

What's the 'Matter' with Materialism? Walter Benjamin and the New Janitocracy

Dan Mellamphy and Nandita Biswas Mellamphy
University of Western Ontario

This paper examines Walter Benjamin's argument that the matter—the materials—of materialist historiography are the objects that have been forgotten and discarded by modern bourgeois commodity culture. Just as Benjamin saw in child's play and children's playthings a potential 'playing out' and 'recollecting' of that which has been dropped, left behind, forgotten and forsaken, he likewise saw the historical endeavor as one which engaged the discarded materials of bourgeois culture and cut through progressivist, universalist history—revealing in so doing a materialist and indeed 'messianic' history. The consequences of this redemptive relation (these redemptive relations) are drawn out in the essay and culminate in the figure of the revolutionary custodian and the 'New Janitocracy'.

Gershom Sholem once wrote of his friend Walter Benjamin that “it is one of Benjamin's most important characteristics that throughout his life² he was attracted with almost magical force by the child's world and ways.” Indeed, Benjamin himself wrote that

[e]very childhood achieves something great and irreplaceable for humanity. By the interest it takes in technological phenomena, by the curiosity it displays before any sort of invention and machinery, every childhood binds the accomplishments of technology to the old worlds of symbol.³

These two statements—the first about the 'magical force' of 'the child's world and ways', the second about the 'great and irreplaceable' achievement of children and their capacity to reconcile modern technology and ancient symbolism—point to the powerful example Benjamin saw in the toddler's interaction with the objects of the world ('messy antics' as we will call them). Children approach the objects of the world as things imbued with remarkable—indeed *revolutionary*—possibilities. For children, the most valuable objects are the very things that adults consider useless trash.

Benjamin saw in children and child's-play the emancipatory potential that was once the promise of the Marxist project of social renewal and

economic transformation. Although Benjamin was pessimistic about the historical domination of mass technological culture, he had hoped that returning to the 'matter' of history could awaken the 'new nature' of technology, and thus reawaken the slumbering forces of the proletariat revolutionary consciousness.⁵ Benjamin was convinced that children not only pointed toward this revolutionary potential, but that in childhood revolutionary emancipation was both a theoretical potential and empirically actualizable.

The world and language of children stood as a kind of prototype or model (or rather potential reality) for the historian's search for the 'matter' of history. For one thing, hidden within the child's fascination for discarded, forgotten objects was a radical openness to and consciousness of the objects themselves. Benjamin argued that the historical materialist, too, must take up what has been left behind, examine it—explore it—and engage it as an active thing; 'activate' it, 'animate' it, breathe 'life' back into it (or allow *its* life to breathe onto/into *ours*). The materialist historian, like the infant, must open herself up to the historical possibilities of the object at hand.

The significant point for Benjamin is that, in having been forgotten, the discarded object nonetheless continues to exist apart from the continuum of progressive historical time. In being discarded, the object that had once been a part of the historical process as a reified or fetishized commodity, dies a social death; but it is precisely at the juncture in which it exists as a 'has-been' that its potential to reveal the 'not-yet' emerges (its chance to be 'born[e] again'). This two-fold movement opens up within the object itself, and therefore it points to two dimensions: on the one hand, as an extinct and bygone object it is able to demystify the structure of progressive history by exposing its 'mythic' dimension. The once-fetishized object in its decayed and disabused/used form exposes the collective fantasy or 'wish-image' that had once made it a valued object of social desire. On the other hand, this demystification or *demythification* also points to the potential for change inherent in the obsolete object itself. This latter aspect constitutes its redemptive dimension: although it is 'fallen' or abjected, in the sense that the object is deemed no longer socially valuable, as an obsolete object or 'ruin', it nonetheless outlives its conventional collective social function. That which has been abjected or abandoned is addressed again⁸ or redressed (and thereby revived) through its extramythic or countermythological potential—its potential, in short, to stand outside the homogeneous continuum and mythological narrative of historical

progression. These forsaken and forgotten objects simultaneously expose the ideological structure of bourgeois capitalist commodified culture (by falling into its margins and/or out of them completely) and also contain within them “a precious but tasteless seed”: the seed of their own temporal redemption.

Benjamin’s point here is poignant: without a materialist presentation of history, the past simply gets co-opted by a mythic vision of futurity in which ‘the present’ disappears and ‘the course of history’ becomes the narratological fiction of a fated or purposive progression. From a political perspective, the revolutionary potential of the masses is therefore co-opted within the discourse of historical progression such that every trace of the concrete particular object (and therefore its actual redemptive potential) disappears within the hegemony of the ‘universal’ conception of history. It is only the discarded and forgotten object as such that reveals itself *concretely*: only the abjected and abandoned object, in the end, can be taken up as an historical *fact*—a *fait* rather than a fetish.¹⁰ The discarded object is the only historical ‘material’ that allows us to look at the present (the ‘now’) because by being blasted out of the historical continuum it is revealed, according to Benjamin, as a ‘monad’¹¹ into which “all the forces and interests of history enter on a reduced scale”. The historical materialist must realize that “in order for a part of the past to be touched by the present instant [*Aktualität*], there must be no continuity between them”. The political or revolutionary task of rescuing the object is thus accomplished by the historical materialist’s ‘seemingly brutal grasp’.¹³

Just as the historical materialist⁴ approaches an historical object only where s/he encounters it as a monad, so too does the inquisitive child take cognizance of the matter at hand in order to give that particular object a ‘shock’ and thereby ‘blast’ a specific life from its lifeless shell, and a specific work from this very lifework. The act of cognizance is a political act of the highest significance, for it is in this way that the historical materialist—and the child—struggle against being a tool of the ruling classes by ‘wresting’¹⁶ the traditional object away from its worldly progressivist ‘conformism’.

