sensed communion among humans, landscapes, and things.¹³ Benjamin’s Proust image interweaves this messianic dialectic with Lukács’ decline narrative historicizing the emergence of the novel as a literary form that attests to our “transcendental homelessness” [36], or, in Tönnisian terms, the rise of anomic *Gesellschaft* in place of organic *Gemeinschaft*. With Lukács whispering in his ear, Benjamin cruelly sentences the asthmatic French novelist to lie “on his bed racked with homesickness, homesick for the world distorted in the state of similarity, a world in which the true surrealist face of existence breaks through” ([10], p. 240).¹⁴

The association with surrealism is, potentially, derogatory to Proust given Benjamin’s apparent disdain for what he refers to as “dream kitsch” in a short essay originally published as a “Gloss on Surrealism” in 1927. After denigrating dreams as a gray-grown catch-all for “threadbare” and “timeworn” objects, and “a shortcut to banality”, Benjamin sarcastically derides surrealism’s solipsistic dream logics. The pretension of André Breton’s *Surrealist Manifesto* thus abides, according to Benjamin, with its mandate “to reestablish dialogue in its essential truth”, which frees interlocutors from “the obligation to be polite” or even to listen to others. Benjamin mocks the surrealist “misunderstanding” of dialogue as “another word for the rhythm with which the only true reality forces its way into the conversation. The more effectively a man is able to speak, the more successfully he is misunderstood” ([37], pp. 3–4). Benjamin’s praise of Baudelaire’s *correspondances* gains significance in light of the critic’s recourse to *Vague de rêves* [Wave of Dreams] from 1924 where Louis Aragon observes that “the mania for dreaming spread over Paris”. The unfortunate result was that “young

¹¹ I borrow the concept of *fatal performatives* from Jacques Derrida’s *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* [29] and “Force of Law: the ‘Mystical Foundation of Authority’” [30]. See also Ball [31].

¹² Jacobs’ reference to *life* resonates with Bergson’s proposition that “it is from the present that the appeal to which memory responds comes, and it is from the sensory-motor elements of present action that a memory borrows the warmth which gives it life” ([6], p. 153).

¹³ On the “restorative” and “apocalyptic” lineages of Jewish messianism, see Gershom Scholem [32] alongside Scholem’s correspondence with Benjamin [33]. On Benjamin’s messianism, see Anson Rabinbach [34] and Stéphane Mosès [35].

¹⁴ Fascinated with the physiological contours of literature, Benjamin speculates that Proust’s “neurasthenic asthma” “became part of his art—if indeed his art did not create it” insofar as his “syntax rhythmically, step by step, reproduces his fear of suffocating” ([10], p. 246).

people believed they had come upon one of the secrets of poetry, whereas in fact they did away with poetic composition, as with all the most intensive forces of that period” ([37], p. 4). Benjamin furthermore finds the surrealist preoccupation with the “schemata of the dreamwork” to be merely derivative with respect to psychoanalysis, which discovered them first. Indeed, despite their conviction, the surrealists “are less on the trail of the psyche than on the track of things” as they “seek the totemic tree of objects within the thicket of primal history”. Benjamin repudiates this “topmost face on the totem pole” as “kitsch”, for it is “the last mask of the banal, the one with which we adorn ourselves, in a dream and conversation, so as to take in the energies of an outlived world of things”. The “new man” fashioned by the surrealist thing world is the byproduct of a sedimentation of old forms and a “confrontation with a particular milieu from the second half of the nineteenth century”, which infects “dreams, as well as the words and images, of certain artists”, to become, in Benjamin’s view, “a creature who deserves the name of ‘furnished man’” ([37], pp. 4–5).

The tone of Benjamin’s 1929 treatment of surrealism published in *Die literarische Welt*, while still critical and sardonic, is also more opaque and modulated than in the 1927 gloss as he spotlights preoccupations that he shares with certain practitioners while professing his admiration for the movement’s anarchical precursors, Dostoevsky, Rimbaud, and Lautréament ([38], p. 214). His delineation of the surrealists’ inadequacies seemingly helps Benjamin to formulate his own praxis: to unlock revolutionary energies through a “profane illumination” as a “dialectical optic” focused on the historicity of the everyday. Over and against surrealism’s heroes, Benjamin pointedly insists that “the reader, the thinker, the loiterer, the *flâneur*” count just as much as “illuminati” as “the opium eater, the dreamer, the ecstatic”, though the former are more “profane” ([38], p. 216). Moreover, surrealist optics are insufficiently dialectical in Benjamin’s estimation.¹⁵ Aragon nevertheless merits limited praise for distinguishing between metaphor and image in *Traité du style* [Treatise on Style]. “For to organize pessimism”, as Benjamin insists, “means nothing other than to expel moral metaphor from politics and to discover in the space of political action the one hundred percent image space” ([38], p. 217). This proclamation heightens the stakes of Benjamin’s endeavor to pinpoint the specificity and power of the literary image in “Zum Bilde Prousts”, an essay published in the summer of 1929, a few months after

¹⁵ As Max Pensky [9] and Keya Ganguly [39] have noted, Benjamin retained a certain critical distance from surrealism, even as his own praxis seems to honor it. In Pensky’s words, the surrealists fell short, in Benjamin’s judgment, since they were ultimately incapable “of transposing the shock of the profane illumination from the model of dream to that of waking” ([9], p. 200). To the extent that Benjamin’s 1929 description of the surrealist heuristic also characterizes his own praxis, he should, nevertheless, be read as ironically over-stating his praise of Breton who “can boast of an extraordinary discovery: he was the first to perceive the revolutionary energies that appear in the ‘outmoded’—the first iron constructions, the first factory buildings, the earliest photos, objects that have begun to be extinct, grand pianos, the dresses of five years ago, fashionable restaurants when the vogue has begun to ebb from them. The relation of these things to revolution—no one can have a more exact concept of it than these authors. No one before these visionaries and augurs perceived how destitution—not only social but architectonic, the poverty of interiors, enslaved and enslaving objects—can be suddenly transformed into revolutionary nihilism.” Despite his own apparent affinity with a surrealist style that “bring[s] the immense forces of ‘atmosphere’ concealed in these things to the point of explosion”, Benjamin here and elsewhere appears to ridicule the most celebrated surrealists’ self-aggrandizing pretensions to originality. Ultimately, then, he disparages their practices as mere “tricks” rather than a method properly speaking, since the surrealist mastery of “the world of things” consists, in Benjamin’s view, “in the substitution of a political for a historical view of the past” ([38], p. 210).

Benjamin's "Last Snapshot" captured a French intelligentsia whose members would never awaken the revolutionary potential they claimed to unleash because they exchanged "to a man, the play of human features for the face of an alarm clock that in each minute rings for sixty seconds" ([38], p. 218).

