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## SEEKING THE UNIVERSAL AMID RUINS

*On Walter Benjamin's Philosophy of Journal Editing (circa 1922)*

**ABSTRACT:** This paper revisits Walter Benjamin's unpublished "Announcement of the Journal *Angelus Novus*," one of relatively few texts Benjamin is known to have written in 1922, European modernism's widely recognized *annus mirabilis*. The announcement followed numerous, transformative essays and fragments of 1921 and was written alongside his dissertation on *The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism*, encompassing a pivotal moment in Benjamin's philosophical maturation. Heralding the new, never realized journal, the announcement articulates what might be deemed "the task of the editor," which it describes as a quest for "philosophical universality". The *Angelus Novus* journal would proceed from the fact of modern social discontinuities toward the elaboration of universal philosophical truths through the criticism of literary works. This paper reconsiders Benjamin's editorial ambitions as part of his individual philosophical development and within a broader context of "total modernism," discussing the announcement's continued relevance for our contemporary world.

**KEYWORDS:** Walter Benjamin, *Angelus Novus*, Total modernism, 1922, Philosophy of editing, Critical theory, Comparative literature.

In evaluating the historic impact of 1922 from a century's remove, it would be a mistake to review only widely acknowledged "masterpieces" like *Ulysses*, *Wozzeck*, the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, and other usual suspects. A robust discussion has grown up around this extraordinary year (Goldstein 2017; North 1999; Rabaté 2015), but a truly constellational approach requires that we also take stock of works at the other extreme: the failures, rejections, aborted plans, notable moments of delay or non-productivity, writings that never made it past the publisher's desk. Walter Benjamin will serve as a case in point. He seems to have published almost nothing in 1922, but that year nonetheless functioned as a pivotal moment in his philosophical biography. He had only recently, in June 1919, completed his doctoral studies at the University of Bern with his dissertation on *The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism*, and, despite uncertainties about a life in academia, had begun projecting a postdoctoral thesis or *Habilitationschrift* on German baroque drama. In the four years since the Great War's ending, he also drafted several unpublished but significant fragments, including his "Program of the Coming Philosophy" (1918), his "Theory of Criticism" (1919–20), the "Theological-Political Fragment" (likely 1920–21), alongside essays for publication on "Fate and Character" (published 1921) and on "Goethe's *Elective Affinities*" (drafted

1919–22, published 1924–25).<sup>1</sup> This period also notably overlaps with the beginning of Benjamin's more expressly socio-political writings. 1921 sees his "Critique of Violence" drafted and published, under the influence of anarchist Georges Sorel. This same year also found him writing "Capitalism as Religion," his rejoinder to the sociological historiography of Max Weber. Not truly abandoning his prior literary interests, these more emphatically political efforts coincided with his ongoing work translating Baudelaire's poetry and with the reflections on language in his introduction for the Baudelaire volume, on "The Task of the Translator," also completed by the end of 1921 (SW 1, 505).

Following this general fervour of activity, 1922 seems to have been a somewhat quieter year at Benjamin's writing desk. However, during this period, he drafted an unpublished prospectus outlining his vision of a future literary journal. Of his writings available in English, it appears as the only major free-standing text he composed during modernism's *annus mirabilis*. He had just acquired Paul Klee's monoprint known as *Angelus Novus* in the spring of 1921; by August of that same year, he had written to Gershom Scholem of his intention to bring out a new journal named for it with his publisher Richard Weissbach, with whom he was then under contract for the Baudelaire translations (SW 1, 506). Although Benjamin's editorial ambitions never materialized, the 1922 prospectus announcing this new journal still serves an instructive role in illuminating his philosophy of editing. My objectives in this paper are threefold: to situate the *Angelus Novus* announcement within the context of Benjamin's thinking in 1922, showing how it extends and develops several ideas of his other writings from that period; to explain how the *Angelus Novus* project fits within a larger situation of "total modernism" (Rabaté 2015, 4); and to assess this document's significance, both for Benjamin's own development and for our present historical moment.