The only ‘historical object’ is the one that has been thrown out, rejected, and exists¹⁷ as a fact (*fait accompli*) and hence *in fact* (*factually*) rather than ‘fact’ or ‘fait’ishly. Its status as ‘has-been’ affords it the possibility to speak something entirely new and novel. For instance, in the world and words of the child we find “prickly chestnuts that are spiky clubs, tin foil that is hoarded silver, bricks that are coffins, cacti that are totem poles, and

copper pennies that are shields;”¹⁸ the babbling baby who calls the wood-block a ‘ga’ and the cardboard box a ‘ba’ finds the object’s purpose and uses many and varied (be it to taste, to touch, et cetera). The infant’s and child’s fascination for (indeed *attraction to*) discarded, forgotten objects is often taken as a source of embarrassment for its elders, but for Benjamin this vigilance and materialist concern (*fascination too*) becomes the area of inquiry and primary methodology of materialist historiography. The openness to the object establishes a primal relation between object and subject by making it possible to understand objects before they become fetishized as commodities (in their ‘infancy’) as well as afterward, in the aftermath of such imbrication (in their ‘history’). Whether it be a babbling baby or an elementary initiate into ‘language’ (the ‘word’ and the ‘world’) the child engaged with a fallen item—an object dropped on the floor, left behind or forsaken—opens up myriad possibilities and potentialities in the object’s name and nature. Old discarded objects, especially those which have ceased to be ‘useful’ as commodities, are the key to uncovering the ‘matrix’ or ‘matter’ of history—its fully wor[l]dly dimension or monadological actualization. In other words, in the infantile reframing (its objective articulation) and renaming (its linguistic articulation) of the world is the potential for and the ¹⁹anticipation of a reconciliation between language, experience and nature. It is this very awareness and openness (never mind inquisitiveness) that Benjamin takes as a welcome model for materialist historiography. In order to understand the emancipatory potential of the new (and simultaneously old) nature of material existence to which he refers, we must turn to Benjamin’s account of how this relationship between the human being and the material world arises as a unity that later becomes fragmented.

The ‘messianic’, for Benjamin, represents the redemptive promise of the historical object. From the perspective of the philosophy of history, ‘the messianic’ points to the fact that the time is ‘ripe’ (to use Hegelian terminology) for the matter or concrete object of history to ²⁰coalesce conceptually and empirically with universal human history, while from the perspective of human experience it also points to a certain primordial exigency (primitive, or ‘raw’, rather than ‘ripe’ or ‘refined’) to reconnect ²¹humanity with the material basis—that is, *creative unity*—of existence. Although the historical materialist appears in the aftermath of the historical object, s/he nevertheless stands as a kind of culmination (an kind of mathematical reintegration or realization ²²) of the object’s

historical trajectory, as its 'salvation' of sorts. The same can be said of the child who picks up the discarded object and 'redeems' it. Both become, as it were, the 'magical force' of which Scholem wrote: "something great and irreplaceable" in the structure of history (according to Benjamin); they are historical '*aftermath*'emagicians or *after*'magicians', performing the algebra²⁴ of materialist history which "binds the accomplishments of technology to the old worlds of symbol."²⁵ The ripe old historian, cultivated and sophisticated, and the raw, uncultivated child, have what Benjamin would call a 'messianic power'—indeed²⁶ we are *all* inheritors of a 'weak messianic power' according to Benjamin, though few of us actually *actualize* or *realize* it; hence the focus on the probing child (primitive and primal) and the attentive historical materialist (advanced and altogether acculturated).

Through childhood activity and historical 'material', the world of mechanical 'invention' and technological 'progression' intersects with that of the original or aboriginal: the primal or primeval beginnings of 'language', the unity of 'word' and 'world' as such. In this encounter, the Modern confronts the Archaic—or rather (according to Benjamin) the *Adamic*: Benjamin believes that language points to an original unity or harmony between man and nature. "Unlike the soundless language of things, human language has an 'immaterial and purely spiritual' community (*Gemeinschaft*) with things; sound symbolizes this community between humans and things."²⁷ The only way, however, to access this primordial unity in modernity is in and through the particular, concrete and material nature of the historical object.