His commitment to the "one hundred percent image space" might explain why a Benjamin who ridiculed surrealism's claim on primal "truth" nevertheless lauds Proust's phantasmagoric descriptive powers as a precipitate of mimicry: "Proust's most accurate, most conclusive insights fasten on their objects the way insects fasten on leaves, blossoms, branches, betraying nothing of their existence until a leap, a beating of wings, a vault, show the startled observer that some incalculable individual life has imperceptibly crept into an alien world" ([10], p. 242). Benjamin marvels at the insect percipience of Proust's imagery, which jars readers with "small frights" and thereby exposes "the spirit's struggle for survival under the leafy canopy of society" ([10], p. 242). Such self-consciously stylistic virtuosity also reprieves the novelist from Benjamin's condemnation of surrealist dream kitsch, since Proust's lavishly detailed images bursting with sentience endow the everyday with the capacity to shock readers; Proustian imagery thus avoids the threadbare quality of the thing residues that Benjamin ascribes to dreams.

Proust's imagery is also conceptually critical insofar as it purports to mimic the sudden literality of "pure" memory while simultaneously conceding its impossibility. This impossibility striates *In Search of Lost Time's* meta-ontotheological heart. In the first volume, the implied author-narrator, followed by his foil, Charles Swann, mourns impossibly idealized loves as if they had once thrived in full-flung presence and then dissipated over time. In the "I" who opens Proust's masterpiece with a seemingly banal admission that he used to go to bed early, we soon discover a backward gaze memorializing sensitive boyhood maneuvers to hasten his mother's goodnight kiss. Yet even this transitory respite from an excruciating Oedipal lust cannot fully replenish the high-strung narrator circling, like a melancholic bird of prey, above the object of his desire. On a formal level, the narrator's neurotic machinations prequel the consuming love that ensnares Swann the moment Odette's face coalesces with "the Zipporah of that Alessandro de Mariano to whom people more willingly give his popular surname, Botticelli" ([40], p. 316).¹⁶

He no longer based his estimate of the merit of Odette's face on the doubtful quality of her cheeks and the purely fleshy softness which he supposed would greet his lips there should he ever hazard a kiss, but regarded it rather as a skein of beautiful, delicate lines which his eyes unraveled, following their curves and convolutions, relating the rhythm of the neck to the effusion of the hair and the droop of the eyelids, as though in a portrait of her in which her type was made clearly intelligible. He stood gazing at her; traces of the old fresco were apparent in her face and her body, and these he tried incessantly to recapture thereafter,

¹⁶ The narrator introduces the Odette/Zipporah association with a seemingly tangential yet dramatically ironic dovetail into Swann's disenchantment with Botticelli's popularization: "it was with an unusual intensity of pleasure, a pleasure destined to have a lasting effect upon him, that Swann remarked Odette's resemblance to the Zipporah of that Alessandro de Mariano to whom people more willingly give his popular surname, Botticelli, now that it suggests not so much the actual work of the Master as that false and banal conception of it which has of late obtained common currency" ([40], p. 316). Swann's pompous distaste for the artist's commonly used name belies his own idealization of Odette, which potentially capitulates to the very falsity and banality he eschews.

both when he was with Odette and when he was only thinking of her in her absence; and although his admiration for the Florentine masterpiece was doubtless based upon his discovery that it had been reproduced in her, the similarity enhanced her beauty also, and made her more precious. ([40], p. 316)

The association with Botticelli's fresco "proves" Swann's discernment in love by refashioning Odette's visage so as to satisfy "his most refined predilections in matters of art". Moreover, by converting Odette into a "masterpiece in a gallery", Swann's all too discriminating act of high-art thingification not only allows the urban esthete to transcend his initial revulsion, but also to resolve a long-running tension between his desires and his "aesthetic taste" ([40], p. 317). As the limited-omniscient third-person narration discloses, the "words 'Florentine painting'" were therefore "invaluable to Swann", because "[t]hey enabled him, like a title, to introduce the image of Odette into a world of dreams and fancies which, until then, she had been debarred from entering, and where she assumed a new a nobler form" ([40], p. 317). The sublimating association between his Odette "thought" and "his dreams of ideal happiness" nevertheless signals the rhapsodic bloom of a romance doomed to wither through an accretion of obsessive tests and hastily disavowed betrayals, and the manipulations these activities ineluctably embrace. Endowed with an originary emotional force, this initial association consequently impels an ontotheological trajectory: Bowing under the accumulation of rebuffs, infidelities, and lies, "bone-weary Swann" ([10], p. 240) insistently upholds Zipporah-Odette as the "hymnic" asymptote of a passionate parabola that traces the hollowing out of his playboy socialite snobbery along with his class-braced authority.

Benjamin's comments on Proust's introversion suggest a parallel with Swann's libidinal curvature. The "born fatigued" author appears to be alienated beyond redemption in Benjamin's view insofar as he sacrifices "friends and companionship" in his life, and "plot, unity of characters, the flow of narration", and even "the play of imagination" in his works to the memory-image as the final preserve of elegiac happiness ([10], p. 239). At the center of Proust's "radical attempt at self-absorption", the critic discovers "a solitude which pulls the world down into its vortex with the force of a maelstrom". Benjamin hears "the overloud and inconceivably hollow chatter which comes roaring out of Proust's novels" as "the sound of society plunging into the abyss of this solitude" ([10], p. 245). This aural-image of Proust attests to a modern *allergy* against bourgeois self-dummification through rote sociability, yet the symptom exacerbates the very emotional risk it hedges, since the wax of camouflage precipitates an attendant longing for waning mutuality and tenderness. As a casualty of internal hardening, the perceived loss of reciprocal affectability sheds light on Proust's "invectives against friendship", since, as Benjamin infers, "[i]t was a matter of perceiving the silence at the bottom of this crater, whose eyes are the quietest and most absorbing" ([10], p. 245).

Abyssal eyes haunt Benjamin's physiognomic catachreses, which light up landscapes as faces and vice versa.¹⁷ Eyes that stare without seeing also crop up in the "Motifs" essay, where Georg Simmel stands in for the premise that crowded metropolitan existence exacts a greater toll on consciousness than rural life. Benjamin is struck by Simmel's observation that "people had never been *in situations*

¹⁷ Benjamin praises Proust's image "as the highest physiognomic expression that the incessantly growing discrepancy between poetry and life was able to produce" ([10], quoted by Jacobs [28], p. 47). On Benjamin's physiognomic inclinations, see Gerhard Richter [41].

where they had to look at one another for long minutes or even hours without speaking to one another” before the “development of buses, railroads, and trams in the nineteenth century” ([5], p. 341 citing [42], pp. 26–27). Benjamin extrapolates: “In the protective eye, there is no daydreaming surrender to distance and to faraway things” on public conveyances where people inure themselves against others at the expense of intimacy and percipience ([5], p. 341).

According to Benjamin’s “Simmel”, claustrophobic urbanization marked by a “preponderance of visual activity” forestalls and thus frustrates the “expectation roused by the gaze of the human eye” as crowded moderns lose their ability to return a look ([5], pp. 339, 341). While urban monads ward off shared visual acknowledgment, unfulfilled longing infuses the reciprocated gaze—from a pale city-dwelling *demoiselle* perhaps¹⁸—with the fetishistic force of a ritual object or an obscure object of desire: “Glances may be all the more compelling”, Benjamin writes, “the more complete the viewer’s absence that is overcome in them” ([5], p. 340). The question that “Proust” and “Simmel” therefore pose on Benjamin’s behalf is whether or not there could be a gaze that fills rather than deepens the Proustian “abyss of loneliness”, mentioned above, a look that affectively replenishes (like the lustrous glances of love in its early stages) rather than self-protects.

