4 Thought-images
A re-reading of the ‘angel of history’

BENJAMIN’S CONCEPT OF IMAGES
From his theory of readability and his definition of dialectical images as read, it is clear that Benjamin regarded images in terms of their property as writing (Schrift) rather than as representations. As such, Benjamin’s concept of images has nothing to do with the history of material images, nor with a ‘mental image’ that is distinguished from the material image in its characterization as derivative or secondary, not proper (uneigentlich). Rather, his thinking goes back to a tradition of the image which precedes that of the function of pictorial representation and which ‘sees the literal sense of the word image as a resolutely non-or even anti-pictorial notion’ (Mitchell 1984:521). Benjamin himself describes the image as a constellation of resemblances (Ähnlichkeitskonstellation) which is figured in a third (ein Drittes), beyond a form-content relation. It is at any rate in order to establish this distinction that he recounts his story of the stocking, a story taken up again in ‘Berlin Childhood Around 1900’:

Each pair had the appearance of a small bag. Nothing gave me such pleasure as to plunge my hand as deep as possible into its inside. I did not do this on account of the warmth. What drew me into its depths was ‘what had been brought me’ [das Mitgebrachte] which I always held in my hand in the rolled up inside. When I had clasped it in my fist and assured myself as best I could of the possession of the soft, woollen mass, the second part of the game began which brought the unveiling. For then I applied myself to unwrapping ‘what had been brought me’ out of its woollen bag. I drew it ever closer to myself until the perplexing thing happened: I had taken ‘what had been brought me’ out, but ‘the bag’ in which it had lain was no longer there. I could not put this process to the test often enough. It taught me that form and content, the wrapping and what is wrapped in it are the same thing. From this lesson I learned to
draw the truth out of poetic writing \textit{[Dichtung]} as carefully as the child’s hand took the stocking out of ‘the bag’.

(Benjamin 1987: 58)

He had related this same story already in his essay on Proust, where he then goes on to describe the image as a third or third thing (\textit{ein Drittes}). This passage, which is concerned with Proust’s ‘impassioned cult of similarity’, begins with the concept of similarity or resemblance (\textit{Ähnlichkeit}), and leads finally—via a number of detours—to that of the image. Taking the concept of similarity as his starting point, Benjamin here makes reference to the dream world ‘in which everything that happens appears not in identical but in similar guise, opaquely similar to itself (\textit{GS II.1, 314; III 206}, translation modified), in order then to illustrate this ‘structure of the dream world’ in the story of the stocking. With this he introduces the concept of the ‘third’ which in turn leads into the analogy with Proust’s image-desire (\textit{Bildbegehren}). For just as children cannot get enough of changing at a single stroke these two things: the bag and what is in it, into a third thing: the stocking, so Proust could not get his fill of emptying at a single stroke the display dummy [\textit{die Attrappe}], the ego [\textit{das Ich}], in order to keep on bringing in that third: the image, with which his curiosity, no, his homesickness was assuaged.

(\textit{GS II.1, 314; III 207}, translation modified)

It is this image, according to Benjamin, that bears Proust’s ‘fragile, precious reality’—and not only this. The image, as third, as the non-material appearance of a resemblance comparable in structure to the dream image, is for Benjamin the shape in which experiences, history, and reality become cognizable, in which they are made visible, as in a mnemic image.

If Benjamin understands the image as a constellation, as that ‘in which the has-been [\textit{das Gewesene}] comes together in a flash [\textit{blitzhaft}] with the Now to form a constellation’ (\textit{GS V.1, 578; see N 50}), then the image here describes a heterogeneous, or heteromorphous, relation of resemblances.

The image is the general term, from which various particular resemblances and correspondences subtend (\textit{convenientia, aemulatio, analogia, sympathia}), which conjoins the world with ‘figures of knowledge’.