The child's naming of things, like the infant's prelinguistic 'ba' or 'ga' (another form of naming), harkens back to the Adamic naming at the Biblical beginning of language-as-such, and relives this magical moment. "So out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man [Adam] to see what he would call them; and whatever the man [Adam] called every living creature, that was its name" (*Genesis* 2). Adam, who himself is named after the matter ('*adamah*': earth or clay) from which he is made, confronts everything that is brought before him and babbles something as he beholds it; this babble is the language that would remain unchanged until Babel and the Babelian fragmentation (*Genesis* 11) of Adamic language into the multitude of languages of humanity.

The child confronting the object at hand and the materialist

historiographer²⁸ approaching the historical hand-me-down suddenly—shockingly—finds herself in an Adamic position while in the same instant at a technological/progressive crossroads. By confronting an object in its aftermath—after it has been *worded* and *worlded* (in *Genesis*, by the Godhead itself), ‘confronting the object’, therefore, in its very *historicity*—these materialists (Adamic in the sense of *‘adamah’*) bear witness in the same instant to an actual *emergence*, a state of *emergency*. Something is *emerging*, and this²⁹ brings the continuum of history to a standstill, if only for the ‘moment’. This is the moment Scholem refers to as the expression (here *‘emergence’*) of³⁰ the “momentary totality” that is the “reflection of true transcendence”: the primordial (‘Adamic’) relation of the world and word.

In the historical materialist’s ‘child-like’ approach³¹ to the discarded object, s/he encounters what Benjamin calls “a monad”: a “configuration” or “constellation” saturated with tensions, “a messianic cessation of happening.”³² In a sense, this is a return, in the midst of history, to infancy; but not as a nostalgic return to some historical or prehistorical ‘Golden Age’. It is not that the Adamic unity of word and world is ‘rediscovered’ in the historical object by ‘returning’ to a previous historical state: rather, the present historical state is one that has made possible, *for the first time*, the emergence³³ and expression of the wor[l]d *within the fallen language of humanity* itself: the expression of the world-word relation in the *name*, the act of *naming*. For Benjamin, the historical materialist’s encounter with the monadological structure of the object opens the possibility for something to be said *for the first time*. The relation of world and word forgotten and forsaken since Babel is in this instant ‘legible’ in the present presentation;³⁴ at no other time has this been possible, and becoming cognizant of this is for Benjamin the critical task of historical knowledge.

For the historical index of the images [the dialectical image] not only says that they belong to a particular time; it says, above all, that they attain to legibility only at a particular time. And, indeed, this acceding ‘to legibility’ constitutes a specific critical point in the movement at their interior [...]. It is not that what is past casts its light [on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation.³⁵

The name (as the relation between the matter at hand and the *base* or *basis*—material condition—of this matter; the relation between the world and word, the mundane and the sublime/divine) emerges only at this juncture: “The true picture of the past flits by,” Benjamin explains; it can be ‘read’ or ‘witnessed’ (it is ‘legible’, ‘intelligible’) “only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again.”³⁶ The object makes way for the dialectical image which presents itself, in the present, as the past, and *passes by* presently *into oblivion*. Against oblivion stands the materialist realization and recuperation of Benjamin’s ‘historian’. This latter relives the Adamic moment of primary (child-like) confrontation with the matter of the wor[ld], and attends to the *nomos* (law) of *onoma* (naming) or *adamah* (matter, word and world).

In the first book of the Bible—a philosophical sourcebook for Benjamin, aside altogether from a theological one—God created the world through the word, and man (Adam and his ilk) ‘grasped’ this worded world via the name. To set it out more clearly: in the beginning was the *word* out of which the *world*—matter and energy, trees and rivers, birds and beasts, *etc.*—was created. Out of this world (matter, earth, clay: *adamah*) man was created. At this particular point, though the things of the world had been created by the word, there existed no communion between the created world and the creative word as such. Man’s God-given task was to engender this communion through the naming of things, and thus to redeem, in the world, the language of the word. Man was therefore made the custodian of the language of the word, this custody expressed by way of the name, in which the creative power of the word ‘shines forth’ (see the following quotation, indented below). “Through the word, man is bound to the language of things,” explains Benjamin; and the “human word is the name of things.”³⁷

The proper name is the communion of man with the creative power of God. [...] In the name [however] the word of God has not remained creative; it has become in one part receptive, even if receptive to language. Thus fertilized, it aims to give birth to the language of things themselves, from which in turn, soundlessly, in the mute magic of nature, the word of God shines forth.³⁸

For mankind, ‘things’ are knowable in their names. The name allows the human being to ‘grasp’—“become [...] receptive” to and have

knowledge of—the material *world*, and in consequence, the matter of *words*. The word “shines forth”³⁹ in our *engaging with* and *naming of things*—although *silently*, since the language of the word (the language of things)⁴⁰ is never actually spoken by the language of names (the language of man). The human being who speaks the language of man was not created from the word, one might note at this point (pointing herein to *Genesis* 1), but molded from the material world: the product and the project or projection of the word. This has the utmost significance for the meaning of man’s custodial task: for in man’s power to name lies his essentially *redemptive* duty—the human responsibility to redeem the creative power of the word through the name. “In the creation of man,” therefore, “the threefold rhythm⁴¹ of the creation of nature has given way to an entirely different order”:

God did not create man from the word, and he did not name him. He did not wish to subject him to language, but in man God set language [...] free. God rested when he had left his creative power to itself in man. This creativity, relieved of its divine actuality, became knowledge.⁴² Man is the knower in the same language in which God is creator.