Benjamin's hopes for a journal editorship were short lived, but nevertheless transformative for him during this time of astounding historical change. By October 1922, he wrote to the conservative intellectual Florens Christian Rang, complaining of delays in publication and financial difficulties on his publisher's part, threatening the project's chances (SW 1, 507). As he put it then, "for the moment... a journal of my own would be possible only as a private and, so to speak, anonymous enterprise" (SW 1, 507–508). Two months later, he would write to Gershom Scholem that the journal had become "unlikely" (SW 1, 506). The year 1922 thus furnished him a brief window in which to imagine a future in professional editing, conceive a journal theoretically, assemble a manuscript for its first issue, then abandon hope for the project almost as quickly. His subsequent desire to internalize the project's aims ("as a private and ... anonymous enterprise") indicates that this "philosophy of editing" statement explains not only his projected practice of editorship, but also illuminates his view of the critic as

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<sup>1</sup> These dates follow those given in Benjamin's four-volume *Selected Writings* published between 1996 and 2003 by Harvard University Press. All English citations to Benjamin in this essay refer to this official edition of his work: volume numbers are given as SW 1, SW 2, etc. German citations refer to his seven-volume *Gesammelte Schriften* published in 1991 by Suhrkamp (given as GS 1, GS 2, etc.).

an anonymous editor, so to speak, collecting and compiling fragments of discourse. Henceforth, with an editorial career closed off to him, criticism would serve him as editing by other means — that is, editing without institutional supports — and, one might also venture, as a *Trauerarbeit* or sublimated mourning process for a publication destined never to exist.

Even if, as a prospectus, the *Angelus Novus* announcement is necessarily short and schematic, roughly four pages, it still stands as a Janus-faced monument, modelling future editorial labour while also reaching backward to the Schlegel's *Athenaeum* journal from a century earlier as its Romantic precedent (SW 1, 293). Though it does not proceed through explicit invocations of “modernism” or of “totality,” its rhetoric links it implicitly to both notions. Where “the modern” is concerned, Benjamin asserts that the journal's primary task is to “proclaim the spirit of its age” and thereby to attain “relevance to the present,” a criterion “more important even than unity or clarity” (SW 1, 292). Furthermore, it will not “look to the public to supply the yardstick by which true relevance to the present is to be measured” but instead aims at “distilling what is truly relevant from the sterile pageant of new and fashionable events” (SW 1, 292–293). These claims for modern relevance are made with a specific reader in mind, whom Benjamin describes as “the man who stands on his own threshold in the evening when his work is done and in the morning before he sets out on his daily tasks, and who takes in the familiar horizon with a glance, rather than scanning it searchingly, so as to retain whatever new thing greets him there” (SW 1, 295). This image projects the journal's ideal reader as a daily labourer, a member of the working classes, seeking guidance in a terrain whose horizons can only be taken in fleetingly. Although this scene seems placid in comparison to the famous maelstrom of progress described in Benjamin's final writings on the *Angelus Novus* image, the journal's claim to relevance will still be an urgent one, requiring historical justification.

This is because of the general atmosphere of crisis in which Benjamin's reflections transpired. Several recent disasters can be invoked here to illustrate the sense of historical emergency: the recently concluded World War, the signing of the Treaty of Versailles, and the subsequent collapse of the German economy would be just the most obvious and devastating. In Berlin, specifically, where Benjamin resided during much of the period 1920–1922, he also lived through the recent assassination of left activists like Rosa Luxemburg (murdered in January 1919); the consequent rise of far-right nationalism in the new Weimar Republic, including the Kapp Putsch in March 1920; the General Strike that followed the putsch that same month; and the German left's subsequent inability to regain parliamentary power afterward. These are the circumstances typically adduced to contextualize Benjamin's political writings of this time, particularly the “Critique of Violence,” but they also illuminate the sense of historical emergency that impelled his vision for a new journal at this juncture.

