

Revelation At Hand: Artistic Distance, or Prophetic Sense

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Abstract: This essay draws upon the critical theory of Walter Benjamin to give an account of the nature of “prophecy” in poetry and poetic interpretation. The other primary interlocutors of the paper are Frederic Jameson, in the paper’s first half, and W.B. Yeats in its second. The first section draws upon Jameson’s writing to create an argument for why prophetic writing has fallen out of style, romantic-early modernist writing. I conclude by using Benjamin’s theories of history to point to a potential revival of this idea of prophecy, in the construction of a “re-modern” moment.

Keywords: Walter Benjamin; W.B. Yeats; Frederic Jameson; modernism; prophecy

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somewhere in sands of the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.¹

In Yeats' apocalyptic vision of the mid-war interregnum, «The best lack all conviction, while the worst/Are full of passionate intensity.»² What the poet managed was so successful that it has become obscured – a statement of prophecy. By prophecy, I mean a statement of social commentary and critique with ongoing usage beyond its immediate moment, a definition I derive from Walter Benjamin's writing on the afterlives and redemption of artworks.³ That Yeats' poem has had such an afterlife, being cited and copied in infinite contexts, speaks to its interpretive distance from the viewer.⁴ In the gap between audience and work, the critical reader becomes imbued with the ability to charge art with new, prophetic meaning.

The essay works from this assumption to first argue that the ability to perform this critical prophetic reading is dependent upon the "aureatic" distance between the viewer and the artwork, a distance which is lost in the commercial fetishization and immediacy of artworks in the Jamesonian postmodern. It will then work back to Benjamin, elucidating his account of the aura and the artwork before addressing "why" the necessary distance is lost between item and viewer. Section 2 will then

¹ - W. B. Yeats, *The Second Coming*, in *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*, Wordsworth Editions, Hertfordshire 1994, p. 159.

² - *Ibidem*.

³ - The primary essays of Benjamin with which I engage are: *On Language as Such and the Languages of Man*; *Goethe's Elective Affinities*; and *On the Concept of History*. Further reading to flesh out this conception of prophecy, upon which I drew while writing this essay: I. Balfour, *The Rhetoric of Romantic Prophecy*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2002; S. Goodheart, *Back to the Future: The Prophetic and Apocalyptic in Jewish and Christian Settings*, in *The Prophetic Law: Essays in Judaism, Girardianism, Literary Studies, and the Ethical*, Michigan State University Press, East Lansing 2014; and N. O. Brown *The Prophetic Tradition*, in «Studies in Romanticism» 21/3 (1982), pp. 367-386.

⁴ - There are too many examples to list, from Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Joan Didion's *Slouching Toward Bethlehem* to Robert Bork's *Slouching Toward Gomorrah*. This last inspired a *The Paris Review* commentary by Nick Tabor, who remarked « 'The Second Coming' may well be the most thoroughly pillaged piece of literature in English.» (*No Slouch* published April 7, 2015: <https://numerocinqmagazine.com/2011/10/14/eternal-recurrence-the-permanent-relevance-of-william-butler-yeatss-the-second-coming-essay-by-patrick-j-keane/>). My personal favorite pillaging (and the one closest to what I mean by prophetic criticism), was written by Patrick J. Keane. Cf. P. Keane, *Eternal Recurrence: The Permanent Relevance of William Butler Yeats's 'The Second Coming'*, in «Numero Cinq Magazine» 2/10 (2011).

turn to Benjamin and Yeats to address the nature of prophetic reading in cases where it can be present. The paper will conclude by drawing upon Benjamin's account of history to lay a philosophical groundwork for the potential reclamation of this form of prophetic artwork and engagement.