If man knows the world through the name just as God creates the world through the word, then the exigency of naming becomes the cornerstone and building-block of all historical knowledge. The ‘messianic task’ of the historical materialist is to bear witness to this potentially actualizable communion between word and world; to shirk this responsibility is to divide the world and the word from man and to consign humankind and human knowledge to disintegration and eventual oblivion.

The *namer*—as the previous quotation, indented above, points out—is not a product of the *word* (the divine and/or spiritual) but of the *world* (the profane and/or material), and yet *nevertheless*—indeed, *all the more*—stands at the juncture or conjunction of word and world in the capacity of *namer*, the capacity of *naming*: the one who calls forth (and, in so doing, lets things as such ‘shine forth’). “All human language”—the language of the Adamic *namer*, the naming *adamah*—is “the reflection of the word in name.”⁴³ *Adamah* (the material world in all its earthy thingliness), Adam (the material articulator, organizer and arranger) and the Creative power (genesis) interconnect in the event of the name, of naming, of calling

for[th] the name.

The namer, in calling for[th] the name, is engaging the material object in a very different manner than the typical or normative one to which we are accustomed. There is a confrontation here with the familiar object that solicits at the same time the unknown—that which in the object ‘shocks’ the normalized, commodified perception and allows an altogether ‘other’ aspect to emerge (this would be the *word*). “We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight,” proclaims Benjamin; “it is our task,” he insists, to bring about this “state of emergency.”⁴⁴ This attentiveness to the ⁴⁵emerging alterity *in* and *of* the object is a fearful thing—‘shocking’, again;⁴⁶ it brings us to a standstill, arrests our very thinking (our progression).

In recognizing this generally unrecognized exigency,⁴⁷ we save the word—and world as such: the era, the lifework, ‘the works’—from oblivion; we ⁴⁸“wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it.” Following this last sentence cited from the sixth thesis in his ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’, Benjamin adds the following remark: “The messiah comes not only as the redeemer, he comes as the subduer of the antichrist.” The wresting of the historical material from a conformism that is about to overpower it (⁴⁹this “seiz[ing] hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger”), this calling forth its name in the name of the word and its world, is a messianic ⁵⁰happening—or rather, more correctly, “a messianic *cessation* of happening,”⁵⁰ a messianic subduing of the dialectic.

The ongoing dialectic of history and historical conformity comes to a standstill, a *cæsura*. Here,⁵¹ at this ‘dangerous’ moment, in a configuration ‘pregnant with tensions’,⁵² the attentive historian recognizes a revolutionary chance (a chance happening—or rather, a chance *cessation of happening*) “which ⁵³flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again.” To call for[th], proclaim, pick up and name this radically alien object—overlooked, overpassed, and almost overcome—is to acknowledge in the ⁵⁴present moment that particular “power to which the past has a claim,”⁵⁴ to *reclaim* for the past what the present represents for it and present (and *proclaim*) in doing so the *nomos* (law) of *onoma* (naming):⁵⁵ the exigency of messianic history.

From the chronology (chronological dimension and succession) of universalist, progressivist history,⁵⁶ the historical materialist engages the *aeon* of a ‘greater’, ‘irreplaceable’, yet radically displaced historical dimension, which s/he calls forth into the present through the messianic ‘mystery antics’

of struggling to work out its name. The historian becomes an Adam again, or child beholding the old-world object, and recognizes it now, in the present instant, by its name—even though it is of another time, even though it has ‘had’ its time and it is ‘out of time’. The ‘used’ object which the child picks up and engages once again is precisely the equivalent of what Benjamin conceives as the trash-heap of history: the “piling of wreckage upon wreckage” that lands at the child’s—or historian’s—feet. The child⁵⁷ and the materialist historian, like the Benjaminian ‘Angel of History’, looks downward, backward, rather than up ahead (upward, forward), s/he looks at what falls down, gets left behind, is trampled under foot, forgotten and forsaken. “A construction of history that looks backward rather than forward,” writes Susan Buck-Morss in her *Dialectics of Seeing*, looks upon “the destruction of material nature as it has actually taken place, [and] provides [in so doing] a dialectical contrast to the futurist myth of historical progress (which can only be sustained by forgetting what has happened).”⁵⁸

The myth of chronological progress is thereby counteracted and juxtaposed by the symbol of messianic temporality: the ‘dialectical image’. The object that is no longer ‘useful’ or ‘productive’—the object that no longer provides us with the means or mechanics (technological advantage) of progression, advancement, et cetera—bespeaks in its silent, disused state, an entire (bygone) era, a lifework, a past lifeworld and work. But only—and here is the crux of Benjamin’s argument—in its *aftermath*. The materialist historian therefore performs an *aftermathesis*: a ‘mathesis’ or ‘algebra’ of the aftermath, *in* the aftermath. It is only once the object itself has become rubbish—*i.e.* is relegated to the *trash-bin* as a ‘has-been’, is dropped onto the messy ‘wreckage-pile’ of history’s ‘refuse’ (that which history in its ‘myth of chronological progress’ refuses), that its revolutionary potential ‘shines forth’.

