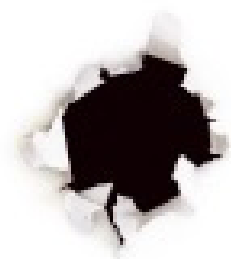


# Theses on (the Philosophy of) **H**istory

(poem)  
séamas carraher



*Theses on (the Philosophy of) **H**istory (poem)* by séamas carraher **October 1, 2012 – July 1, 2015**

### Notes & Bibliography

Walter Benjamin, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, from *Illuminations: Translated by Harry Zohn, Edited (& Introduction Hannah Arendt) Published in the United States by Schocken Books, a division of Random House, Inc., New York. Originally published in Germany by Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt a.M. copyright © 1955 by Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt a.M.*

Copy of *Theses in History (Über den Begriff der Geschichte)* attached to Samizdat hard copy: <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/benjamin/1940/history.htm>

Source: [http://www.efn.org/~dredmond/Theses\\_on\\_History.html](http://www.efn.org/~dredmond/Theses_on_History.html);

Translation: © 2005 Dennis Redmond;

translation used with permission, Creative Commons (Attribute & Share Alike); Original German: *Gesammelten Schriften I:2*. Suhrkamp Verlag. Frankfurt am Main, 1974; Transcribed: by Andy Blunden.

Photograph Used: By *Photo d'identité sans auteur, 1928 [Public domain]*, via *Wikimedia Commons / Attribution not legally required*.

### **"A cage went in search of a bird."**

- Franz Kafka, *The Third Notebook*, November 6, 1917

Quoted in: Left Panel, Page 8, *The Sun's Attendant*, (1963, Simon & Schuster)

Charles Haldeman,

(September 27, 1931 – January 19, 1983)

***For Walter Benjamin***

***(15 July 1892 – 26 September 1940) &***

***All our Lost Comrades***

***“The complete uncertainty about what the next day and even the next hour will bring has dominated my existence for many weeks. I am condemned to read every newspaper (they now come out on a single sheet of paper) like a summons that has been served on me and to detect in every radio broadcast the voice of the messenger of bad tidings.”***

(Walter Benjamin, to Theodore W. Adorno, Lourdes, August 2, 1940, in Scholem & Adorno, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin*, University of Chicago Press, 1994, Page 638)

Theses  
on the  
Philosophy  
of History



i

Somehow the old century ended. I meet myself on the way to my own funeral. After wading through blood and guts and bone, i will enter the ruins. This new century is a fucking ghetto in ruins. i have already criticised this mirror, once, twice. Now here is another puppet pulling my strings. Neither God nor History, Walter. Old age! Old age is a question without an answer to this blind watchmaker in the dark.

In a world where pope and commissar  
have both counted the dead  
on their clipboards.

It is lonely here, comrade. Beyond bearing.

ii

My guess is: past and future are cities full of ruin to the old. i see that from the side of the road where my cart has broken down. People pass as if their blindness was a gift and this destination on the horizon, a carnival instead of a funeral. There is no redemption for the fool who doesn't know his own foolishness. The debt is too great. Even though:

“Our coming was expected on earth.”<sup>1</sup>

Past and future are like vultures, they come to feed on the present. In this way, Vladimir, there is no excuse for your murderous intellectual arrogance. The dead don't want revenge, we want our dreams back. We, who have outlived you, we, who will dance on all your graves,

see the danger of  
this present moment.

1. Illuminations, Benjamin, Walter, 1968, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc. p. 254

iii

Walter, it is cold here, on the platform of this railway station, in this dreary waiting room where history turns up, always late, always drunk and always badly disguised. For a single moment i balance between past and future, this moment before the knife slices deep. i see your terrible dilemma. You have stopped believing our communal lies. Truth lands like an unbalanced angel on the mantelpiece. Its neon is lit with a sign called redemption. Another damnation!

This hotel room between countries, between empires, between ideologies, full of both hope and promise: an agony on holidays.

You are friendless, like history. Like us all.  
Though most sink,  
deep, into  
sleep.

iv

Walter, all that endures is change, this dance of the electrons. You could not tell this to the people who killed you. No one could, not the millions who died alongside you, filling your shoes with their feet, most esteemed proletariat, these nameless ones. It took years, then the statues fell, great blocks of stone thundering to the ground and dust. It is our bones make up the dust. The puppet laughs from his hiding place in the audience – not knowing how right you were. Bones turn to dust. Tyrants fall from their pedestals. All that's left for the present are questions. Like these ghosts, or Neruda's flowers always filling up the world.

Dialectics or doubt, you ask, in  
your ferocious morphine-sleep?

v

Now, briefly: you walk an Avenue lined with tall aristocratic trees. It is 5 in the afternoon, exactly 5pm, (“5 by all the clocks”!) and the town sleeps its catastrophic siesta. For one with the ears of an angel (and a mind on fire) from nowhere-in-particular a voice calls, like a broken car alarm, it calls – history, the thug!

You carry no solution in your pocket. Years later now, i see: just at the moment your foot descends, all of humanity is in danger. Then the moment passes and your lost grave becomes one more irrelevance – even as i speak.