1. The Gyre Widens

We should begin with a conclusion: Frederic Jameson famously regards the modernist epoch as supplanted. Art is completely saturated by capital; the notion of an art set apart from the culture industry becomes inconceivable. The commodity form is indistinguishable from the artwork – works are themselves nothing over and above their status as market creations. Even the rebellious aspect of modernist art is subsumed into the system itself. There is no longer a line between “higher” and “lower” art; both are nothing besides particular fetish forms. The resistance of postmodern art to interpretation takes this further – in its immediacy there is nothing far enough away to hunt.⁵

Jameson first discusses this dynamic in relation to Warhol's *Diamond Dust Shoes*, where he refers to depthlessness as «a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense.»⁶ The superficiality in question is a “flatness,” tied to what he calls “the waning of affect.” In a postmodern context, emotion is no longer appropriate to treat in the manner of modern art – or even modern subjects, who Jameson treats as if even subjectivity itself dissolves into depthless appearance. In an alternative account, one could argue with Anna Kornbluh that there is “too much” emotion, a flattening of artwork down to affect; the result is the same, and interpretive distance is lost.⁷ Jameson thus contrasts the Warhol with a similar Van Gogh painting: «if this copiously reproduced image [the Van Gogh] is not to sink to the level of sheer decoration,» interpretive action must be taken on the part of the audience, to reconstruct it as a «symbolic act.»⁸

Meanwhile, the waned affect of *Diamond Dust Shoes* renders it a “dead object,” existing in a museum full of such things; it is encountered «with all the contingency of some inexplicable natural object.»⁹ The art is nothing over and above its objecthood; it is a mere commodity. Jameson notes that while Warhol's artwork

⁵- Cf. A. Kornbluh, *Immediacy, or the Style of Too Late Capitalism*, Verso, London 2024, pp. 5-7.

⁶- F. Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, in «New Left Review» 146 (1984), p. 60.

⁷- A. Kornbluh, *Immediacy, or the Style of Too Late Capitalism*, cit., p. 13.

⁸- F. Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, cit., p. 58.

⁹- *Ivi*, pp. 59-60.

is fully engaged with this contradiction, it lacks critique; his paintings «ought to be powerful and critical political statements» but they are not.

It is as though the external and coloured surface of things – debased and contaminated in advance by their assimilation to glossy advertising images – has been stripped away to reveal the deathly black-and-white substratum of the photographic negative which subtends them.¹⁰

Bereft deeper content, reduced to the mere flat image, the *Diamond Dust Shoes* and other pop art works are pure fetish item. As such, they do not serve an artistic end but a market purpose.

The commodity form's capture of the art-object is symptomatic of the same epoch-defining shifts to which Jameson ascribes the waning of affect. The individual self is rendered schizoid when it loses its ability to «extend its pro-tensions and re-tensions across the temporal manifold» – the subject is obliterated by its loss of footing in a real history, replaced by historicity.¹¹ «The past as 'referent' finds itself gradually bracketed and then effaced altogether, leaving us with nothing but texts.»¹² In historicity, the temporal footing which generates the subject is replaced by a simulacrum of history-images.

Jameson ties the loss of the referent to the development of capitalist technology; importantly, the ultimate root causes remain for him the structural contradictions of capital.

Consumer capitalism, far from being inconsistent with Marx's great 19th century analysis, constitutes on the contrary the purest form of capital to have yet emerged... This purer capitalism of our own time thus eliminates the enclaves of precapitalist organization it had hitherto tolerated and exploited.¹³

Postmodernism occurs as machine power enables capital to fully dominate the cultural sphere of human consciousness. The culture industry has won. Art becomes object, and cannot be defined by any sense of value beyond the monetary.¹⁴

Here Jameson follows the Frankfurt School theorists, especially Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin – it is Benjamin's writing on the "aura" of a work of art

¹⁰- *Ibidem*.

¹¹- *Ivi*, pp. 70-73.

¹²- *Ivi*, p. 66.

¹³- *Ivi*, p. 78.

¹⁴- The original deployment of the term "culture industry" can be found in T. Adorno and M. Horkheimer, *The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception*, trans. E. Jephcott, in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2002, pp. 94-136.

and its disappearance in the closing gap of “distance” between art and spectator that most closely prefigures Jameson’s tack. Benjamin’s conception of the artwork as subject to the changes of time and technology is a helpful springboard for understanding the changes in art of our time. The loss of the aura, most famously described in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* but also in the earlier *Short History of Photography*, is an articulation of the spiritual or “theological” aspect of what Jameson calls “depthlessness;” the overwhelm of the traditionally unreachable parts of the artwork by a flattening illumination, and the subsequent reduction of art to product.