Although the imagined journal would include new works of literature and philosophy, its primary purpose would be critical. It would both aim to annihilate “talented fakes” in literature (notably, the recent popularity of Expressionism), and even

more importantly, would “concentrate on the individual work of art” for, as the journal announcement explains, “the function of great criticism” is “to cognize by immersing itself in the object.” Criticism must *account for the truth of works*, a task just as essential for literature as for philosophy” (SW 1, 293; emphasis added). This mission statement — allowing criticism to subtend both literature and philosophy, despite those fields’ traditional hostilities toward each other, vaunted at least since the time of Plato’s *Republic* — can be said to participate in a broader modernist quest for totality (Rabaté 2015), but also suggests a doubt about the notion of totality in its familiar sense. That doubt is similarly registered in a passage from Goethe’s notes for his *Theory of Colours* that Benjamin favourably cited in his private notebooks of 1921 as accurately grasping “the relation of knowledge to truth” (SW 1, 278). Goethe theorized the knowledge-truth relation as follows, in a formulation that Benjamin clearly admired:

Since in knowledge, as in reflection, no totality [*kein Ganzes*] can be created, because the first lacks the inner ... and the second the outer ..., we must necessarily think of science as an art if we are to hope for totality [*Ganzheit*] of any kind from it. Moreover, we are not to look for this totality in the general [*im Allgemeinen*], in the superabundant, but since art always constitutes itself wholly in every work of art, science too, should manifest itself entirely in each application.<sup>2</sup>

To “think of science as an art” — to rethink the hunt for scientific knowledge as an interminable, quasi-artistic process that lacks wholeness in both knowledge and reflection alike — means projecting for science and art together a renovated conception of totality. If science can offer knowledge, but never holistic insight into the complete (capital T) Truth of things, what regarding science as an art *can* accomplish is to give “an *account of the truth*” or, for criticism to “*account for the truth of works*” (SW 1, 279, 293, emphases added).

This accounting or narrating of truth — one might say, this critical storytelling of truth, a process of artistic creation rather than of piercing discovery, uncovering, violation, or conquest — will never succeed at grasping the unbroken Truth of things unmediated. By drawing on Goethe’s aesthetic theory, Benjamin implies such unmediated totality is not on offer in his epistemology. Instead of promising a view into an unmediated “general” totality of truth, what the *Angelus Novus* announcement instead promises is what Benjamin calls intellectual or philosophical “universality”. Here I quote Benjamin’s 1922 announcement at length:

The intellectual universality [*Universalität*] contained in the plan for this journal will not be confused with an attempt to achieve universality in terms of content. For, on the one hand, it will not lose sight

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted in SW 1, 279. This excerpt from Goethe’s writings also served Benjamin as the epigraph to his book on the German Trauerspiel in 1928: “Da im Wissen sowohl als in der Reflexion kein Ganzes zusammengebracht werden kann, weil jenem das Innre, dieser das Äußere fehlt, so müssen wir uns die Wissenschaft notwendig als Kunst denken, wenn wir von ihr irgend eine Art von Ganzheit erwarten. Und zwar haben wir diese nicht im Allgemeinen, im Überschwänglichen zu suchen, sondern, wie die Kunst sich immer ganz in jedem einzelnen Kunstwerk darstellt, so sollte die Wissenschaft sich auch jedesmal ganz in jedem einzelnen Behandelten erweisen” (GS 1.1, 207).

of the fact that a philosophical treatment confers universal meaning on every scientific or practical topic, on every mathematical line of inquiry as much as on any political question. And on, the other hand, it will bear in mind that even the literary or philosophical themes of immediate interest will be given a welcome only because of this approach and on the condition that it be adopted. *This philosophical universality [philosophische Universalität] is the touchstone that will enable the journal to demonstrate its true contemporary relevance most accurately.* (SW 1, 294; emphasis mine)<sup>3</sup>

Such “philosophical universality” will necessarily be provisional and is not to be confused with universally comprehensive reportage: Benjamin makes clear his journal will exclude coverage of the plastic arts and scientific research (SW 1, 295). Neither will the *Angelus Novus* attempt to create any unanimity of belief among its contributors: giving voice to such “unity, let alone a community,” Benjamin asserts, notably, is also not possible “in our age” (SW 1, 296).<sup>4</sup> Rather, what drives Benjamin’s theory of editing is a faith in the kind of philosophical universality that would allow criticism to give an credible account of truth — the truths of works, and of modern life — thus attaining contemporary “relevance” for his readers.