The moment has passed.

Despite this: here are your descendants, now, in these heroin-and-cocaine hells, in these cultures birthed with barbarism, our insurgent and rented destinies!

Now is the ‘moment of danger’, Walter. Moment after moment in our grim progress, this endless forced march from there to here and beyond. But history? Pshaw! You walk the old Avenida del General Mola to the hotel, you walk now as if fragmented in an André Breton collage: the street, soon-to-be-dead Franco generals, a Guardia Civil cell, and always in autumn, leaves, harmless leaves falling from the trees. All this danger.

“...even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins...”<sup>2</sup>

...25th September 1940.

Years later, the shadow in the corner still wields the knife. Not even the dead are safe. i get it. This fascist general is gone but still, Gestapo or not, these dead, our dead, always we remain, hostages and prisoners, in debt to the past.

Without a future to  
stare in our faces.

Now Walter, i must make my goodbyes (including this one) ‘against the grain’<sup>3</sup>. The birds have fled, long before me. i waited a while, nostalgic for a world that was never mine. You never understood this. We crave what we never possess, this illusion among the debris. This antithesis which is our failure. In this way the ghosts overcome us, like a virus they possess us, intimately. And we them. There is no redemption, only resurrection. You left no documents in the hotel to unprove this.

“There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.”<sup>4</sup>

This ache in the middle?  
A suicide bomber now in the world of ghosts.

2. Illuminations, Benjamin, Walter, 1968, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc. p. 255

3. “He regards it as his task to brush history against the grain.” Illuminations, Benjamin, Walter, 1968, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc. p. 257

4. Illuminations, Benjamin, Walter, 1968, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc. p. 256

“The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the ‘state of emergency’ in which we live is not the exception but the rule.”<sup>5</sup>

Walter, who, here, the fuck, has a clue what you are going on about? Even though at 3am, at exactly 3am, my 3am of the broken clocks, the streets here ring with the howls of the drunken dead, the walls beat each other into submission, women pull their hair on the streets and the wind tears to shreds every small creature in its path. Still we sleep.

“What, in the name of Jesus, are you going on about,” he said to me, coldly.

My own proletarian  
‘father’..

Walter, another storm is ‘blowing in from Paradise’. There is no work here any more. Now there are more subtle chains to bind our thoughts with. Bind our desires with. If we hadn’t these pills, if we hadn’t this weed, if we hadn’t these illusions, man, we’d go fucking mad. Wake up and watch this town on the horizon, burning.

Here is a life without heart or soul. Here is a world without heart. Here is the heart stolen from a heartless world. And here now, a sigh, this song of the oppressed creature.

Here, Karl, like it or not, is one unmitigated disaster, a pain called Monday, like today, in this concrete hell, called Ballyogan.

Our angel now with eyes burnt and beaten back,  
the Messiah with a Kalashnikov!

Walter, we are all theologians at the impossibility of our own face. Wake up, you said, but the children slept on. Even after 40 or 70 million dead, the same puppet still pulls our strings. The streets have changed little. Another fascist general may be in disrepute but only the dust is disturbed by their cruel wind and your building sits, redundant, just like you, now. You were right, we travel at a hundred miles an hour – with no one at the wheel.

Wake up, children. It is our birthday, today, here, in the belly of the whale. Today could be the first day of our humanness.

Wake up, wake up!  
The house, this house, our empty house  
is on fire!

5. Illuminations, Benjamin, Walter, 1968, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc. p. 257

xi

Walter, the lunatics have taken over the asylum. This dark night has blown all the candles out. Look at these countless bright sparks in cheap suits telling me to worship my chains! i have gone mad in this sanity, delirious on contradiction! The people are without hope. This TV here gloats at my quest for freedom, “stupid fool”, it says, “you’ve never had it so good”. Like a fatted pig at the door of the slaughterhouse. Or Nikolai’s farewell to Anna Larina. Downtown Moscow, 27th February. Or Dublin. 1937 - 2013.

Amen.

xii

It is night, Walter. The dead sleep, even in Ballyogan. The voices of ghosts argue like thieves over the remains of the living, more predators picking on flesh. My neighbour calls to complain about my hedge. Either my glass is half full or half empty, i have been told. i think i know what you are trying to say, Walter, but it’s not easy. Still, i can’t bear that half empty-half full glass one more time. There’s no one left to light the fuse here, in this cardboard-box town, unlike my liberated-neighbour, armed with his knowledge of hedges, half full glasses, and thugs with baseball bats and shotguns. In this life now where even social democracy looms like a threat or a promise to the walking dead.

A spectre haunting Europe,  
like another gravedigger, in  
a land of disease?

xiii

Daylight comes. The ghosts still sleep. Even in a recession, each day the workers rise up in locust-hordes and swarm into the city. In our hunger we workers have built palaces for our stomach. We eat each other, day in day out. No matter how much i swallow i am never full. This is progress, Walter. Left or Right. “Out of my way! Out of my way! When i get to the top of this shit-heap, i know i must swallow the world whole and raw. Later is our vacation. To the Death Camp, comrade! The inflight horror movie, the four horsemen of progress and profit: war, starvation, disease, death!