Benjamin’s use of the term “aura” is complicated by the fragmentary nature of his writing on the subject; his intellectual project is difficult to approach, being not only short by his early demise, but also impacted by the unsystematic style of his writings. His dissertation on German Romantic Literary criticism provided the intellectual backdrop for a career which, despite twists toward Marxism, stayed within that disparate mode. His critical approach is thus difficult to synthesize into a single, unified project. A young Benjamin wrote the following to a friend:

Whatever its effect, poetic, prophetic, objective, I can, in general, only understand literature as magical, that is, unmediatable. Every salutary, yes, every act of writing which is not catastrophic in its innermost nature has its root in mystery (of a word, of language). Although language may appear to be effective in so many forms, it will not be so through the mediation of its content; rather it will be effective through the purest opening up of its dignity and essence. And, if I disregard other forms of its effectiveness - such as poetry and prophecy - it seems to me, over and over again, that the elimination of the unsayable in language so that language attains the purity of crystal is the form given to us and most accessible to us in order to have an effect within language and, by this means, through language...¹⁵

The origin of this approach to language, with its goal of accessing the unsayable, is to be found in the fragmentary early works of Romantic criticism, particularly Schlegel’s *Athenaeum*. The only one of Benjamin’s major works which does not adopt this literary form is the dissertation itself.¹⁶

¹⁵ - W. Benjamin, “Briefe 1”, pp. 126-127, cited in P. Lacoue-Labarthe, *Introduction to Walter Benjamin’s “The Concept of Art Criticism in German Romanticism”*, in B. Hanssen and A. Benjamin (eds.), *Walter Benjamin and Romanticism*, Continuum, London 2002, p. 12.

¹⁶ - P. Lacoue-Labarthe, *Introduction to Walter Benjamin’s “The Concept of Art Criticism in German Romanticism”*, cit., p. 12.

The fragmentary nature of Benjamin's writing should influence our approach to the aura. Benjamin's project, from its earliest appearance, is concerned with the creation of an uncertain space within the reader – the reading is itself transformational.¹⁷ This can be seen even in what Lacoue-Labarthe calls the "secret core" of the dissertation – «the senseless and orgiastic disclosure of all the secret sources of tradition which ought to have overflowed unswervingly into the whole of humanity.»¹⁸ The revelation of such a secret history, and the bringing into being of its full messianic experience in the community, is at the heart of the Benjaminian project.

Benjamin lived in a period where the full pot of history seemed to boil over – Jameson's reading of Benjamin presents us two senses in which this is true: first, immanently, Blitzkrieg panzers sweeping the Maginot Line, and secondly the more figurative "end of Marxism" in the decay of historical thinking.¹⁹ The same breakage between "history" and "historicity" Jameson posits in *Postmodernism* can be found in Benjamin's writing. What Jameson called "depthlessness," the reduction to mere fetish, is what remains of the work of art without aura. And it is key to both thinkers that their chosen term emerges from the impact of photography.

Benjamin's *Short History of Photography* refers to Eugene Atget's architectural photographs of Paris as a forerunner of surrealism – it is here that he determines aura slips totally away, «like water from a sinking ship.»²⁰ In the short history, it is very clear that the eradication of the aura is not solely the product of technological advance (though it very much is that) but also the production of a particular attitude among photographers. He attributes photographers after Atget a desire to represent every nook of reality, allowing the full light in; contrary to prior trends of photography (an artificial darkening process, which sought to maintain the aura-like qualities of limited, early photography), «he sought the forgotten and the neglected, so such pictures turn reality against the exotic, romantic, show-offish resonance of the city name.»²¹ In Atget, the photograph begins to take on the qualities and potentialities of reproduced (and reproducible) art.

17 - F. Jameson, *The Benjamin Files*, Verso, New York 2022, p. 17.