Underpinning this ambition for philosophical universality are several longstanding metaphysical questions in Benjamin’s development, derived from Platonic and Kantian sources. Several earlier notes among Benjamin’s unpublished writings make these connections clear. In an outline of his “Theory of Criticism” (1919–20), Benjamin draws on a Kantian vocabulary to claim that correspondences exist between “the individual truth in the individual work of art” and the “manifestation of the beautiful in the true: This is the manifestation of the coherent, harmonious totality [*Allheit*] of the beautiful in the unity [*Einheit*] of the true. Plato’s *Symposium*, at its climax, deals with this topic” (SW 1, 219). If the true forms a “unity” in the Platonic sense, then in this instance, “the beautiful” forms a “multiplicity assembled into a totality [*Vielheit, zusammengefaßt zur Allheit*]” (*Ibid.*).<sup>5</sup> The vocabulary Benjamin deploys in this definition is clearly Kantian,

<sup>3</sup> “Die sachliche Universalität, welche im Plan dieser Zeitschrift liegt, wird sie nicht mit einer stofflichen verwechseln. Und da sie einerseits sich gegenwärtig hält, daß die philosophische Behandlung jedem wissenschaftlichen oder praktischen Gegenstand, einem mathematischen Gedankengang so gut wie einem politischen, universale Bedeutung verleiht, wird sie andererseits nicht vergessen, daß auch ihre nächsten literarischen oder philosophischen Gegenstände nur um eben dieser Behandlungsweise und unter deren Bedingung ihr willkommen sind. Diese philosophische Universalität ist die Form, in deren Auslegung am genauesten die Zeitschrift Sinn für wahre Aktualität wird erweisen könne” (GS 2.1, 244).

<sup>4</sup> Where the journal’s lack of material comprehensiveness is concerned, the announcement makes clear Benjamin will exclude discussions of the plastic arts and the natural sciences from the journal’s scope. As to its ideological non-unanimity, Benjamin notably hoped to include writings by Rang, a conservative, in an early issue of the journal. (SW 1, 507).

<sup>5</sup> “Dieser Erscheinung des Wahren sowohl als der einzelnen Wahrheit in dem einzelnen schönen Gebilde entspricht ein anders zu bestimmendes Erscheinen des Schönen im Wahren; die Erscheinung der geschlossnen harmonischen Allheit des Schönen in der Einheit des Wahren. Von ihr handelt auf seinem Gipfel Platons Symposium. Erst im Ganzen der Wahrheit, wird dort gelehrt, erscheint virtuell die Schönheit. ... Welcher gemeinsame Grund für diese beiden Relationen zwischen Kunst und Philosophie sich finden läßt, bleibt zu untersuchen.

[*das Wahre: Einheit*]

insofar as “*Allheit*” (literally “Allness”) functions at various moments in Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* as a synonym for “Totality” (*Totalität*), denoting “plurality regarded as unity.”<sup>6</sup> However, for Benjamin — both working under the influence of Kant’s epistemology and Plato’s metaphysics, and departing in strategic ways from both those frameworks — pluralities can be regarded as unities and “assembled” into totalities. A totality in this sense involves the work of construction, configuration, assemblage: the journal editor’s task, then, is to form a provisional totality from the multiplicity of works available at any given historical juncture.

Furthermore, translation has a crucial role to play in this project, as Benjamin’s *Angelus Novus* aimed to be a foundational publication in the study of what is now called comparative literature. Just as Benjamin articulates his aspiration toward universality, he also praises translation as “a genre that has always had a beneficial effect on [literature] in its periods of great crisis” (SW 1, 294). The first issue of the journal promises to treat questions of translation at length, highlighting their key importance as an ongoing feature of the editor’s concern. Translated works will spur German writers “to abandon superannuated linguistic practices, while developing new ones” (SW 1, 294). In this way, including works in translation alongside their originals will produce what the prospectus describes as a “school of language-in-the-making” (SW 1, 294), a laboratory where new experiments in the history of literature can be developed.