Out of my way! Out of my way!”

This dream, angel or butterfly, the starving child draws on the camp wall? More a nightmare to the holiday-makers.

To you also, Comrade Vladimir, we are all, fascist-right or ultra-left, all deadmen on leave.<sup>6</sup>

6. “We Communists are all dead men on leave.” Leviné, Eugen, ‘Leviné’s Last Speech’, at <http://www.whatnext-journal.co.uk/Pages/History/Levine.html>

xiv

Later, in the alleys and laneways of this ghetto, i see this kid with an anger sharp as a blade to match my own. Two tigers burning in the dark of Blake’s endless industrial night. Who’ll win, my philosopher brain asks? What a laugh, Walter! Two tigers leaping into the dark! “Fuck you.” he mouthed.

“Fuck the Pope. And fuck the IRA, too” – these kids always knew that. Each civilised day is a leap into the dark, if you are still alive when you land, that’s dialectics, you ignorant bollix!

xv

(How would a two-faced politician,  
this banker with our future in a portfolio,  
understand this?  
Those fuckers in their arrogance  
think they have stopped time  
like a bus or a taxi,  
from the heart of this heartless television.)

Now even the broken clocks are fighting back, Walter!

xvi

1945-2013: After the war, after your cheap and hasty funeral, we all queued up to share out the benefits of 90 million dead: the shutters were torn from windows, the doors from their hinges, the walls from their foundations – and what happens: chains, Walter! They handed out chains and dole cards and public sector pensions.

Now these corpses, my friend, haunt my dreams with this narcotic and corroded music, this burden of work somehow rotting both mind and muscle, this food that chokes my dreams, our fear of freedom worse than the slow death i die each day in this prison called progress!

xvii

Like you said, Walter, we have written it all, prematurely, in order to say nothing. Better even to stop this mouth that won’t stop speaking. The Dead talk endlessly. Instead i could write this to plant a bomb in my mouth. In your mouth too. In all these dead mouths that can’t shut up.

Spit it out, my son, whose wings have not burnt yet, he swears at me, soaring higher and higher, into the revolutionary furnace of our sinking sun.

xviii, a & b

This is the end, Walter.

The giant has given birth to a mouse.  
Look at these mad-men on TV with their whips  
bullying us into this market-place called civilisation!  
Look at these torturers of innocence  
invent more mealy-mouthed religions.  
These salesmen of fear and penance and prayer.  
Look at the killers cornering the market  
in cut-price peace deals!

i can't listen to this corpse anymore.  
There is no future in this graveyard called history.  
There is only this past called the Dead, their silence.  
All the freight cars have left the station  
disguised as progress, or work, or law!  
Only your ghost remains, one last passenger,  
more clown than agitator  
in your ferocious complexity.

Over this empty house, the moon must light  
its last incendiary.  
Our struggle is now this forced march  
over the cliff edge,  
ethnic cleansing, this massacre in a field,  
the silence here, another war crime  
like graffiti littering a wall,  
there is no magic to these events unfolding the street,  
there are no communists, no philosophers,  
no angels, any more  
no physician, lawyer, priest, no poet, no man of science,  
only paid servants, Walter  
“wage-labourers”,  
now there is not even time,  
all the clock are broken

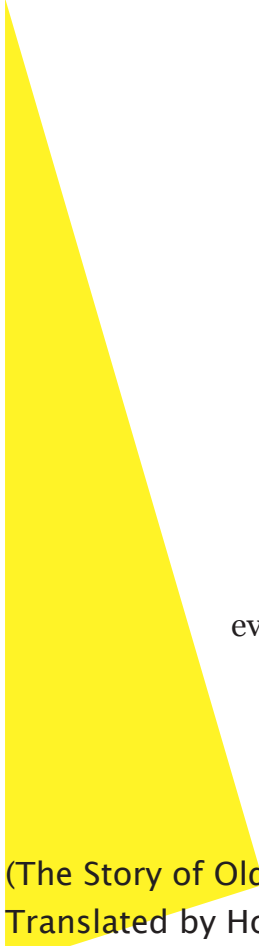
each second, see, what the fuck,  
in an instant, at this barricaded door here,  
with their halos removed  
both Messiah and Commissar  
about to enter.<sup>7</sup>

Not Past. Not Future.  
Not me. Not you.  
What the fuck,  
you ask?

Not now, Walter.

séamas carraher,  
October 1, 2012 – April 10, 2015

7. “For every second of time was the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter.” Illuminations, Benjamin, Walter, 1968, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc. p. 264



“The nature of his strength, Walter Benjamin once wrote,  
is “patience, conquerable by nothing.”  
Reading this years later, I saw him again walking slowly,  
evenly along the mountain path, and the contradictions within him  
lost some of their absurdity.”

(The Story of Old Benjamin, By Lisa Fittko in The Arcades Project, Walter Benjamin,  
Translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin,  
PREPARED ON THE BASIS OF THE GERMAN VOLUME EDITED BY ROLF TIEDEMANN,  
THE BELKNAP PRESS OF HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS,  
CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS, AND LONDON, ENGLAND)

<http://www.seamascarraher.blogspot.ie/>