(Mitchell 1990:21)

According to Mitchell, it was only with the invention of artificial perspective in the Renaissance period and with the accompanying
illusion of a pictorial representation that was true to life that the material image and the function of representation came to dominate the conceptualization of the image. This meant that other types of image now came to be defined as mental or spiritual, and thus as secondary or metaphorical. By contrast, Benjamin’s concept of the image actualizes a biblical or Judaic tradition that had been submerged in the course of this historical development. It is a tradition in which the image figures as a synonym for likeness, resemblance, or similitude (Ähnlichkeit), and expressly for a non-material and non-sensuous similitude. Moreover, within this tradition images are also understood as being readable, as being a form of writing.

This concept of the image may also go some way to explaining why in Benjamin’s ur-history of modernity, in which the mode of observation is so dominated by images and which is grounded in a theory of images, painting plays such a minor role. And where Benjamin does devote attention to particular works from art history, such as Dürer’s Melancolia or Klee’s Angelus Novus, these images become for him meditative images, as he termed them following a visit to an exhibition of Klee’s work (Benjamin 1978: 283), or thought-images, which accompany and preoccupy him over a long period of time. They are for him thought-images (Denkbilder) in a double sense: as images in relation to which his thoughts and theoretical reflections unfold, and also as images whose representations are translated into figures of thought (Denkfiguren)—‘translated’ here in the primary sense that Benjamin had attributed to it in the context of Adamite language, namely, as the translation of the language of things into that of words.

THOUGHT-IMAGES

The thought-image (Denkbild)—a word used by Benjamin as a kind of generic term for his own shorter text-pieces—can be seen as lying at the heart of his work on thinking-in-images (Bilddenken). His thought-images are as it were dialectical images in written form, literally constellations-become-writing (Schrift-gewordene Konstellationen) in which the dialectic of image and thought is unfolded and becomes visible. They are in the first instance linguistic representations of those resemblances which conjoin ‘the world with “figures of knowledge”’ (see above), that is, texts proceeding from those images and figurations in which the act of thinking is performed and in which history, reality, and experience find their structure and expression: representations of ideas (Darstellungen von Vorstellungen), executed in such a way that in the linguistic imitation of the idea the petrified movement in it is restored, made fluid again. Here, with the aid of the mimetic faculty, the image, understood as dialectic at a standstill, is transformed into writing, that is, set in motion, in such a way
as to reveal the origin of the idea and what has gone into its production: what has preceded it, entered into it, disappeared in it, and, simultaneously with the expression of an idea through the image, become, as its reverse side, invisible and invalidated. Thus this writing mimetically re-enacts the constitution of meaning in the image.

The dialectic at work here does not follow a triadic formula; its line of (written) descent goes back not so much to Hegel as to Hölderlin, in whose work a like attempt is to be found at the precise linguistic description of a dialectical process and its illumination in all its aspects—aspects which in the very course of this process change their status and position. Indeed, Hölderlin’s text ‘Das Werden im Vergehen’ could be taken as a model of this, his linguistic representation of a constellation of origination and emergence (Entspringen) which mimetically reenacts the dialectical movement inherent in this process, doing so by describing the movement as a reciprocal transformation from the status of the possible to that of the real or the ideal:

But the Possible which enters into Reality when Reality disintegrates [sich auflöst], this has effect, and it has as its effect both the sensation of disintegration and the recollection of what has disintegrated…. The new life is now real, that which was destined to disintegrate, and has disintegrated, possible, ideally old, the disintegration necessary and bearing its particular character between Being and Non-Being. But in this state between Being and Non-Being the Possible becomes now everywhere Real, and the Real Ideal, and this is in the free imitation of art a fearful, and yet a divine dream.