This emphasis on translation is among the most striking signs of Benjamin’s concern with philosophical universality, as well as a marker of his linguistic conception of knowledge, and ultimately, his conception of truth. For as he avers in his essay on “The Task of the Translator” — written for the Baudelaire translation project, but which he also hoped to include as his own contribution to the first issue of *Angelus Novus* — “in every [human language] as a whole, one and the same thing is meant. Yet this one thing is achievable not by any single language but only by the totality [der Allheit] of their intentions supplementing one another: the pure language” (SW 1, 257).<sup>7</sup> What is ultimately universal to human languages is that no finally accurate or fully truthful meaning resides in any of them individually, and that fully adequate meanings are absent from all human words, regardless of the linguistic systems that produce them. Hence the need for poetic and fictive language, which makes no claims to empirical truth, and even more so, for translation, which allows human languages to appear alongside each other in their shared incompleteness. Translation thus illuminates a shared intention toward

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*das Schöne: Vielheit, zusammengefaßt zur Allheit]*” (GS 1.3, 834–835).

<sup>6</sup> For this definition of Allness [*Allheit*] as “plurality” [*Vielheit*] regarded as unity [*Einheit*], and for the further equation of Allness to “Totality” [*Totalität*], see §§B111 and B379 in the 1786 edition of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*. On Kant’s concept of “universality” (*Allgemeinheit*) as corresponding with “allness or totality of conditions,” see B379.

<sup>7</sup> “[I]n ihrer jeder als ganzer jeweils eines und zwar dasselbe gemeint ist, das dennoch keiner einzelnen von ihnen, sondern nur der Allheit ihrer einander ergänzenden Intentionen erreichbar ist: die reine Sprache” (GS 4.1, 13).

the totality of language as such, and this intention is both consequential in a metaphysical and, as we shall see, political sense.

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Speaking of the many landmark literary and philosophical works that were produced in 1922, Jean-Michel Rabaté has argued that “[w]hat distinguishes those masterpieces from the works that came before the war is a sense of a new mission: because of the massive destruction, there was a general sense of added responsibility. The thinkers, writers, and artists had to give birth to something that would approach a totality of experience” (2015, 4). Given the total devastations of the war, and the radical impoverishment of experience undergone by an entire younger generation of Germans, this “approach” toward a “totality of experience” was impossible from its outset. Still, Benjamin’s ambition with the ill-fated *Angelus Novus* journal — to safeguard the possibility of the universal by constructing a provisional totality of truth out of the capricious fragments into which experience had been shivered — clearly formed part of a larger modernist project in 1922, the larger modernist “responsibility” Rabaté has described. Although the journal never came to fruition, Benjamin would continue pursuing this ambition in his later research and writings, most notably his *Arcades Project*, a text that aims to construct a near-totalizing picture of 19th-century Paris out of a kaleidoscope of quotations, configured alongside each other like so many jigsaw puzzle pieces, left incomplete at the time of Benjamin’s death. In “composing” the *Arcades*, he continued to implement his theory of editing “as a private and, so to speak, anonymous enterprise.” With his studies of the Parisian passages, one might reasonably ask: is Benjamin the text’s author, or should he be better understood as its *Redakteur*, the one who collects a work’s contents and assembles them according to editorial needs and desires?<sup>8</sup> For, as Rabaté elsewhere writes:

Benjamin’s composition of the enormous and unfinished *Arcades Project* was an attempt at creating order in a literary and philosophical collection. He evoked in “Unpacking my Library” the ‘bliss of the collector,’ a bliss that was not limited to the possession of some rare items but approximated the happiness of whoever can contemplate history as the field of ruins and fragments that it is but finds there a reason to be more alive in the present. [...] We collect so as to recollect, thus turning into the curators of an always unfinished and unfinishable archive. This archive can be called modernism. It is an archive that will never become a totality. (2019, 8–9)

Offering a description for the task of modernist studies — inspired by Benjamin’s larger corpus — Rabaté productively troubles any easy distinctions between re/collecting, researching, writing, editing, curating, and translating. In his description of

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<sup>8</sup> One web source, the Online Etymology Dictionary, gives the origin of “redact” as “from Latin *redactus*, past participle of *redigere*: “to drive back, force back, bring back; collect, call in.” and indicates a shared etymological root (via “the Old Latin habit of using red- as the form of re- before vowels”) with the word “redemption.”