Once viewed through the gauze of the novelist’s hermetic inclinations, *In Search of Lost Time* might read as recoiling against this emotional inurement that averts a longing for mutually-affective presence. Proust’s hyper-realized sentience seemingly compensates for the mannered settings, ritualized camouflage, and enervating chatter of bourgeois society ([10], p. 241). It is a sublimation that transpires as a single-minded quest for intimate communion by other means: through an overtly contrived simulation of the preternatural mimetic capacity in which “*voir* and *désirer imiter* were one and the same thing” ([10], p. 243).

Bergson declares that affection is not “the primary matter of which perception is made”, but is, instead, “that part or aspect of the inside of our body which we mix with the image of external bodies; it is what we must first of all subtract from perception to get the image in its purity” ([6], p. 58). The literary gaze, in contrast, basks in the vibrancy of this “alloy”. Here we arrive at a tentative solution to the question of how Proust’s literary image avoids surrealism’s pretensions, or, at least partially, while advancing an “immanent critique” of Bergson. In “the constant attempt to charge an entire lifetime with the utmost mental awareness”, Proust’s method, as Benjamin interprets it, “is actualization, not reflection” ([10], p. 244). This is the case insofar as Proust’s literary image does not reprise Bergson’s theoretical “pure perception”; rather, it performatively amplifies how memory permeates perception with the “impurity” that the philosopher calls *affection*. Hence “the deliberate and fastidious way in which [Proust’s world] appears” to Benjamin: this world “is never isolated, rhetorical, or visionary”, as Benjamin insists; it is “carefully heralded and securely supported” in “[bearing] a fragile, precious reality: the image”, which “detaches itself from the structure of Proust’s sentences just as that summer day at Balbec—old, immemorial, mummified—emerged from the lace curtain under Françoise’s hands” ([10], p. 240).

¹⁸ Benjamin writes: “This is the gaze—evident even as late as Proust—of the object of a love which only a city dweller experiences, which Baudelaire captured for poetry, and which one might not infrequently characterize as being spared, rather than denied, fulfillment” ([5], p. 324).

By determinately negating the “spontaneity” of his own faculty of recollection, Proust’s *mémoire involontaire* unveils itself, for the author of “Zum Bilde Prousts”, as both victor and vanquished to the Bergsonian concept of an “unnatural” *mémoire pure*. Benjamin confirms this understanding in “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire”, where he proposes that “Proust’s work *À la recherche du temps perdu* may be regarded as an attempt to produce experience [*Erfahrung*], as Bergson imagines it, in a synthetic way under today’s social conditions” ([5], p. 315; [43], p. 187).¹⁹ The challenge is that “there is less and less hope that [such experience] will come into being in a natural way”, and Proustian *mémoire involontaire* can therefore be actualized, paradoxically, only through a voluntary memory, “one which is in the service of the intellect”, and which communicates information about the past that “retains no trace of that past” in serving “the call of conscious attention” ([5], p. 315). Yet Benjamin takes issue with Proust’s inclination to situate the past “‘somewhere beyond the reach of the intellect and its field of operations, in some material object...though we have no idea which one it is,’” or, indeed, whether or not we will ever encounter it ([5], p. 315 citing [44], p. 44). For Benjamin, in contrast, “there is nothing inevitable” about the chance that enables us to “come upon this object before we die”, as Proust phrases it, since “a person’s inner concerns are not by nature of an inescapably private character”, which they attain “only after the likelihood decreases that one’s external concerns will be assimilated to one’s experience” ([5], p. 315). Proust elevates involuntary memory as the belated corroboration of a rich interior life and thus prepares the ground for Benjamin’s celebration of Baudelaire’s *correspondances* as *Erfahrung*’s last resort.

4. Community Regained: Benjamin’s “Baudelaire” after Proust and Freud

While both “Toward the Image of Proust” and “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” respond to modernity-induced enervation and perceptual-affective petrification, when I situate these essays along the trajectory of Benjamin’s modernization lament, then Proustian involuntary memory resurfaces as the neurasthenic nether side of Baudelaire’s “post-melancholic” *correspondances* as a kind of “shock therapy which seeks to establish itself in crisis-proof form” ([5], p. 333).²⁰ Yet it should be acknowledged that Bergson also criticizes the forces of reification, albeit less self-ironically than either Proust or Benjamin. For the purpose of conceptual clarity, Bergson segregates “pure memory” from “matter”; however, his thinking in *Matter and Memory* as a whole (and of “the whole”) is disposed toward rediscovering continuities where British idealism and atomistic realism have erroneously installed discontinuities—the philosophical symptoms of rationalized perception.²¹ This commitment

¹⁹ In “Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire”, the accent grave is missing over the “A” in the title of *À la recherche du temps perdu*. In addition, *recherche* is not capitalized in the German essay, whereas the English translation included in the fourth volume of the Belknap Press edition of the selected writings does capitalize it (compare [5], p. 315 and [43], p. 187).

²⁰ Eiland makes a related point about Benjamin’s agenda for the artist facing “the unmooring of metaphysical substance” that results from the “technologization and commodification of things” as a “crisis of form”. “From an aesthetic point of view”, as Eiland suggests, this agenda responds to “the challenge of discovering a form commensurate with the entropic or centrifugal tendency of modern experience, with what in fact resists integration and closure” ([45], p. 11).

²¹ The third of Bergson’s “suggestions” about matter reads: “*All division of matter into independent bodies with absolutely determined outlines is an artificial division.*” Insofar as he posits a “reciprocal action of all parts of matter upon each other”, Bergson proclaims that science aims “to rediscover the natural articulations of a universe we have carved artificially” ([6], pp. 196, 197, 200).

spurs him to broach the theoretical basis for a continuum that leads from matter to perception, perception to memory, memory to duration, and duration to spirit while at the same time finessing a long-running opposition between freedom and determinism. The association between pure memory and spontaneity as a valence of freedom thus hints at Bergson's stake in promoting spirit's destiny in a *Gesellschaft* where duration takes a back seat to individuation and *distentio*.

Bergson's memory/duration/spirit conjunction leaves the whole open, hence his disregard of the laws of conservation and entropy predicated upon the limits of a closed system. This disregard partially clarifies why his account of perception and memory goes astray for Benjamin while reinforcing Freud's explanatory value. For what the psychoanalyst offers the critic of reification is an image of sensory compartmentalization and protective deadening that mirrors the impact of rationalized labor as well as the harried paces of survival. Benjamin builds this image with a thermodynamic vocabulary that articulates the process whereby perceptual selectivity correlates inextricably with defensive desensitization and simultaneously re-affirms the value of spontaneity and suddenness as the conditions for hopeful disruption.