(Hölderlin 1992:II, 73)

If in what follows Hölderlin lends particular emphasis to the recollection of the disintegrated in the new, as also to the gap and contrast between new and old, it is—from the perspective of what has entered into reality—only the backward glance to what has disappeared in the process described that makes possible the ‘recollection of what has disintegrated’. And it is precisely this kind of recollection that is central for Benjamin’s thought-images. The constitution of meaning of which he is in pursuit is quite different from a ‘grammatology’ orientated around the modern conceptualization of the sign. It is not a différence (Derrida 1976) operating with a range of linguistic material that he is concerned with, but the origin of ideas and their crystallization in linguistic figurations: linguistic images (Sprachbilder) which precede and provide the basis for the archives of metaphor, rhetoric, and iconography. In this way Benjamin identifies language, too, as the location of those images defined by him as dialectic at a standstill, and will only allow these
dialectical images the status of genuine images (echte Bilder) (GS V.1, 577; N 50). They have a bearing on that image-writing (Bilder-Schrift) in which the images of the world become the view of the world. And with his ‘thought-images’, Benjamin himself produced and wrote such images, in order by so doing to deconstruct ways of thinking and ideas or imaginative concepts (Vorstellungen) handed down through the centuries. Yet thought-images are also read images, readings of images in written form, in which the character of images as writing—whether these be paintings, mnemic images, dream-images, wish-images materialized in architecture or in objects—becomes literally transformed into writing. It is in his thought-images that it becomes most patently apparent that Benjamin’s manner of writing and manner of thinking cannot be seen as separate, that his thinking-in-images constitutes his specific and characteristic way of theorizing, of philosophizing, and of writing, and that his writings cannot be seen in terms of a dualistic opposition of form and content. Rather, the many constellations that run like leitmotifs through his writings demonstrate how, from the tensions between poetic language and conceptual meta-discourse, he won his own singular style of writing, so to speak a third thing beyond the dualistic opposition of literature and philosophy. The emergence and construction of this third place can be observed in the development of individual figures over what is frequently a long period of time, as also in the construction and procedural method of individual texts.

A fine example in this respect is the text ‘On the Concept of History’. The series of eighteen, or rather twenty, short text-pieces, not really theses as such, do not so much set out an historico-philosophical programme as present reflections on conceptualizations of history, or thought-images on the way history is conceived—that is, on the notion of history itself. This is made extremely clear by Benjamin through such formulations as: ‘the puppet called “historical materialism”’ (GS I.2, 693; Ill 255), the ‘conception of progress’ (GS I.2, 701; Ill 262), or ‘the notion of a present’ (GS I.2, 702; Ill 264; my emphases).

The text opens with the much-discussed image of the automaton, the knowledge of which is introduced as an on dit—‘The story is told of…’ and which is described in detail, following which a ‘philosophical counterpart’ is imagined: note a counterpart, not a comparison. ‘One can imagine a philosophical counterpart to this device’ (GS I.2, 693; Ill 255). As the many attempts at interpreting this passage demonstrate all too clearly—attempts that turn Benjamin’s sentences over and over in order to try to wrest from them some unequivocal meaning—this notion of a philosophical counterpart to the image of the automaton cannot be subsumed in a simple equation or unambiguous transferral—metaphora—between the object described and the philosophical concept. On the contrary, via the correspondence between concrete thing and
philosophical counterpart, Benjamin circumscribes precisely that field in which the image is constituted as a resemblance between the figures of the external world and those of abstract knowledge. This is the field of his writing in which he develops his thought-images, images located in a space beyond the opposition of poetic language and philosophical discourse, in a different sort of language, the language of thought-images that operate with the received figurations of thought. Yet these thought-images do not stand at the beginning of his writing, but are rather the result of many and varied detours—for method is detour (GS I.1, 208; see OGT 28)—and arise ‘from the centre of his image-world’.7

GEGENSTREBIGE FÜGUNG: THE ANGEL OF HISTORY

An example of this is the figure of the ‘counter-striving disposition’ (gegenstrebig Fügung)8 in which the thought-image of the angel of history culminates—itself figuring a non-synchronicity between his position and perception and ours, which simultaneously gives expression to the non-synchronicity or incompatibility of philosophy of history and Messianism—and which has a whole series of precursors in the shape of similar constellations, linguistic figures, and images with which Benjamin evidently worked on this topos of a counter-striving disposition.