18 - P. Lacoue-Labarthe, *Introduction to Walter Benjamin's "The Concept of Art Criticism in German Romanticism"*, cit., p. 17.

19 - F. Jameson, *The Benjamin Files*, cit., 219-221.

20 - W. Benjamin, *Short History of Photography*, trans. E. Jephcott and K. Shorter, in *Selected Writings vol 2, part 2*, H. Eiland and M. W. Jennings (eds.), Belknap, Cambridge 1999, p. 518.

21 - *Ibidem*. It is worth mentioning also a quirk of this essay, which attributes the term "aura" both to something natural and to a literal halo-like element of early photography's reproductive mechanism. It is my belief that this is intended to further illustrate Benjamin's technological progression from the early photograph (an improper reproduction) to portrait photography (arti-

What is the aura, then? The aura is a strange weave of space and time: the unique appearance or semblance of distance, no matter how close it may be. While at rest on a summer's noon, to trace a range of mountains on the horizon, or a branch that throws its shadow on the observer, until the moment or the hour become part of their appearance-this is what it means to breathe the aura of those mountains, that branch.²²

Aura is that feeling which exists before the object is in the possession of the spectator. It is the extra-verbal sublime feeling of being incorporated "into" the distance between the object and the spectator; in the transient experience of the aura of a work of art, one experiences the stilling of time into the full finitude of history.

This is why losing the aura is so dangerous for Benjamin. For him, the turn from art into reproducibility is the aestheticization of politics – and from there, the descent into fascism. Fascists deny the ability of citizens to organize for their rights (as they cannot compromise the property structure of society), but the energy of the masses must still be "expressed."²³ Fascism is a release valve for this tension; it prevents a revolution from developing by channeling mass energy into political life. The aesthetic reorientation of political life, which mirrors the aura-obliterating immediacy of mass art, shares in its character. Benjamin quotes Filippo Marinetti that the "new literature and new graphic art" will be of a piece with the ultimate fascist project: war.²⁴

War is the only venture which can create a mass politics while fundamentally altering nothing of the existing superstructure. It is thus the natural end of an aestheticized politics; the only place such a politics can go is an outward expenditure of energy in an "unnatural utilization" of modern warfare – the most immediate art imaginable. «Through gas warfare» he writes, «the aura is abolished in a new way.» The immediacy of warfare satisfies the tastes of a public whose desires have been radically limited by the advancement of mechanical reproduction, a public who Benjamin noted earlier in the same essay have been thrust, half-awake,

ficially using darkness to simulate aura) to Atget (auraless, reproducible). Regardless, the relationship between the two passages seeming to attribute the aura to separate loci is an interesting problem, and one future research may wish to investigate.

²² - *Ivi*, pp. 518-519.

²³ - W. Benjamin, *Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility, 3rd Version*, trans. H. Zohn and E. Jephcott, in *Selected Writings Volume 4*, H. Eiland and M. W. Jennings (eds.), Belknap, Cambridge 2006, p. 269.

²⁴ - *Ibidem*.

into the seat previously held by the critic.²⁵ War is the ultimate aesthetic “distraction”.

The essays on aura not only precipitate the Second World War but the commercial status of wars he could not possibly have foreseen. The immediacy of the artwork will render the artwork itself totally unnecessary – once the great distance is transgressed, then eventually the artwork will be supplanted by the visceral potential of life itself, now also stripped of its aura by the flash of blood and iron. The key turn of Jamesonian postmodernism is the scattering of the individual self under the domination of hyper-speed industrial capitalism. The singular absent-mindedness of the public is supplanted by the “schizophrenic” non-individual of late capitalism, and the aesthetic warfare idealized by the fascists is turned inward to an aestheticized, conflict-riven “self.”