To follow the mediations whereby Baudelairean *correspondances* function, for Benjamin, to unlock the spaces for hope that industrialization contracts, it will be useful, first, to recall Freud's pressurized image of perception cited in the third section of the "Motifs" essay to plot the defense mechanism that Bergson inadvertently performs. This image comes to us in the form of a story about the evolution of a protective membrane in a basic life form:

This little fragment of living substance is suspended in the middle of an external world charged with the most powerful energies; and it would be killed by the stimulation emanating from these if it were not provided with a protective shield against stimuli. It acquires this shield in this way: its outermost surface ceases to have the structure proper to living matter, becomes to some degree inorganic and thenceforward functions as a special envelope or membrane resistant to stimuli. In consequence, the energies of the external world are able to pass into the next underlying layers, which have remained living, with only a fragment of their original intensity; and these layers can devote themselves, behind the protective shield, to the reception of the amounts of stimulus which have been allowed through it. By its death, the outer layer has saved all the deeper ones from a similar fate—unless, that is to say, stimuli reach it which are so strong that they break through the protective shield. Protection against stimuli is an almost more important function for the living organism than reception of stimuli ([46], p. 27).

Freud's "living substance" parable depicts the phylogenesis of an organism with a surface that "deadens" as it is bombarded by stimuli. Though a "loss" of vitality has presumably taken place, this quasi-inorganic membrane hereafter serves a crucial function, since it defuses charged perceptual contents that could overwhelm the organism as a whole. On a formal level, this evolutionary fable comprises the primordial bedrock of an analogy that correlates the vesicle's "baked through" cortical layer with the selective-and-protective operations of the perceptual-conscious system; it thereby introduces Freud's first topography as an economy functionally differentiated between the process of sorting stimuli based on their intensity and the operation of cordoning some of them off to "underlying layers" in order to conserve energy for immediate tasks.

It bears reiterating that Freud's evolutionary image of perception under siege from the fourth chapter of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* parallels his theory of trauma and compulsive repetition as an unconsciously mobilized endeavor to diffuse a wounding event's retroactive anxious force. The living substance parable also sets the stage for the entrance of the death drive as the pleasure principle's masochistic avatar. Very briefly, whereas Freud's G.T. Fechner-indebted pleasure principle is a regulatory mechanism that staves off entropy by quelling *excess* tensions in order to conserve the energy available for work, the death drive is the conduit of a primal urge to neutralize *all* stimuli and thereby bring about a state of Nirvana-like calm that resembles "death", or, at the very least, inorganic stasis. On a structural level, the death drive also metapsychologizes a phylogenetic inscription figured by Freud's reference to the cortical layer that has not only been inalterably *deadened* by stimuli, but, in giving up "the structure proper to living matter", also "becomes to some degree *inorganic*", in what he characterizes as a noble sacrifice of vitality for the sake of the greater good.²²

In the third section of "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire", the encrusted destiny of Freud's amoebic "living substance" assumes a sociohistorical as well as a literary signature.

In Freud's view, consciousness as such receives no memory traces whatever, but has another important function: protection against stimuli. "For a living organism, protection against stimuli is almost more important than the reception of stimuli. The protective shield is equipped with its own store of energy and must above all strive to preserve the special forms of conversion of energy operating in it against the effects of the excessive energies at work in the external world—effects that tend toward an equalization of potential and hence toward destruction." The threat posed by these energies is the threat of shocks. The more readily consciousness registers these, shocks, the less likely they are to have a traumatic effect. ([5], p. 317 citing [46], p. 27)

The language of energetics plays out above in the impact of the "excessive energies" that batter consciousness and in the work of the selective functions that deflect them. A key lesson that Benjamin distills from Freud's thermodynamics is that energy must be "conserved" for this work *at the expense of reception* to protect the system as whole from traumatic shocks that might lead to systemic collapse. For Freud, as Benjamin reminds us, *trauma* names the relative permanence of the frightful event that pierces the "siege mentality" of the perceptual-conscious system "in the absence of any preparedness for anxiety." Part of what Benjamin gains from Freudian psychoanalysis is insight into "the nature of these traumatic shocks 'in terms of how they break through the shield that protects against stimuli'" ([5], p. 317 citing [46], p. 29). Freud's vesicle image provides a figural means of bridging

²² For a more detailed reading of the "living substance" figure in Freud, see Ball [47]. The sixth chapter of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* seemingly aims to ground the phylogenetic premises of the death drive "scientifically" through Weismann's, Hartmann's, and Woodruff's views on the "problem of death" in unicellular and multicellular organisms. This scientific assemblage depicts the mitosis of unicellular organisms as the reverberation of a threshold: these entities divide once they wear down, thereby staving off death with new life; in higher organisms, however, the work of preserving and reproducing life exerts an *endogenous stress* that intensifies deterioration rather than vitality and goads a primal urge to revert to inorganic stasis. For Freud, the necessity of "mitosis" translates into the process of psychic division through internal path-breaking/facilitation [*Bahnung*]. Unconscious dynamics mark the navigation of these anxiety-girded grids of avoidance, disavowal, and negation.

“excessive energies” and the “shocks” which modern consciousness must effectively “parry” to ward off trauma. To the extent that Benjamin persuades us that industrialized modernity is “traumatic”, he can claim that it inculcates shock absorption “training in coping with stimuli”, and that it enlists dreams as well as recollection to facilitate this end ([5], p. 318).

Benjamin’s “Freud” backlights the inevitability of the human motor winding down or wearing out, rigged, therefore, to conserve energy for survival, but with a definitive cost. The sacrifice of reception to protection exacerbates the wax of superficial and finite lived “moments” [*Erlebnisse*] and the wane of long-term experience [*Erfahrung*] that integrated the present with the past. This *Erfahrung* decline motif sociohistoricizes Freud’s death drive: the primeval urge to revert to the insentience of inorganic matter translates into an *adaptation* to the jarring bustle of urban masses, public transport, and spatiotemporal flux. The death drive hereby reemerges as Benjamin’s reifying “motor”: it *hardens* moderns against a siege of perceptual demands that deplete vitalizing reserves of tradition-limned *Erfahrung* and memory as capacity [*Gedächtnis*].