In ‘The Diary’ (Das Tagebuch) (1913), a poetic text full of metaphor, the writing ‘I’ is situated within a counter-movement of things and time and in the midst of unfolding events which surround it like a landscape—in the midst, then, of a mythically perceived environment.9 The same constellation as appears here in the medium of a subjective, literary text and in a metaphorical language will reappear in a number of very different texts and linguistic figures—for example, as a conceptual image in the context of a philosophical discourse on the relation between philosophy of history and the Messianic in the ‘Theologico-Political Fragment’ (c. 1920–21). Here, following a passage emphasizing the difference between the Messianic and the historical dynamic, Benjamin writes:

The order of the profane has to be erected on the idea of happiness. The relation of this order to the Messianic is one of the essential lessons of the philosophy of history. For it is this that forms the basis of a mystical conception of history, raising a problem that can be represented figuratively [in einem Bilde sich darlegen lässt]. If one arrow points to the goal towards which the profane dynamic acts, and another marks the direction of Messianic intensity, then certainly the quest of free humanity for happiness runs counter to the Messianic direction; but just as a force can, by its movement,
propel another forward that is moving in the opposite direction, so
too the profane order of the profane \([\text{die profane Ordnung des Profanen}]\) assists the coming of the Messianic kingdom.

\((\text{GS II.1, 203–4; OWS 155, translation modified})\)

What is here still termed a ‘lesson of the philosophy of history’ and represented (dargelegt) figuratively—that is, as an illustration of a conceptually formulated insight in terms of a figurative description—can be seen as a kind of experiment on the path towards the elaboration of thought-images within Benjamin’s writings. The attempt at portraying, or illustrating, a philosophical problem with the aid of arrows pointing in different directions or counter-directional forces propelling each other forward has something of the character of the representation of a conceptually formulated figure in terms of a geometrical or topological image. Benjamin’s endeavour to capture dialectic in the image can already be seen here, an endeavour in which he will, however, only really achieve success with his read or written images.

In this respect, the thought-image of the angel of history can be read in direct succession to the ‘Theologico-Political Fragment’. This probably most frequently quoted section from Benjamin’s text ‘On the Concept of History’, in which he sets out his critique of conventional historicism as well as of the progressive trajectory of historical materialism, has been repeatedly read as a metaphorical image,\(^\text{10}\) but not as a dialectical one. This is symptomatic of the more general misrecognition of Benjamin’s thinking-in-images and is not without its repercussions, for it is in this section that the many different lines of thought developed in his work converge and that his quite singular and specific reflections on history, progress, the hope of redemption, and on the image itself are figured in a single constellation. This thought-image can thus be understood as an allegory of Benjamin’s specific theoretical work. If it is read as a metaphorical image—for example, when Klee’s \textit{Angelus Novus} is taken as a figurative representation of the ‘angel of history’—Benjamin’s thought-image is not seen as dialectic at a standstill; instead, such an interpretation immobilizes, freezes the dialectic contained in the image.

For a start, the motto, the quotation from a poem by Gershom Scholem, is often overlooked or disregarded in readings of this kind. These lines of poetry are, however, an important component of the movement of the text, since they mark a reference point for the constellation in which that movement culminates. For in fact this ninth section ‘On the Concept of History’ (\textit{GS} I.2, 697–8; \textit{Ill} 259–60) presents us with not one, but three angels who are very different indeed. The first is the one in Scholem’s verse:
My wing is ready for flight,
I would like to turn back.
If I stayed timeless time,
I would have little luck.

—Gerhard Scholem, *Gruss vom Angelus*

The lyrical ‘I’ of the poem quoted is identical with the voice of the angel here. In this turn back to the origin in search of salvation, it is the tone of disappointment in the quest for happiness (in the order of the profane) and the pathos of a positively evaluated about-turn that determine the lyrical rhythm. In contrast to this very eloquent angel of Scholem’s, the second angel referred to, the one in Klee’s painting, is mute. Benjamin says of him that he is called—that is, that the artist called him—*Angelus Novus*.