In this sense the task of the historical materialist is akin not only to the *algebraic* operation (the work of *mathesis*, the algebra of the mages or sages—that ‘magic’ of which Scholem spoke) but also to the *alchemical* one: the work of the alchemist-philosophers who engaged the material world in the hope of having the ‘true philosophical gold’ (the veritable philosophical ‘matter’) ‘shine forth’ from the most ‘vile’ and ‘crude’—‘base’, ‘debased’—of substances. What an engagement with historical matter means *to* and *for* the historical materialist is precisely “that which the ‘philosopher’s stone’ means in alchemy,” Benjamin insisted. Just as the historical materialist

examines the detritus of history, takes up the forgotten and forsaken rubbish or refuse in the hope of encountering the veritable matter of her historical endeavor, so did the alchemists undertake this uncomely and unseemly task. The veritable matter (philosopher's stone)₆₁ of the alchemists was an 'odious', 'uncomely' and downright messy thing —a "gross materiality" as Jung admitted in his study, and this is precisely why it is so hard to find it.

[T]hat is precisely why it is so hard to find the *lapis* [philosophical matter: the 'philosopher's stone', the lapsed/collapsed *lapis philosophorum*]: it is *exilis*, uncomely, it is thrown into the street or the dung-hill, it is the commonest thing to be picked up anywhere [...]. But 'the stone which the builders rejected, the same has become the head and the corner', and the intuition of this possibility arouses the liveliest regret in the dreamer.₆₃

It is only in confronting this odious mess, this uncomely pile of refuse, and engaging it—apprehending it, contemplating it, considering it, and calling for[th] its name—that messianic history reveals itself within immanence of present time, 'shining forth' like the alchemical 'gold' and 'goal' from the dung-hill or trash-heap of history. Only by these base ('debased') 'messy antics' is the 'messianic' *mathesis* and alchemical *algebra* of the historical materialist made possible. The child, the alchemist, and the historical materialist (along with the 'angel of history' hovering over such alchemies, algebras, baby building-blocks and babble) all redeem from the refuse-pile of history, and point the way to a new understanding of the political agent and revolutionary social stratum that emerges from the work of Walter Benjamin.

If the historical potential for Marxist revolution held out redemptive promise for Benjamin, it has also been quelled and tamed by the hegemonic forces of bourgeois capitalism. Benjamin has shown us that the past (as what has *passed*) is the only material *present* historically; this basic fact, unfortunately, has been forgotten by the revolutionary class. This is pointed out in his observation of Social Democracy: by turning its attention to the future rather than to the present, the Social Democratic movement in Germany effectively demobilized and debilitated the working class's revolutionary potential.

Social Democracy thought fit to assign to the working class the role of the redeemer of the future generations, in this way cutting the sinews of its greatest strength. This training made the working class forget both its hatred and its spirit of sacrifice, for both are nourished by the image of enslaved ancestors rather than that of liberated grandchildren.⁶⁴

Attending to the ‘matter’ of history thus becomes the only feasible activity for potential political and collective mobilization of the masses. By returning to the forgotten object, the collectivity—and ‘man’ therein—realizes that history is not a progressive, unending and hegemonic continuum, but a transitory collection of discarded or disused (used, abused and abandoned) objects that in their suppressed and subsumed silence nevertheless hold untold stories,⁶⁵ silenced speeches—the power or potential of expression and revelation.

But what and *where* is the revolutionary class to which Benjamin refers? Who are the custodians of this historical-monadological matter, the keepers of this revolutionary consciousness? Surely they are not simply the ‘historians’ of academia (‘academics’), individuals in the ivory towers of their institutions;⁶⁶ and they cannot be the infant children, even if these are open to scouring the garbage heaps and taking up what has been tossed aside, forsaken and forgotten. They must share with the child and historical materialist a concern for the lapsed or collapsed ‘*lapis*’ (the ‘*lapis exilis*’ of the alchemical philosophers), the materials which the architects of universal history rejected, but they must also be the laborers, members of the working class—the community of ‘*ouvriers*’ (workers), as they say in French, who are moreover ‘*ouvert*’ (open) to the emergence of historical matter as such. They must be open to the ‘state of emergency’ which constitutes their actual exigency:⁶⁷ the ‘state of emergency’ that “is not the exception but the rule.” They must be ‘open’ to this exigency—the *nomos* of *onoma* or *adamic law* as such⁶⁸—as well as actually and actively *open* it,⁶⁹ “bring about” this state of emergence, this revolutionary emergency.