With art supplanted by life (and then life by the shift toward scattered interiority), the art-object is reduced to mere-object. And as an object, it is subject to commodity fetishization. Remembering Jameson’s chosen example of the *Diamond Dust Shoes*, we can see how the piece both intentionally reflects this cultural moment and is a literal product of it. A self-aware market product remains a market product. The artwork is a painting copied from a photograph – like many of Warhol’s works in this period, it is derived from a polaroid – an ironic wink to the artifice of a painting culture broken down by the immediacy of photography. The content of the picture, women’s luxury shoes, draws attention to the commodified nature of the work itself, while its main gimmick, the presence of real diamond dust in the paint turns the object into a luxury product; it is literally more valuable because of the gimmick. It also plays in contrast to Van Gogh’s depiction of working life; from Warhol can be concocted a grand story about socialites in the big city. A final twist: the painting’s sale price, in 2023, was 945,000 U.S dollars.²⁶

Inflation of the art market comes downstream of the objectification of art. Only in a world which considers paintings objects like any other could their value be inflated in this way – the painting “as painting” does not have value as such, but is reified via its objectification into a site of exchange value. This is the secret of the art market: that it has nothing to do with art as such, or even the desire of the public for art. The exchange itself dominates. The artwork is a placeholder for imagined future value, and as such is not art at all; it need not even be perceived, considering the number of paintings currently taking up warehouse space in the Swiss Freport.

²⁵ - *Ivi*, pp. 259-260.

²⁶ - A. Warhol, *Diamond Dust Shoes*, in *Christies’s*, May 23rd, 2023 <https://www.christies.com/en/lot/lot-6425004>

Hito Steyerl's account of the Freeport makes clear points regarding art's autonomy in an age of dominance by internationalized capital. A "duty free" artwork, decentralized from the previous epoch's ties of material instantiation and cultural life, is in some sense free; it seems to float above and around the physical universe in a way Benjamin's aureatic painting never could. But as Steyerl points out, this freedom is based upon a trade: instead of dependence upon persons, art becomes dependent upon a global economic system, and further the global violence which that system relies upon.²⁷ Anything can be art, because art is anything: the art is objectified, and the object is artified. And any of these objects can become pawns in the games of either investment, or (in Steyerl's example), Middle Eastern insurgencies.

As money predominates, even the independent cultural institutions surrounding visual art become reliant upon market vicissitudes to stay afloat. This is perhaps seen nowhere better than in the collaborations between museums and representatives of the fashion and music worlds, the barriers of which are increasingly broken down in the contemporary culture industry. In the last two decades, figures such as Virgil Abloh have come to bridge the gap between commercial fashion and high art, following largely from the example set by Warhol. Advocates of this trend see in the breaking down of commercial barriers a sort of democratization, of access being granted to voices traditionally outside the art world.²⁸ Abloh himself articulated this view regarding one of his own gallery installations:

In a large sense, the biggest education device in art is fashion – fashionable things. Style. Now that sort of epiphany, it's one of those blurry lines that lends a space for people to create. I think we both see this huge explosion on a highway that no one's playing in. Everyone's still in the same lane. The kids standing at Supreme, or wearing the latest fashion trend: imagine how much they've invested in their apartment, or specifically how much they've spent in their closet, cost per square inch. They could probably afford this painting!

My thought was, "It doesn't matter what sells. What matters is that it exists."²⁹ It does not matter, to Abloh, what art "is" – it matters that it takes up space in the market of exchange. The winking humor in Abloh's articulation, that the acquisition of a luxury couch can imbue one with aesthetic wisdom, is the direct result of the scattering of the late capitalist subject. As Natasha Degen writes:

²⁷ - H. Steyerl, *Duty Free Art: Art in the Age of Planetary Civil War*, Verso, London 2017, pp. 105-107.

²⁸ - N. Degen, *Art After Warhol*, Reaktion Books, London 2023, pp. 61-63.

²⁹ - D. Blasberg, *Future History: Murakami and Abloh*, in «Gagosian», 2018, <https://gagosian.com/quarterly/2018/05/01/future-history-takashi-murakami-and-virgil-abloh/>.

if fashion inculcates an aesthetic sensibility in consumers, what kind of education are its students receiving? Among the lessons of 'fashionable things': that brands are the primary signal of value; that cultural goods should be seen above all as assets; that rarity is important, although a certain volume of production helps generate buzz; that consumption is a form of community building; and that critique is a kind of spoiler [...] They essentially act as expensive jokes that affirm the consumer's cultural conversancy.³⁰

The cultural institution of the museum has become a site of exchange, forced to do so by the pressures of mass society's new relationship to art.