Transferred to a literary domain, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* builds Benjamin’s case for celebrating Baudelaire as a “traumatophile” poet who “made it his business to parry the shocks, no matter what their source, with his spiritual and physical self” ([5], p. 319). The poet’s combat imagery simultaneously dramatizes and overcomes mounting defenses against the numbing effects of fast-paced, noisy, relentlessly visual, densely crowded scenes. To forge this connection, Benjamin transfigures Freud’s phylogenetically-determined first topography into a reaction formation against the multifarious agents of modernization fatigue.²³ The order of the sections in the “Motifs” essay is consequential in this respect. The sorry news about Freud’s deadened and deadening perceptual cortex in section III structures Benjamin’s pivotal inversion between *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung* in the first lines of section IV:

The greater the share of the shock factor in particular impressions, the more vigilant consciousness has to be in screening against stimuli; the more efficiently it does so, the less these impressions enter long experience [*Erfahrung*] and the more they correspond to the concept of isolated experience [*Erlebnis*]. Perhaps the special achievement of shock defense is the way it assigns an incident a precise point in time in consciousness, at the cost of the integrity of the incident’s contents. This would be a peak achievement of [reflection] [*Das wäre eine Spitzenleistung der Reflexion*]; it would turn the incident into an isolated experience. Without reflection [*Fällt sie aus*], there would be nothing but the sudden start, usually the sensation of fright which, according to Freud, confirms the failure of the shock defense. ([5], p. 319 translation modified; [43], p. 193)

²³ Perhaps enough has been said about Benjamin’s shock aesthetics, which crystallized a stylistic conjuncture between the historical avant-garde (surrealism, dada, and futurism) and literary modernism. Though it unfortunately remains untranslated, Karl Heinz Böhrer’s *Ästhetik des Schreckens* [48] usefully compares Benjamin’s shock experience with Ernst Jünger’s proto-fascist “total mobilization” trope [49]. Benjamin’s deployment of Freud’s model of a perceptual-conscious “totally mobilized” against a chronic barrage of threats recalls Jünger’s logic. In contrast to Jünger, however, Benjamin’s “Baudelaire” is clearly not preoccupied with existential authenticity, preferring to celebrate the haptic motility of shock-fencing. Benjamin also seems to allude to Jünger with a measure of historical distance in the opening section of “The Storyteller”, which evokes “[a] generation that had gone to school on horse-drawn streetcars”, but “now stood under the open sky in a landscape where nothing remained unchanged but the clouds and, beneath those clouds, in a force field of destructive torrents and explosions, the tiny, fragile human body” ([50], p. 144).

In the context of a modernization lament that also deposes narratives of progress, Benjamin's seemingly backhanded praise of *Erlebnis* as a "peak achievement of reflection" above is paradoxical, since he subsequently explains it as the disconnected residue of a shock defense at the cost of the "integrity" of an event's contents; however, if we recall his characterization of Bergson's symptomatic investment in specifying and fixing the spontaneous afterimage "as a permanent record" ([5], p. 314), then Benjamin's use of the term *Reflexion* assumes an alternative nuance, since it could also denote *reflected image* rather than *intellect* as it has been translated in the Belknap Press edition of the *Selected Writings* [5].

Bergson's and Benjamin's shared preoccupation with the afterimage emerges in the wake of a historical context, highlighted by Jonathan Crary, in which "new industries of image-making (and later auditory formats)" in the early nineteenth century "fundamentally transformed the very possibility of 'visionary' experience. In the 1830s and 1840s", Crary notes, "there was an increasing amount of research on the features of human vision considered to be 'subjective', or belonging to the body as the result of internal causes or activity." Among the categories that attracted interest, Crary foregrounds retinal afterimages defined as "nervous or optical phenomena vividly discernible to the perceiver *with eyes closed*" ([21], p. 106).²⁴

Bergson's eidetic *afterimage* concept manifestly attests to this milieu and its horizon—the rise of photography as a technology of memory. Once again, Bergson stresses the involvement of attentive perception in *reflection* in its etymological sense as the "projection, outside ourselves, of an actively created image, identical with, or similar to, the object on which it comes to mold itself" ([6], p. 102). While elaborating on the phenomenon of afterimages, he additionally remarks that, "we are dealing here with images photographed upon the object itself, and with memories following immediately upon perception of which they are but the echo" ([6], p. 103).

On a rhetorical level, the language Bergson employs to elucidate the afterimage's "photographic" disposition furthers his agenda to shore up the intimacy between matter and perception, on the one hand, and between perception and memory, on the other. At the same time, because photographic imagery surfaces throughout *Matter and Memory*, it also reads as a testament to Bergson's techno-historical "unconscious". In stressing that spontaneous recall memory "answers with difficulty to the summons of the will", Bergson elaborates on this torpidity by referencing Mortimer Granville's "faculty of mental photography", which "belongs rather to the subconsciousness than to consciousness" ([6], p. 87 citing [53], p. 458). Further on, where he acknowledges that recollection becomes "capable of blending so well with the present perception that we cannot say where perception ends or where memory

²⁴ Crary lists the phenakistiscope and zoetrope, along with various "other pre-cinematic entertainments" before recalling a "very different class of subjective visual events [that] was also explored, beginning in the 1830s" that were "[f]ar more resistant to any quantification or mastery". What came to be known as "hypnagogic images" comprised "multiform visual occurrences (often inseparable from other sense modalities) that are unique to a state of consciousness hovering between wakefulness and sleep". Because the attention to hypnagogic phenomena "could not lead to any practical or commodifiable applications", its study fell by the wayside, according to Crary, by the end of the 19th century, "or was pursued mainly in work on pathological conditions, dissociative states, or personality disorders" ([21], p. 107). Crary offers an eloquent coda to this history in a postscript from Italo Calvino a century later to the effect that "civilization as a whole was on the verge of 'losing a basic human faculty: the power of bringing visions into focus with our eyes shut'" ([21], p. 107 citing [51], p. 92). For Crary's more extensive treatment of this conjuncture, see [52].

begins”, Bergson also avers that memory, does not “capriciously” transmit and reclaim its images, but instead “follows regularly, in all of their details, the movements of the body”. Bergson hereby conjures memory as a *fantastic camera* that archives “[p]ast images, reproduced exactly as they were, with all their details and even with their affective coloring”, which thereafter supply the content for “the images of fancy or of dream” ([6], 106).²⁵ In the third chapter of *Matter and Memory*, Bergson likewise characterizes the endeavor “to recover a recollection, to call up some period of our history”, as a set of steps through which “we detach ourselves from the present in order to replace ourselves, first, in the past in general, then, in a certain region of the past—a work of adjustment, something like the focusing of a camera” ([6], pp. 133–34).

From the standpoint of literary history, Bergson’s photography figures implicitly address a challenge to a realist literature, which undertakes the task of evoking precise memory-images beyond the darkroom, that is to say, in competition with the latest technologies for synthesizing afterimages and as a recuperative reaction against what Crary narrates as a co-extensive decline of “visionary experience”. A lesson that would not have been lost on Benjamin is that this challenge might pressure a 19th century author to stylistically replicate the photograph’s force.