“an always unfinished and unfinishable archive,” he implies this task as an historical and scholarly one, “unfinishable,” in much the same way Goethe’s *Theory of Colours* depicts the pursuit of scientific knowledge as ultimately interminable.<sup>9</sup> In critical writing and in the editing of criticism, however, as Benjamin imagined it, another temporality is at stake: not the interminable *chronos* of *Wissenschaft* — approaching scientific knowledge as a curve infinitely approaches an unattainable asymptote — but rather, the *kairos* of truth, which appears as a fragmentary totality recognizable to the philosophical critic or editor in a moment of instantaneous illumination, prompted by immersion in artistic objects.

Important political consequences may be derived from the 1922 *Angelus Novus* announcement, relevant both for Benjamin’s lifetime and today. At a basic level, the document’s Neo-Kantian language bespeaks Benjamin’s continued dialectical engagements with Hermann Cohen’s writings and “ethical socialism.” In a persuasive reading of Cohen’s *Ethics of the Pure Will* (1904), Harry van der Linden has shown that Kant’s ethics depend on a “threefold division [that] corresponds to the categories of quantity as developed in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (B106; A80): unity, plurality, and totality. It follows that the purpose of general obedience to the moral law is to make possible a unified plurality, i.e., a totality” (van der Linden 1994, 6).<sup>10</sup> Van der Linden furthermore argues that Cohen reconstructed Kant’s ethics on specifically socialist grounds, based in the model of the worker’s cooperative (*Genossenschaft*), which could then in turn provide the model for the ideal state. “Like Kant, Cohen holds that existing humanity is a mere plurality and must be transformed into a unified plurality or totality. But unlike Kant, Cohen holds that this means that all our institutions must become unified pluralities or totalities” (1994, 6–7). The residually (neo-)Kantian language of totality and universality in Benjamin’s *Angelus Novus* plan thus signals, in some measure, a radical democratic politics, relevant to cooperative political endeavours and to the lives of working people, those whom it describes standing at their thresholds, glancing over their daily horizons. But where Cohen’s Kantianism had embraced an optimistic, social-

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<sup>9</sup> “The encyclopaedia will never be closed on itself, and like Benjamin’s *Arcades Project*, it will remain forever unfinished. This is the belief that Derrida and Benjamin share, and both find in it a condition for a revolutionary awakening. In the same way as there is no absolute language, there is no absolute collection, thus no end to modernism. Because the absolute is lacking, the task of the collector, which includes loving all the things and texts that will be redeemed, will be to keep open the discontinuous history of modernisms in the plural” (Rabaté 2019, 9).

<sup>10</sup> The full context for Van der Linden’s claim is as follows: “Kant’s summary in the *Foundations of the [three] different formulations of the categorical imperative* underlines the foregoing account. Kant states here that all maxims that accord with the moral law have a form (universality), a material (human agents as ends in themselves), and a complete determination (consistency with the realm of ends, i.e., the harmony of free wills). The threefold division corresponds to the categories of quantity as developed in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (B106; A80): unity, plurality, and totality. It follows that the purpose of general obedience to the moral law is to make possible a unified plurality, i.e. a totality. It The unity (form) is universal law as such. The plurality (the material) consists of human agents and their personal ends. The former applied to the latter creates a moral totality (the complete determination), ideal humanity” (6).



democratic philosophy of history, modelled on the endless task of human progress, Benjamin's *Angelus Novus* signals a chronopolitics and a philosophy of history altogether distinct from Cohen's, rooted not in the eternality of the progressive future, but in the messianic potentials of the now.<sup>11</sup>

To this point, the English-language editors of Benjamin's collected works, Marcus Bullock and Michael Jennings, have shown that Benjamin's theory of language transected his editorial and critical labours and carried implications for a theory of revolutionary politics (SW 1, 500). That is, the *Angelus Novus* announcement attests to a period of Benjamin's development in which Cohen's Kantian ethical socialism, Sorel's anarchism, and practical, anti-capitalist protest tactics were commingling generatively in Benjamin's theoretical imagination. Bullock and Jennings connect Benjamin's linguistic theory and his support for the proletarian general strike (in "The Critique of Violence") by way of Benjamin's letter to the philosopher Martin Buber in July 1916, describing his essay of that year "On Language as Such and the Language of Man," and declining Buber's invitation to contribute to the Zionist journal *Der Jude*. Speaking of the apparent speechlessness of Nature, its tacitness, which Benjamin will describe in the 1921 "Translation" essay as the silence between languages that Mallarmé intuited, Benjamin wrote to Buber, "only where this sphere of speechlessness reveals itself in unutterably pure power can the magic spark leap between the word and the motivating deed, where the unity [Einheit] of these two equally real entities resides" (SW 1, 501).<sup>12</sup> Translation then, serves not only to renovate the German language past "superannuated" linguistic practices; it also serves to illuminate that sphere of speechlessness that resides in the interstices between languages, and their shared, that is, supplemental totality of intentions.<sup>13</sup> This domain of silent communion may make possible a leap between "word" and "motivating deed," from language to embodied action, from theory into revolutionary practice.<sup>14</sup>