Abloh called Duchamp his "lawyer."³¹ The notion of the readymade, and the pop-art that followed it, laid the groundwork of the following decades. It is as Benjamin remarked upon Dada: while considering Dada as the forerunner of film, he remarked that art of the present moment can "make demands" only to be satisfied by future development. In the case of Dada, this is its immediacy – the inability to take time for contemplation like one would before a high modernist work, a demand which would be fulfilled by the rapid-fire changes of image in film. In the case of Duchamp and Abloh, this is the readymade: the "mediumistic" role of the artist in transforming «inert matter into a work of art.»³² Duchamp's readymade is the most obvious early articulation of the status of art after objectification, and its demand reaches fulfillment in the artification of the object, the fulfillment of the postmodern promise – economic products in the art space.

But the demand of the current moment to flatten and objectify artistic products cannot be resisted by simple identification. Toward the end of her recent book on the topic, Kornbluh makes the case for criticism itself reinforcing immediacy; the descent of critique into "realism as reading practice" embodied in post-critique and autotheory leads to a critical body which only reinforces immediacy, and renegees its traditional duty toward social criticism.³³ This is a hard trap to avoid, in part because so many of our products are made to be read only immediately. When a piece by Abloh or (in Kornbluh's favorite example) a book by Knausgaard intentionally lacks distance, critique too can only be immanent.³⁴ As such, I will attempt for the remainder of this essay to return to art with distance, in the form of Yeats'

³⁰ - N. Degen, *Art After Warhol*, cit., p. 68.

³¹ - *Ibidem*.

³² - M. Duchamp, *The Creative Act*, in *The Essential Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, M. Sanouliet and E. Peterson (eds.), Thames and Hudson, London 1975, p. 140.

³³ - A. Kornbluh, *Immediacy, or the Style of Too Late Capitalism*, cit., p. 173.

³⁴ - *Ibidem*. Kornbluh's treatment of Knausgaard forms the heart of her book, as her counter-rejection of his rejection of fiction makes him the primary representative and theorist of "immediacy" as she understands it.

poetry and Benjamin's criticism, to carve a space for reading as prophetic practice against contemporary immediacy – side-stepping immediacy into a temporal distance, which can then be weaponized as critique in the prophetic mode.³⁵

2. The Hour Comes at Last

In his later years, Yeats can be seen in photographs staring off beyond the camera, toward some distance the viewer cannot perceive. Then, in January 1939, he slipped off into that distance – two days after the Francoists took Barcelona. As Auden would write a month later, «he became his admirers» – Yeats was swallowed up by the world of his readership. He no longer belonged to himself, but first to the Irish nation and then to the world. «The words of a dead man are modified in the guts of the living.»³⁶ The infinite distance between the departed poet and the eternally present audience is filled by the work. The extant work is eternally open to reinterpretation by the audience, creating the artwork's legacy (a fraught interpretive category for Benjamin).³⁷ This afterlife includes the eternal adoption and re-adoption of his poetry as social commentary – the prophetic role of poetry.³⁸

Yeats held that mystically accessible truth was the origin point of poetry, *not* the imagination – the imago creates nothing alone, but instead interprets revela-

³⁵ - In this, I owe much to Billy Childish and Charles Thompson, with their conception of "Re-Modernism" in the manifesto *Remodernism* and the earlier *Stuckist Manifesto*, both of which can be accessed for free at www.stuckism.com.

³⁶ - W. H. Auden, *In Memory of W. B. Yeats*, in Poets.org, <https://poets.org/poem/memory-w-b-yeats>

³⁷ - W. Benjamin, *Goethe's Elective Affinities*, trans. S. Corngold, in *Selected Writings Volume 1*, M. Bullock and M. W. Jennings (eds.), Belknap, Cambridge 1996, pp. 321-323.