To draw out what might be at stake in Bergson’s and Benjamin’s respective *reflections*, it will be helpful to revisit the critic’s praise of Proust as a reader of both Bergson and Baudelaire in the opening sentences of the tenth section of the “Motifs” essay. In that context, Benjamin maintains that Proust shared Bergson’s belief that, “it is the actualization of *durée* that rids man’s soul of the experience of time”. According to Benjamin, this belief encouraged Proust’s development of “the lifelong exercises in which he strove to bring to light past things saturated with all the reminiscences that had penetrated his pores during the sojourn of those things in his unconscious”; it also positions him “as an incomparable reader of *Les Fleurs du mal*, for he sensed that it contained kindred elements”:

Proust writes: “Time is peculiarly dissociated in Baudelaire; only a very few days can appear, and they are significant ones. Thus, it is understandable why turns of phrase like ‘if one evening’ occur frequently in his works.” These significant days are days of the completing time, to paraphrase Joubert. They are days of recollection [*Eingedenken*], not marked by the immediate experience [*Erlebnis*]. They are not connected with other days, but stand out from time. As for their substance, Baudelaire has defined it in the notion of *correspondances*—a concept that in Baudelaire is concomitant but not explicitly linked with the notion of “modern beauty”. ([5], pp. 332–33; [43], p. 314 citing [54], p. 652)²⁶

In a note provided by Benjamin, he contends that Baudelaire’s conception of beauty as evinced in *correspondances* is “aporetic” in “[defining] beauty as the object of experience [*Erfahrung*] in the state of resemblance” ([5], p. 353, note 63). For Benjamin, this definition clarifies “the disconcerting features of Proust’s technique”, which entails “continually and loquaciously [building] his reflections

²⁵ According to Bergson, the body operates as a “special image” as well as a passage of “universal becoming” ([6], p. 151). “Itself an image, the body cannot store up images, since it forms a part of the images, and this is why”, as Bergson explains, “it is a chimerical enterprise to seek to localize past or even present perceptions in the brain: they are not in it; it is the brain that is in them” ([6], p. 151).

²⁶ Proust writes: “Le monde de Baudelaire est un étrange sectionnement du temps où seuls de rares jours notables apparaissent; ce qui explique les fréquentes expressions telles que ‘Si quelque soir’ etc.” ([54], p. 652).

around the concept of a work of art as a copy, the concept of beauty—in short, the hermetic aspect of art” ([5], pp. 352, 353, note 63). Whereas Proust the writer magnifies this aporetic beauty, Proust the reader teaches Benjamin why he admires Baudelairean *correspondances* over and against the “artistic variations” that synesthesia permits ([5], p. 333). Benjamin nevertheless seems to favor Baudelaire’s *correspondances* over Proust’s synthesized memory-images because the latter does not recall the rituals, “with their ceremonies and festivals”, that repeatedly amalgamate elements of individual and collective memory, thus “[triggering] recollection at certain times” while “[remaining] available to memory throughout people’s lives. In this way”, Benjamin infers, “voluntary and involuntary recollection cease to be mutually exclusive” ([5], p. 316). “The important thing”, according to Benjamin, is that Baudelaire’s *correspondances* “encompass a concept of experience [*Erfahrung*] which includes ritual elements”, if they do not belong exclusively to this realm. These “ritual elements” are key to Benjamin’s understanding of *Erfahrung* because they enable Baudelaire “to fathom the full meaning of the breakdown which he, as a modern man, was witnessing” and then “to recognize it as a challenge meant for him alone” ([5], p. 333).

To track how Baudelaire’s attention to ritual imparts a potentially post-melancholic motility to Benjamin’s modernization lament, recall the opening section of “Motifs”, where he agrees with Bergson that, “[e]xperience is indeed a matter of tradition in collective existence as well as private life. It is the product less of facts firmly anchored in memory [*Erinnerung*] than of accumulated and frequently unconscious data that flow together in memory [*Gedächtnis*]” ([5], p. 314). As he phrases it, subsequently, in the second section: “[w]here there is experience in the strict sense of the word, certain contents of the individual past combine in the memory [*Gedächtnis*] with material of the collective past” ([5], p. 316). The implication is that rituals constitute this historically-enriched “material” resource that compartmentalized perception and fragmented experience have rarefied.

Andrew Benjamin’s 1991 analysis of “The Storyteller” sheds light on Benjamin’s oddly nostalgic attitude toward rituals, a reverence that redeems the concept of tradition from social scientific condemnations of conformity. Andrew Benjamin observes that rituals repeat and thereby *reactivate* in a phenomenological sense tradition as a force of continuity and community. Because tradition in Benjamin’s account “demands and creates unity”, its fragmentation entails “the construction of the present as a site of loss” ([55], pp. 160–61). This view aligns the destruction of *Erfahrung* with the disintegration of tradition as the nurturing soil for the kind of audience who hears the wisdom in the story, but also finds communal spaces to retell it (to pass the time at work, perhaps). The multiplication of *Erlebnis* that disperses *Erfahrung* thus translates into a modern inability to reconnect with tradition through the rituals that presumably nurtured communal belonging. A sense of lack, of self-irreconcilability, feeds an idealization of the “initial unity” located in and lamented as a bygone *Gemeinschaft* ([55], p. 170).

Of course, even if Benjamin aptly identifies social and subjective fragmentation, as Andrew Benjamin emphasizes, the accuracy of this description “demands neither an initial unity nor the need to define the present in terms of loss” ([55], p. 171). To posit this anterior unity is, thus, to replay a prototypically melancholic logic in which an absent and unachievable *Gestalt* is mourned *as if* it were a loss; however, Benjamin resists this diagnosis, for where he appears to bemoan the dissipation of mutual responsiveness in urban scenes, he also conjures a sensory *Gemeinschaft* that literature would,

perhaps, provisionally restore. This potentially post-melancholic stance vests poetry with the power to disrupt alienating *Gesellschaft* by tapping into the communal energies of an Edenic before-time.

If we grant that “[t]he end of the story is the end of community”, as Andrew Benjamin’s reading of “The Storyteller” suggests, then Jennifer Bajorek interprets this end as “the beginning of poetry” in the “Motifs” essay where she discovers “the poetic rebirth of community” ([56], p. 100). Against Adorno’s notoriously scathing rejection of Benjamin’s methodology in the “Motifs” essay at the “crossroads of magic and positivism” ([56], p. 96 citing [57], p. 283),²⁷ Bajorek highlights the latter’s extraordinary investment in Baudelaire’s poetry “as a technology of memory and a technology, if not of mass production and technical reproducibility exactly, then of the recording and transmission of an experience that was already becoming a mass experience” under capital ([56], pp. 98–99). Her analysis elucidates how Benjamin’s reading of Baudelaire’s lyric transports the historicity of this poetic form, which is to say, its materiality, as a reaction against industrialization and an obsolescent “technology” in its own right.

The singularity of Baudelaire’s poetry for Benjamin derives, as Bajorek proposes, from its ability to enunciate the destruction of collective experience that transpires as capital curtails its range and contents as well as the “kind of collective experience that would be transmissible” ([56], p. 99). Nevertheless, to insist that *Erfahrung* is always “a matter of tradition, and therefore always collective”, is not to represent it as “historically specific”, as Bajorek reminds us ([56], p. 99). This is the case insofar as Benjamin’s use of Freud’s first topography assumes that memory and consciousness are incompatible—they cannot co-exist within the same system—because the capacity for reception must be continuously defended against the pressures that threaten to overdraw it. In this connection, Benjamin reiterates Freud’s claim that the most forceful and durable memories would be those never processed by a selective and defensive consciousness, which would have defused their charge. The implication is that the charged contents deflected by the perceptual-consciousness are not and do not become “historical”, as Bajorek acknowledges ([56], p. 116), even if “history” is partially comprised of memory traces. The “truth of experience” and the “stuff of history” could only be transmitted, then, as Bajorek demonstrates, from a gap or hiatus in consciousness ([56], pp. 108–09).