A Klee painting named ‘Angelus Novus’ shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread.

In Benjamin’s description, this angel has Medusa-like features: an open mouth, staring eyes, a frozen gaze. But to this account of Klee’s painting, the description of the angel depicted in it, and the name given to it by the painter, Benjamin adds an association of movement: he looks ‘as if he were about to…’. With this formulation the text makes reference to the perceptual logic of the ‘as if’ in the supposed simple reproduction characteristic of material images. In the frontal view of the picture, however, which has the angel’s face turned towards the viewer, this movement is only imagined; that is, it is added to the representation through the act of looking. The real movement enters the text, though, with the third angel, the angel of history. The *Angelus Novus* depicted by Klee is not equated with the angel of history, let it be noted, nor is it interpreted as a pictorial representation of it. What is presented is now a purely imagined image:

The angel of history must look like this. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and
hurling it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay a while, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise that has got caught in his wings, and its strength is such that the angel can no longer close them. This storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him mounts up to the heavens. What we call progress: that is this storm.

(Translation modified)

The movement in the text is brought about above all by several changes of perspective: a shifting between the way the viewer sees the angel and the perspective and wishes of the angel himself—‘the angel would like to stay a while’—and between ‘us’ and ‘him’ in relation to the wreckage at his feet and to the future to which his back is turned, but towards which he is driven by the storm. In the course of the text, the non-synchronicity between ‘us’ and the angel is made present in a representation that functions polyperspectivally and on multiple levels: as a topographical and spatial constellation (‘where we perceive..., he sees’) and as a bodily one (through the references to the face, feet, and back), a temporal one (‘irresistibly’—here in the sense of ‘incessantly’, ‘while the pile...’), a material one (the dead, wreckage), a mythical one (the storm blowing from Paradise), and a conceptual or historico-philosophical one (‘What we call progress’).

**IMAGE-DESIRE AND THE TURN BACK**

Through this constellation, whose multidimensional relations clearly differentiate it from the description of a picture or a pictorial representation, the contrast between the two preceding angels as quoted from Scholem and Klee—the lyrically articulated desire to turn back of the one and the mythically conceived, Medusa-like frozen posture of the other—is carried over into a dialectical textual movement. It is true that this textual movement is tripartite in structure, and yet it does not culminate in a synthesis, but in a constellation of non-synchronicity. Here the incompatibility of the desire for healing—to ‘make whole what has been smashed’—and the paralysis of terror is reflected, while the non-synchronicity and ultimate irreconcilability of a positivistic understanding of history, which sees history as a chain of events and as a continuum, with the perception of wreckage and catastrophe is figuratively represented in the thought-image. The storm blowing from Paradise that is called ‘progress’—the originary moment of an historical movement through which history is finally and irreversibly separated from Paradise and thus from a mythical place—marks a situation in
which Messianism and the philosophy of history cannot be made to tally with each other.

It is clear that in this text, in contrast to the ‘Theologico-Political Fragment’ of twenty years previously, the image no longer serves as an illustration of an historico-philosophical ‘lesson’; namely, the relation of the order of the profane to the Messianic (GS II.2, 203; OWS 155). Rather, taking as his starting point on the one hand a poetic image and on the other a painted one, both of which can be seen also as wish-images (Wunschbilder), Benjamin evolves a thought-image whose figuration can no longer be translated into conceptual terminology or meta-discourse. And in this, the reflection of the images of (his own) imagination at the same time embraces the ‘processing’ or workingthrough (Bearbeitung, a Freudian term) of the wishes bound up in these images, and thus also the work on, and with, fascination and image-desire (Bildbegehren).