³⁸ - In Harold Bloom's words, «after death, we become all imagination.» In Yeats' system, this is tied closely to the propensity of the spirit to return to the archetypal realm from which poetic inspiration comes. The eventual unity of the poet's soul to God acts to render the poet also one with the muses, and influence that reading, while simultaneously the work of the audience (in this case, later poets adopting the symbolism and language of dead poets is interpretive. Bloom points out that Yeats used Shelley and Blake in such a manner). Cf. H. Bloom, *The Dead and History*, in *Yeats*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1970, pp. 262-292. Cf. S. Vannini, *Echoes of the Ancestors: Literary Reverberations in Yeats' 'The Second Coming'*, in «The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies» 25/1-2 (1999), pp. 323-336.

tion.³⁹ Yeats considered mystical tradition as a very real and accessible truth; one of his final poems, *Under Ben Bulbin*, addresses this central role of the imagination and art:

Quattrocento put in paint,
On backgrounds for a God or Saint,
Gardens where a soul's at ease;
Where everything that meets the eye
Flowers and grass and cloudless sky
Resemble forms that are, or seem
When sleepers wake and yet still dream,
And when it's vanished still declare,
With only bed and bedstead there,
That Heavens had opened.

Gyres run on;
When that greater dream had gone
Calvert and Wilson, Blake and Claude
Prepared a rest for the people of God,
Palmer's phrase, but after that
Confusion fell upon our thought.⁴⁰

Note the return of the "gyre" from *The Second Coming* (written 18 years prior). The whirlwind was about to split open across the center of Europe.⁴¹ This is the Yeats who Auden both deeply admired and could never reconcile himself to. Yeats, older than the rest of the major English-language modernists, held stronger than any of the others to the romantic impulse. Auden's reception of Yeats, exposed by his appropriation of poetic motifs from *Under Ben Bulbin* in both *In Memory of W.B. Yeats* and his World War II poem, *September 1st, 1939*, was always ambivalent.⁴² It had to be – Auden's eventual rejection of the latter poem from his collected

³⁹ - Cf. K. Raine, *From Blake to "A Vision"*, in *Yeats the Initiate: Essays on Certain Themes in the Work of W.B. Yeats*, Barnes and Noble Books, Savage 1990, pp. 106-176.

⁴⁰ - W. B. Yeats, *Under Ben Bulbin*, in *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*, cit., p. 303.

⁴¹ - Look also to Yeats' poem *The Gyres* (*Collected Poems*, p. 249) and the discussion of gyres in *A Vision*. Notably, in the former, the mysterious cry of "rejoice!" echoes not from the gyre itself, but from a hidden seaside cave (echoing a common hermetic image of prophecy found in caves, dating at least back to Parmenides). Cf. N. A. Jeffares, *Yeats 'The Gyres': Sources and Symbolism*, in «Huntingdon Library Quarterly» 15/1 (1951), pp. 87-97.

⁴² - Cf. G. Kruzhkov, *Once More on a Discarded Poem*, in «New Hibernia Review» 19/2 (2015), pp. 132-133, 140-141.

works can be taken as the decisive moment his anti-romantic views win out.⁴³ If a writer were interested in defining epochs by the lives of individuals, they could make this the moment modernist writing and philosophy fully supplants the romantic; in 1939, Yeats died, and the blitzkrieg was born. That the last champion of English romantic verse died the same year as the material conditions were laid for the post-war flowering of high modernism might strike one as "poetic."

Benjamin noted, «Wasn't it noticeable at the end of the war that men who returned from the battlefield had grown silent-not richer but poorer in communicable experience?»⁴⁴ Art in the sense by which Benjamin means "storytelling" can only exist in the presence of a developed (but not over-developed) subject, one which the onset of modernity scattered. Recalling Jameson for a moment, we can return now to the thought that post-modernism is not necessarily defined by its opposition to modernism, but is better thought of as modernism's decay. The roots of the contemporary situation in art can be found in the dialectical attempt to turn away from romantic impulse in art. It is the demythologizing impulse of the modern which creates an inability in the subject to solidify.