In Bajorek’s interpretation, Benjamin entrusts Baudelaire’s poetry with the mission of safeguarding traces that have never been processed because the perceptual-conscious system has deflected them to a deeper layer—an unconscious archive.²⁸ The pivotal point here is that *lapsed consciousness* becomes the contingent condition for revitalized *Gedächtnis*, the concept of memory as a power of preservation and a surface of inscription rather than as a record of a particular event (*Erinnerung*). In this respect, the image of Baudelaire’s traumatophile fencing not only permits Benjamin to formalize modern shock

²⁷ In the notorious letter dated 10 November 1938, Adorno writes: “If one wanted to put it drastically, one could say that your study is located at the crossroads of magic and positivism. This spot is bewitched. Only theory could break this spell—your own resolute and salutarily speculative theory. It is simply the claim of this theory that I bring against you here” ([57], p. 283).

²⁸ For Freud, the insulated layers presumably include the unconscious system, though it defies location. It is also worth pointing out that his emphasis on unconscious mediation cannot be reconciled with claims about the “literality” of perceptions stored as memories, “unalloyed”, as Bergson might say, by the “impurity” of affection ([6], p. 58). More likely, given Freud’s understanding of censorship, it is the relative intensity of this “impurity” that determines their diversion to a less immediate domain.

resistance, as Bajorek contends, but also to stipulate that there can be no *Erfahrung*—“no real, transmissible, durable experience”—that is not mediated by market forces ([56], p. 106). Insofar as consciousness for Benjamin “functions as a form of blankness for the subject, bearing no traces of his experience” ([56], p. 109), Bajorek argues that his Baudelaire transcribes a collective memory of capital as a subliminal residue of lapsed consciousness at a moment when long-term, “freighted” experience (*Erfahrung*) and collective memory are being steadily eroded by technological developments. Even as it marks this erosion, Baudelaire’s commitment to the “past that murmurs in *correspondances*” also redeems language as an alternative memory technology to photography ([5], p. 334 cited by [56], p. 111). As an “insertion into blankness” ([5], p. 318), Baudelaire’s poetry offsets a negative image of meaning—like a photographic negative, as Bajorek stresses, thereby opening an interval that the reader fills.²⁹

Benjamin affirms the importance of this opening or interval in his opposition between storytelling and information. In contrast to information, a story “embeds the event in the life of the storyteller in order to pass it on as experience to those listening. It thus bears the trace of the storyteller, much the way an earthen vessel bears the trace of the potter’s hand” ([5], p. 316). A clay surface capable of retaining fingerprints would still be malleable—not yet fired, or “baked through” like the little vesicle’s cortical shell depicted by Freud. As “both the bearer of traces and an inscribed surface”, Bajorek observes, Benjamin’s clay vessel thus offers “a markedly textual metaphor for the story or the work”, which empowers it “to convey, not the event per se, but rather the traces left by those who have handled it” ([56], p. 109).

Bajorek detects intimations of a distinction “between a poetic transmission of prehistorical *versus* historical data” in Benjamin’s valorization of Baudelaire’s *correspondances*. This distinction is worth dwelling upon because it signals “an alternative model of poetry and of poetic composition in which the past would be recorded, but not necessarily *transmitted*” ([56], p. 110). Bajorek’s observation encourages further consideration of the connotative valence of Benjamin’s *tradition*. This valence seems to include *prehistory* as a *regression* of the historical in favor of the *immemorial*, which is to imply that the reach of poetic percipience surpasses not just philosophy *but also history*. Benjamin already hints at this connection in two early fragments on “Baudelaire” from 1921, where he characterizes Baudelaire’s soul as having “this mythical prehistory, of which he knows, and thanks to which he knows more than others about redemption. He teaches us above all to understand the literal

²⁹ In one of two early fragments from 1921 on Baudelaire published in the first volume of the *Selected Writings*, Benjamin explicitly associates Baudelaire’s “way of looking at the world” with photography: “Let us compare time to a photographer—earthly time to a photographer who photographs the essence of things. But because of the nature of earthly time and its apparatus, the photographer manages only to register the negative of that essence on his photographic plates. No one can read these plates; no one can deduce from the negative, on which tie records the objects, the true essence of things as they really are. Moreover, the elixir that might act as a developing agent is unknown. And there is Baudelaire: he doesn’t possess the vital fluid either—the fluid in which these plates would have to be immersed so as to obtain the true picture. But he, he alone, is able to read the plates, thanks to infinite mental efforts. He alone is able to extract from the negatives of essence a presentiment of its real picture. And from this presentiment speaks the negative of essence in all his poems” ([58], p. 361 quoted by Bajorek [56], p. 112).

meaning of the word ‘knowledge’ in the story of Eden” ([58], p. 361).³⁰ In the “Motifs” essay, Benjamin commends Baudelaire’s *correspondances* for commemorating festive days as encounters with an earlier life—“not historical data”, as Benjamin remarks, “but data of prehistory” ([5], p. 334). In marking a time before *Erlebnis* eclipsed *Erfahrung* and, in Tönnisian terms, before *Gesellschaft* ousted *Gemeinschaft*, Benjamin’s reference to prehistory might indicate why a philosophy of perception that brackets out sociohistorical developments cannot hold a candle to poetry. By animating the spiritualizing *durée* of ritual time, Baudelaire’s *correspondances* both expose and transcend the functionally differentiated perceptual economy that traps moderns in atomistic immediacy while simultaneously evoking a community of readers who yearn for a dispensation from defensive individuation.

5. Concluding Remarks

The figure of *prehistory* might stand in for a story-telling oral culture supplanted by information as an increasingly dominant mode of communication “shot through with explanations”, as Benjamin phrases it in “The Storyteller” ([50], p. 147). Benjamin’s elaboration on the dissipation of story-counsel suggests that its transmissibility is vitalized, not through a coherent explanation that would distill it into information, but through a listener seeking distraction from repetitive labors, one who unconsciously fills in the story’s gaps by drawing on the contents of his or her own experience [*Erfahrung*]. When Benjamin evocatively declares that “[b]oredom is the dream bird that hatches the egg of experience” ([50], p. 149), he once again affirms the value of relaxed, self-forgetful states in which the perceptual-conscious system’s ossified protective barrier is inadvertently lowered. Loosened defenses enable story-counsel to be absorbed for future redistribution as renewable communal energy. The figure of prehistory pays tribute to unforeseen regressions in consciousness as windows that temporarily open to allow latent sensibilities to breeze in.