For with his text on the angel of history it seems probable that Benjamin was working out and reflecting the history of a fascination of his own that had bound him to Klee’s painting for nearly twenty years, doing so in a dialectical image that at the same time represents an awakening from a magical fixation on the painting as expressed in a form of continuous ‘beviewing’ (Beaugenscheinigung). It is doubtless not by chance that the time-span during which Benjamin was in possession of Klee’s painting corresponded to that of the hidden history of the origin of this text (written in 1940, shortly before his involuntary suicide), as indicated in a letter to Gretel Adorno. Referring in this letter to the text, he writes that it is his concern ‘to write down a few thoughts of which I can say that I have kept them with me, indeed, kept them from myself, for nigh on twenty years’ (GS I.3, 1223). There is, too, an idea of Klee’s in a note in his ‘Paedagogical Sketchbook’ (Pädagogisches Skizzenbuch) (1925) which could be taken as a comment on his Angelus Novus—‘The human being is half winged creature, half prisoner’ (Klee 1990: 100)—a note that follows the pattern of dichotomous concepts of imagination and identity, which in Benjamin’s thought-image of the ‘angel of history’ is wrenched from its paralysis as a metaphor of existence and set in motion of a kind that, in the representation of non-synchronicity, does not seek resolution in reconciliation.

The radicality of Benjamin’s thinking lies precisely in his work on such constellations—in the transformation of conventional images, traditional metaphors, and his own linguistic figures into thought-images, a transformation which does not simply adjudge and denounce the former as false consciousness. He himself describes this work as a reflection in moments of awakening, and it is a reflection that does not neutralize or rationally resolve the desire condensed in these preexisting images. Rather, the desire is incorporated into the thought-image, so that it
becomes both allegorical practice and redeeming critique (*rettende Kritik*) in one.

Moreover, the figuration in which Benjamin’s text finds its culmination and in which the non-synchronicity of our perception and the gaze of the angel of history is represented corresponds precisely to the theoretical figure of non-synchronicity in Freud’s model of memory as set out in the allegory of the ‘mystic writing-pad’ (*Wunderblock*). The non-synchronicity between consciousness and the writing that flashes up out of the permanent traces of the unconscious thus forms the basis for the representation of the non-synchronicity with which Benjamin is preoccupied. Even the formulation ‘chain of events’ might be traced back to Freud. In his essay ‘On Screen Memories’ (*Über Deckerinnerungen*) of 1899, it says: ‘The reproduction of life as a connected chain of events is not achieved before the age of six or seven, in many not until the age of ten’ (Freud 1964:531–2; see Freud 1953: III, 303). The non-synchronicity only becomes visible via the *topos* of the turn back or reversal (*Umkehr*), a figure which is again to be found in Hölderlin. The turn back organizes a form of perception which—positioned in the flow of time, but adopting a stance opposed to it—directs the gaze towards what has disappeared in that flow, towards what has been destroyed in history, the elements that have been used—and consumed—in the process of artistic production, in short, towards ‘what passes away in the becoming’ (*das im Werden Vergehende*). Precisely this is what Hölderlin put to the test in his reading and translation of Greek tragedy. Here he focused attention on the ‘wild origination’ (*wilde Entstehung*) of a form of rationality in order to accentuate the ‘oriental element’ (*das Orientalische*) which, he maintained, had been denied within Greek art—but not in such a way as to repudiate the Greek tradition or its importance for him. What was at stake, as Hölderlin himself formulated it, was a ‘reversal of all kinds of ideas and forms’ (*Umkehr aller Vorstellungsarten und Formen*), but not a complete reversal, for ‘A complete reversal in these is, as is complete reversal generally, where nothing is left to hold onto [ohne allen Halt], not permitted to the human being as a creature of intellect [erkennendem Wesen]’ (Hölderlin 1992:II, 375).

In this respect it is, in Benjamin’s historico-theoretical thought-image, precisely the angel, as a non-human being, who endures in the position of the one who turns back, in doing so keeping at least momentarily this perspective open for us too.

*Translated by Georgina Paul and Rachel McNicholl*