Let us follow the *nomos* of *onoma* here and name this revolutionary agent: the name that emerges here captures and/or crystallizes the notion of a path or passage, a way or mode, a gateway, archway or an opening.⁷⁰ It is, in fact, the name that stands unnoticed—yet noted, here—at the entrance-way of Benjamin’s monumental *Passagen-Werk* (his ‘arcades project’ or open *magnum opus*); the name of the doorkeeper, gatekeeper, caretaker or

custodian of 'archways, gateways or covered passages': the janitor.⁷¹

The janitor is the symbol of emergence, of historical/calendrical emergence (January) and of physical/material emergence as well (*Passagen-Werk*). Moving through the hallways of society and dealing with its daily detritus—its refuse—the janitor, of all people, is the one in closest proximity to the veritable matter of history and who is thus in the best position to awaken herself to revolutionary historical consciousness in order to redeem the human experience of the world.

In French⁷² as well (at times) as English also, the janitor is called 'concierge', from the Latin *conservus*, literally designating a 'fellow' (*con*) 'slave' (*servus*). The janitor or concierge is 'one of us', one of the masses, one of the vast social-stratum that is the working (laboring) class. Revolutionary possibility, one could say, lies in the hands (at the feet?⁷³) of the conscious,⁷⁴ 'awakened' janitocracy—which we are here calling the New Janitocracy. The custodial workers who have become aware of their historical-revolutionary potential (in the very objects forgotten in the hallways and arcades of historical knowledge) would form what in political terms we could call a New Janitocracy whose task it is, as Benjamin says,⁷⁵ "to bring about a real state of emergency" from the "gross materiality" of the trash-heap of history.

In conclusion then, the Janus-faced janitor, facing the present task and its historical exigency, would be the very harbinger (beginning) of messianic history and the herald of a revolutionary materialist consciousness, precisely by dint of her custodianship (custody) of those "crude and material things without which no refined and spiritual things could exist."⁷⁷ The hallways, pathways and passage-ways of our social structures would be for this concierge the crucible of a contemporary alchemical operation at once the magical *mathesis* of past and present, the 'no longer' and the 'now'. History in the New Janitocracy would not be an 'empty', 'homogeneous' structure but rather one which is "filled by the presence of the now [*Jetztzeit*],"⁷⁸ and this conjunction of the 'now' and the 'no longer', of the present and the past, is 'grasped' (taken up, picked up, engaged) by the concierge in order to establish "a conception of the present as the 'time of the now' which is shot through with chips of messianic time";⁷⁹ "he grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one."⁸⁰ This 'constellation' or 'conjunction', of course, inevitably comes as a 'shock'⁸¹ —which "is precisely why it is so *hard*," such a *hardship*, a *labor*, an 'odious' *task* —but this is precisely the task of the janitor, the Janitocratic mission: a historically

‘messianic’ one undertaken, what’s more, through revolutionarily messy antics.

Notes

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² Gershom Scholem, *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis: Selected Essay*, ed. Werner J. Dannhauser (New York: Schocken Books, 1976) 175.

³ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1999) N2a,1; 461.

⁴ “New nature” is a term borrowed from Susan Buck-Morss who uses the phrase to designate the entire material world of objects (including human beings) as it has been determined and transformed by technology—*The Dialectics of Seeing* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989) 70. The status of ‘nature’ in Benjamin’s work is rather complex; most important for this study is his assertion that there is no fundamental distinction between ‘nature’ and ‘technology’: “There is no more insipid and shabby antithesis than that which reactionary thinkers like Klages try to set up between the symbol-space of nature and that of technology. To each truly new configuration of nature—and, at bottom, technology is just such a configuration—there correspond new ‘images.’” Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, K1a,3.

⁵ Buck-Morss, 64.

⁶ In other words, this is the ‘messianic’ idea that what we are calling the ‘messy antics’ stage of childhood development holds open for the historical materialist: in children, “the capacity for revolutionary transformation is present from the start” (Buck-Morss, 265). In other words, if the historian could open her eyes to the activity of children, s/he would see that the potential for the redemption of collective human experience is made actual in the very beginning stages of human life.

⁷ The ‘matter’ of history is therefore that which resists the mythic, and because of this it can finally reveal its latter-day mythic dimension in the concrete form of a ‘ruin’ *qua* ‘rune’ (see the following passage in the text above and the following footnote, below). “Historical materialism must renounce the epic element in history,” Benjamin explains. “It blasts the epoch out of the reified ‘continuity of history,’” he continues, “but it also explodes the homogeneity of the epoch, interspersing it with ruins—that is, with the present.” *Arcades Project*, N9a,6; 474.

⁸ —the ‘ruin’, in this sense, becomes a ‘rune’: an ancient alphabet and an

‘addressing’ as such.

⁹ Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” thesis number XVII, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1969) 262-3.

¹⁰ In French, a *fait*—as in *fait accompli*—as opposed to what in English we call a ‘fetish’. The fetishized or commodified object, though useful (indeed, *because* it is ‘useful’), is in fact only *fait*’ish, *i.e.* not in fact a *fact* as such, but merely a mythic subject, a ‘wish-image’.

¹¹ Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, N10a,3; 475 .

¹² Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, N7,7; 470.

¹³ Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, N9a,3; 473—the grasp that gives the present configuration (the presentation as such) “a shock, by which it crystallizes into a monad” (Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History’ XVII”, 262-3.