In “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Mechanical Reproducibility”, Benjamin also extols the virtues of a regression of consciousness as a means of generating new, and potentially mass-mobilizing tasks of perception that can be assimilated in a non-voluntary as opposed to a contemplative register ([59], pp. 268–69). This provision valorizes distraction as provided by mechanically produced art, and perhaps film most quintessentially, because of its hypnomorphic capacity to generate collective sensoria. Howard Eiland has examined Benjamin’s slippages between “mere” distraction (as diversion) *versus* “productive” distraction (as pedagogy). According to Eiland, “The Work of Art” essay implies that, “[r]eception in distraction is conditioned, first of all, by the dynamics of modern technology, by the technologization of things—the accelerated pace of life, the rapid transitions of modern media, the press of commodities and their programmed obsolescence, and so on. At the same time, it is a covert measure of the ability to perform new tasks of apperception, for *successful* reception in distraction presupposes that a mastery of certain tasks has become habitual” ([45], pp. 6–7).³¹

³⁰ The editors of the Belknap Press edition of the “Motifs” essay attribute the inspiration for Baudelaire’s idea of natural *correspondances* to the Swedish mystic Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772), “who envisioned a universal language in which everything outward and visible in nature was a symbol pointing to an inward spiritual cause” ([5], p. 352, note 61).

³¹ In keeping with this image of modern perceptive faculties, Eiland notes that cinema emerges, for Benjamin, as “the authentic *Übungsinstrument*, or training device, for the sort of reception in distraction which is coming into being in all areas of contemporary art, and which is symptomatic of a new kinetic apperception, one opened out and agitated, as it

Eiland's "Reception in Distraction" analysis confirms the status of Benjamin's reinvention of the unconscious as an archive of foreclosed memory and the unrealized possibilities that abide in it. I have suggested that Bergson's photography analogies symptomatically attest to their technological horizon—an *interpretative unconscious* that over-determines memory as well as its conception. In this respect, Bergson's model of perception and memory is no more or less "historical" than Freud's vigilantly individuated perceptual consciousness fortified against entropy, which serves as a thermodynamic departure point for Benjamin's literary energetics.³² One notable difference is that Freud supplies Benjamin with a figurative means through which to anteriorize the receptivity sacrificed to protective reification as a latent yet renewable source of energy. If Bergson nevertheless remains an influence here, it is through his prioritization of suddenness as a feature of spontaneous recollection that disrupts habit, a notion that supplements Benjamin's construction of regressed consciousness as an escape valve from the perceptual-affective hardening induced by large-scale industrialism. In this schema, literary images potentially breach selective barriers by unexpectedly rekindling a prehistorical poetic *animacy* that redeems us from perceptual calcification.

My understanding of Benjamin's "animism" is indebted to Christopher Bracken's elaboration of "magical criticism" [63] as a poetics that invests things with force, thereby harnessing the power of metaphor over and against the anxiety about it evinced in a range of discourses, including anthropology, sociology, philosophy, and linguistics. From the standpoint of this poetics, Marx was ironically primitivist when he denigrated consumers as naive animists who vest commodities with magical regenerative properties while occulting the coercion and exploitation that ensure efficient production and the accumulation of surplus value.³³ Likewise, Freud associated a neurotic's belief in the omnipotence of his or her thoughts with a magically-thinking "primitive" characterized as a pre-civilizational "child", an association the psychoanalyst repeatedly employed to supplement his phylogenetic theory of the unconscious.

As Bracken has demonstrated, Benjamin did not scorn the idea of animist force fields; on the contrary, his theses about *correspondances* and aura suggest that he savors the "magic" in fetishistic perception as the missing link between modern literature and pre-modern sentience. While granting literary images the power to reactivate the auratic powers of obsolescent commodities and forlorn landscapes *to look and talk back* in the enigmatic language of resemblances, Benjamin converts

were, jolted." Significantly, then, as Eiland infers, "[w]hat makes film instrumental in the cultivation of such decentered reception is...the metamorphic mechanism of montage," which "is no longer opposed to distraction, as in the essays on Brecht, but is its vehicle" ([45], pp. 8–9).

³² This essay might have provided an opportunity to reflect on Freud's "photographic unconscious", as Elissa Marder has recently analyzed it in a paper on Baudelaire and Freud presented at the Annual Convention of the Modern Languages Association in January, 2015 [60]. For published discussions of this connection in Freud's trauma theory, see Kate Lawless [61] and Ulrich Baer [62].

³³ It might be argued that Benjamin revises Marx's equation between labor power and vital energy by replacing thermodynamic *Kraft* with a still more outmoded pantheist idea of forces or energies that inherently bind all matter in an animist's web, a notion that Émile Durkheim identified as an unequivocal feature of "primitive" religion [64]. To the extent that he passes from thermodynamics to animism, Benjamin inverts Marx's critique of commodity fetishism while reversing the political economist's "intellectual progress". On Marx's fluctuation between a pantheistic metaphysics of nature and Helmholtzian *Kraft*, see Anson Rabinbach [25] as well as Paul Burkett and John Bellamy Foster [65].

“Proust” and “Baudelaire” into vehicles for the heightened “prehistorical” perception that would have been available to Adam and Eve once upon a theologico-political fragment time—before industrialization petrified our senses. To the extent that he projects a desire for affectability and mutuality onto literary images as refractions of sociohistorical conditions, Benjamin bears witness to the alienated modern’s longing for community.³⁴ It is, thus, “literature” rather than “philosophy” that carries the potential to awaken, not only buried revolutionary hopes, but also an atrophied poetic capacity for social and natural communion.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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³⁴ McGettigan correctly views Benjamin’s “energetics” as assuming a revolutionary and messianic slant in “On the Concept of History” [66], where Benjamin postulates “a model of conjunctural past time returning within a particular form of experience, remembrance”. McGettigan discerns “a plurality of forms of time in Benjamin’s work, but remembrance is the one with political relevance. It does not need history as a whole—it is mortgaged to revolutionary energetics” ([24], p. 31). As McGettigan proposes, one of the lessons Benjamin adapts from Bergson is that “the energy for revolution comes from particular past times. For certain periods in the past are charged with a particular tension which can be brought to bear upon current conditions”. From the standpoint of revolutionary energetics, then, historical times could be viewed as “vary[ing] in terms of their degree of ‘charge’ ... ([24], pp. 27, 30). In my own reading of this “revolutionary energetics”, Benjamin calls upon historical materialist critique to open itself to flashes of buried hope by sifting through the rubble of progressive history. This spiritualizing excavation coalesces with a gently Lurianic mission to recover divine sparks from shattered vessels. *Tikkun* (cosmological healing) in Benjamin’s literary praxis might therefore be re-envisioned as a messianic energetics—one that *repletes* lost political vitality by gathering scattered light (unrealized hope) from broken shards. Eiland’s articulation of Benjamin’s messianic “scatter poetics” reinforces this view. Referring to Benjamin’s characterizations of the collector, the *flâneur*, and the gambler, Eiland observes that, “[a]ll three are at home, relatively speaking, in the world’s scatter. They are touched and inspired by it. They spend themselves and expand themselves in being dispersed to the current of objects. And their reception in distraction, like that of the movie audience, is not merely visual but tactile, or visceral; it involves their whole sensorium, as illuminated by memory (for the experience in ‘intoxicated experience’ is long experience [*Erfahrung*]). Their struggle against dispersion succeeds only by dint of studious abandonment to it, and this is the source of their presence of mind as something bodily” ([45], p. 11).

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