That is, by claiming "philosophical universality" as "the touchstone" of "true contemporary relevance" (SW 1, 294), this announcement's author opens his attention more fully toward questions not grasped within academic philosophy and *belles lettres*. The *Angelus Novus* was to be a philosophical literary journal with revolutionary

<sup>11</sup> For useful analyses of Benjamin's debts and critical relations to Cohen's neo-Kantianism, especially as regards their dissimilar philosophies of history, see: Deuber-Mankowsky 2004 (135–139); Fenves 2011 (5–13); Hamacher 2011 (176–179); Hamacher 2012 (508n17).

<sup>12</sup> "[N]ur wo diese Sphäre des Wortlosen in unsagbar reiner Macht sich erschließt, kann der magische Funken zwischen Wort und bewegender Tat überspringen, wo die Einheit dieser beiden gleich wirklichen ist" (*Briefe*, 127).

<sup>13</sup> Mallarmé's rhetoric of speechlessness in the "Crisis of Verse" essay is useful here for illuminating Benjamin's poetic and theoretical touchstones: "Languages imperfect insofar as they are many; the absolute one is lacking: thought considered as writing without accessories, not even whispers, still *stills* immortal speech; the diversity, on earth, of idioms prevents anyone from proffering words that would otherwise be, when made uniquely, the material truth" (Mallarmé 1897, 205).

<sup>14</sup> For a discussion of Hermann Cohen's influence over Benjamin's "Critique of Violence," see: Eiland and Jennings 2014, 132.

ambitions, but, as Benjamin also acknowledged in almost the same breath, even if the journal were to go forward, “there is no guarantee that the universality aspired to will be fully achieved” (SW 1, 295). All the more poignant, then, that the *Angelus Novus* never materialized as an actual journal in the first place: Benjamin’s hopes for it perished almost as soon as they first arose. Over a century later, his philosophy of editing is no less urgent. In light of recent and ongoing “disruptions” to the domains of humanistic study that Benjamin so prized—in academic institutions of all sizes, in their official organs of scholarly or “peer reviewed” dissemination, and in the field of literary magazines that has historically functioned alongside or within both—the *Angelus Novus* announcement continues to read as an untimely document, with marked contemporary importance.

In February 2021, to give just one notable, recent, and “disruptive” example, the American news network CNN published a web editorial by the journalist Leah Asmelash under the title “Long-standing literary magazines are struggling to stay afloat. Where do they go from here?” chronicling the downfall of the prominent American journal *The Believer* after its home institution, the University of Nevada, announced its closure in October 2021, citing pandemic-related financial woes. The magazine’s March 2022 issue was its last, after nearly twenty years of operation. Similar closures, professional downsizings, and labour casualizations are occurring throughout the public sphere, lending the contemporary moment a sense of crisis in the arts, humanities, and education, as is well known and widely acknowledged. While prominent web journals continue to emerge (and some seem to thrive) in our new digital economy, the capacity for criticism to flourish in these outlets is still uncertain. This is particularly the case when such outlets operate with increasingly less institutional and monetary support, in competition with platforms and apps that function more like monopolies helmed by billionaires and less like infrastructures of universal public good. Amid these dismal developments, notable voices on the left are once again advocating for a “universalist” politics, and the editorial engines of modernist critical and artistic production must heed these calls (McGowan, 2020; Sunkara, 2019). What is needed now on the left is a renewed commitment to the expanding modernist archive Benjamin claimed for his critical custodianship, still deeper thinking of his editorial universalism in theory and practice, and a commitment to his principles that might still be applied successfully from within the catastrophes of our contemporary world.

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