¹⁴ More specifically, *only* the monad can be considered an historical object: “Where thinking comes to a standstill in a constellation saturated with tensions, there the dialectical image appears. It is the *cæsura* in the movement of thought [...]. Hence, the object constructed in the materialist presentation of history is itself the dialectical image. The latter is identical with the historical object; it justifies its violent expulsion from the continuum of historical process,” Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, N10a,3; 475. See also ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’ XVII, 262-3.

¹⁵ Benjamin, ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’ XVII, 262-3.

¹⁶ Benjamin, ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’ VI, 255.

¹⁷ —indeed ‘exits’: existing, as such, in its exiting the social-structure and the status quo.

¹⁸ Walter Benjamin, “One Way Street,” *Reflections*, ed. Peter Demetz (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1978, 74.

¹⁹ The task of the historical materialist is to bring about a socialist culture in which the attentiveness to the ‘matter’ of history—that is, the discarded objects of mass culture—is itself ‘revolutionary’: it fulfills the task of demystification of bourgeois ideology while at the same time revealing the redemptive social vision of reconciliation that is realizable. “When and how will the worlds of form which, without our assistance, have arisen, for example, in mechanics, in film, in machine construction, in the new physics, and which have subjugated us, make it clear for us what manner of nature they contain? When will we reach a state of society in which these forms, or those arising from them, reveal themselves to us as natural forms?” Benjamin, *Arcades Project* K3a,2; 396.

²⁰ Buck-Morss explains this clearly: with the introduction of the new calendar

by the French Revolutionaries (see Benjamin, ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’ I, 253)—“a gesture of the universal human significance of this particular historical event”—the establishment of a new political discourse of equality and human rights, increasingly renders politically illegitimate the discourse of class division and domination by the bourgeoisie. “[W]ith the advent of the industrial revolution, which has real potential to achieve universal material well-being, class domination loses economic legitimacy as well.” Buck-Morss, 242.

²¹ It is this facet of Benjamin’s “messianic idea”—the primordial correlation of worldly objects and the divine creation—that Gershom Scholem found to be most compatible with the kabbalistic idea of the messianic. Scholem writes that “for the kabbalist, too, every existing thing is endlessly correlated with the whole of creation; for him, too, everything mirrors everything else. But beyond that he discovers something else which is not covered by the allegorical network: a reflection of the true transcendence [...]. The symbol in which the life of the Creator and that of creation become one, is [...] ‘a beam of light which, from the dark and abysmal depths of existence and cognition, falls into our eye and penetrates our whole being’. It is a ‘momentary totality’ which is perceived intuitively in a mystical now—[*Nu*] the dimension of time proper to the symbol.” Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1946) 27-8.

²² See the following footnote below for an interpretation of this ‘mathematical’ mathematical realization or reintegration.

²³ What Scholem might have called the ‘magic’ of mathematics—its ‘mathemagic’ here here—is its ‘factoring’ function, whereby that which has been eliminated or ‘factored out’ of the present equation can be arithmetically and/or algebraically ‘figured’ and thereby potentially ‘factored in’ again; what was ‘lost’ in this way ‘returns’ in a numeric prestidigitation of sorts which in Greek would be *mathesis*, in Arabic an *al-jabr* (a ‘putting things back together again’ or ‘mending of broken [b]ones’). Jacques Derrida has perhaps taken this factoring function to its n^{th} degree in ‘Le facteur de la vérité’, ‘Postscript’, ‘Envois’ and other essays (see his *Post Card*, translated by Alan Bass, University of Chicago Press 1987, for example), taking up—however unintentionally—Benjamin’s point that “the primary problem of language is [this] magic”: this ‘factoring in’ of what is ‘factored out’ as such (Walter Benjamin, “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man,” *Reflections*, 316-317).

²⁴ Algebra: an ‘*al-jabr*’: a ‘putting-together’—a ‘putting things back together again’ or a ‘mending of broken [b]ones’, as we put it in the previous footnote [above]; in the language of the ancient Greeks this was called a ‘*mathesis*’—its ultimate (in some sense messianic) extension would be the *mathesis universalis*

(‘universal’ or ‘world’ *mathesis*).

²⁵ Benjamin, *Arcades Project* N2a,1; 461.

²⁶ “Like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a weak messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim. This claim cannot be settled cheaply. Historical materialists are aware of that.” Benjamin, ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’ II, 253-4.

²⁷ Brian Britt, *Walter Benjamin and the Bible* (New York: Continuum Books, 1996) 39.

²⁸ Benjamin, ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’ XVII, 262-3.

²⁹ This dialectics-at-a-standstill or ‘state of emergency’ is precisely what the historical materialist struggles to achieve, according to Benjamin. “The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the ‘state of emergency’ in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight. Then we shall clearly realize that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency [...]” Benjamin, ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’ VIII, 257.

³⁰ See footnote 19, above.

³¹ Benjamin, ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’ XVII, 262-3.

³² Benjamin, ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’ XVII, 262-3. Buck-Morss, 219.

³³ This is what Buck-Morss refers to as “profane discourse,” Buck-Morss, 239.

³⁴ Buck-Morss notes that “the Fall that alienates nature from human beings describes accurately the production of commodities in its historical particularity, as Marx’s early texts made clear. Similarly, the Biblical loss of the language of Names identifies the essence of abstract labor that characterizes this production”, Buck-Morss, 239..

³⁵ Benjamin, *Arcades Project* N3,1; 462-3.

³⁶ Benjamin, ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’ V, 255.

³⁷ Benjamin, ‘On Language as Such and on the Language of Man’, 324.

³⁸ Benjamin, ‘On Language as Such and on the Language of Man’, 324-325.

³⁹ “blasted out of the continuum of history,” shining forth as if from a ‘crystal’ —“that configuration [...] which [...] crystallizes into a monad.” Benjamin, ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’ XIV & XVII, 261, 262-3.

⁴⁰ —never spoken *by*, but always spoken *in*: this means that the language of names does not *speak* the language of the word, but rather, lets the word emerge or appear in it. In other words, the name does not speak for the word, but rather, the

language of names allows for the language of the word to speak itself.

⁴¹ Benjamin, 'On Language as Such and on the Language of Man', 323.

⁴² Benjamin, 'On Language as Such and on the Language of Man', 323.

⁴³ Benjamin, 'On Language as Such and on the Language of Man', 323.

⁴⁴ Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' VIII, 257.

⁴⁵ Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History,' XVII, 262-3.

⁴⁶ Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History,' XVII, 262-3.

⁴⁷ The *nomos* (law) of *onoma* (naming), or rather, of *adamah* (Adam, mankind, creatures of the *earth* or *material world*), as we have previously noted, above.

⁴⁸ Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History,' VI, 255.

⁴⁹ Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' VI, 255.

⁵⁰ Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' XVII (italics added), 262-

3.

⁵¹ Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' VI, 255.

⁵² Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' XVII, 262-3.

⁵³ Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' V, 255.

⁵⁴ Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' II, 253-4.

⁵⁵ —or rather, the *nomos* (law) of *adamah* (Adam, mankind, creatures of the *earth* or *material world*), as was previously pointed out, above.

⁵⁶ Benjamin, *Arcades Project* N2a,1, 461.

⁵⁷ Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' IX, 257-8.

⁵⁸ Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' IX, 257-8.

⁵⁹ Buck-Morss, 95.

⁶⁰ Benjamin, 'Letter to Karlplus, 16 August 1935'; cited in Buck-Morss,

218.

⁶¹ —hence the 'messy antics' of these materialist philosophers.

⁶² C.G. Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy* (New York: Princeton University Press, 1968) 80.

⁶³ Jung, 80-81; Buck-Morss, 218.

⁶⁴ Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' XII, 260.

⁶⁵ Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' IX, 257-8.

⁶⁶ For all his attempts, even Benjamin himself could never be one of those.

⁶⁷ Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' VIII, 257.

⁶⁸ *nomos adamah*.

⁶⁹ Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' VIII, 257.

⁷⁰ From its initial traces in the Sanskrit *yanam* ('way' or 'mode'; 'mode of knowledge') to its emergence as the Greek *ienai* ('to go'; 'passage') and Latin *ianus* ('archway', 'gateway' or 'covered passage'), the janitor comes to us from the very halls and passages of our cultural/educational edifices as the 'gatekeeper', 'caretaker'

and ‘doorman’—not to mention the *custodian* and *concierge*—of these passage-ways and thoroughfares (venues downtrodden, bypassed, ‘passed over’ and ‘passed through’ by the work-a-day world-without-word) ... See the following endnote [below].

⁷¹“A holiday for janitors ought to take place in January, for both words are linked. In Latin *ianus* was the word for ‘archway, gateway, or covered passage’ and also for the god of gates, doorways, and beginnings in general. As many schoolchildren know, our month of January—a month of beginnings—is named for this god. The Latin *ianitor*, the source of our word janitor and ultimately also from *ianus*, meant ‘doorkeeper or gatekeeper’. Probably because *ianitor* was common in Latin records and documents, it was adopted into English, first being recorded in the sense of ‘doorkeeper’ around 1567 in a Scots text. In an early quotation Saint Peter is called ‘*the Janitor of Heaven*.’” ‘Janitor’, in *The American Heritage Dictionary of The English Language*, Fourth Edition.

⁷²And we resort to French at several points in this essay (in part because Benjamin himself was a francophile).

⁷³—see thesis number nine of the ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’: “Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet.” Benjamin, ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History, 257-8’

⁷⁴It is also worth noting that the janitocracy or potentially-revolutionary working class of today is largely made up of immigrants, exiles, refugees and the dispossessed—those who have much to say, but no chance to speak, who have experienced *first-hand* the fragmenting consequences of first-world industrial bourgeois capitalist technocracy—for example, the demoralization of the factory worker, the devaluation of labor, and the rising hegemony of the ‘expert’.

⁷⁵Benjamin, ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’ VIII, 257.

⁷⁶Jung, 80-1.

⁷⁷Benjamin, ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’ IV, 255.

⁷⁸Benjamin, ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’ XIV, 261.

⁷⁹Benjamin, ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’ XVIII(a), 263.

⁸⁰Benjamin, ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’ XVIII(a), 263.

⁸¹Benjamin, ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’ XVII, 262.

⁸²Jung, 80-1.

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