Myth, for Yeats, hangs in the idealistic ether, waiting for an embodiment by entry into mental life.⁴⁵ He feared that modernist works such as *Ulysses* might explode such mythic ideas into the real in a way unmediated by sagely structures of prior ages. He depicts this in *The Second Coming* as the "rough beast, slouching toward Bethlehem to be born."⁴⁶ Yeats feared that the collapse of mythic sensibility would lead to a loss of something essentially human.⁴⁷ In Benjamin, we find this same awareness. Benjamin's already discussed ambivalence toward photography, and his account of the arrival of the novel in *The Storyteller* both contain a reverence for the expansive sensations of traditional forms – and while they lack the explicitly mystical frame of Yeats, such a turn would arrive in the final major work of Benjamin's life, the *Theses on History*. In the *Theses*, the prophetic mode reap-

⁴³ - *Ivi*, p. 135.

⁴⁴ - W. Benjamin, *The Storyteller*, trans. H. Zohn, in *Selected Writings Volume 3*, H. Eiland and M. W. Jennings (eds.), Belknap, Cambridge 2002, p. 144.

⁴⁵ - D. Donoghue, *Yeats, Eliot, and the Mystical Method*, in «the Sewanee Review» 105/2 (1997), pp. 212-214; Donoghue immediately follows his explication by giving an example from Yeats' poem *Beautiful Lofty Things* (*Collected Poems*, p. 258) in which Maud Gonno, constantly represented by mythical figures, shifts from her own form (mentioned by name in one of Yeats' poems for the first time) into that of "Pallas Athene."

⁴⁶ - W. B. Yeats, *The Second Coming*, in *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*, cit., p. 159.

⁴⁷ - «Among the modern writers Pirandello, Pound, Eliot, and Joyce were much on Yeats's mind when he pondered this theme. These writers exhibit the fracture of an earlier unity of consciousness. In them 'there is hatred of the abstract [...] the intellect turns upon itself.» D. Donoghue, *Yeats, Eliot, and the Mystical Method*, cit., p. 213.

pears in the guise of political philosophy, and further the understanding of history as shattered, repetitive monads creates an understanding of the past in which it can always be reappropriated to the present.⁴⁸ In both Benjamin and Yeats we find a cynical view of the present, but a cynicism coupled with the presence of poetic-critical potential in art.⁴⁹

Jameson interprets the famed images of the chess-playing dwarf and the Angel of History as representations of Benjamin himself – blown about on the winds of history, sitting as a shriveled theologian within the metal shell called Marxism.⁵⁰ Certainly, Benjamin's circumstances were as catastrophic as the winds that knock the Angel backward out of paradise. The catastrophic view of history originates from a chronological view of time. Instead, he puts forward, we should see events as monads situated in history, which we gain and lose access to not chronologically, but through material conditions. The Paris Commune was such a monad; one that made a demand of history which would be fulfilled in the moment Lenin's Soviets regained access to it, from its historical distance. «All the revolutions in history, in other words, have been failures; each of them seemed to posit an 'infinite task' and to demand completion by some future fulfillment.»⁵¹ Within this apparent pessimism, however, hides an optimism: every revolution fails, but it can be taken as prophecy for what is to come.

Thesis VI discusses this most directly, with its indication that a tradition can be lost to conformity; directly before, thesis V states that the forgotten moment can slip away forever, indicating a connection between this loss and Weimar social democracy's failure to prevent fascism. When tradition is allowed to fall into conformity, it will be used as a cudgel. «*Even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious.»⁵² Auden's appropriation of Yeats, and the wider modern attempt to outrun its own romantic origins, is the beginnings of such a victory: Auden, on some level, feared both Yeats hermeticism and his predilection for nationalism, and especially feared their political re-

⁴⁸ - M. Löwy, *Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin's On the Concept of History*, trans. C. Turner, Verso, London 2005, pp. 5-7.

⁴⁹ - Marjorie Perloff remarks on this at the conclusion of her essay on *The Wild Swans of Coole*; M. Perloff, *From Beckett to Yeats in Infrathin: An Experiment in Micropoetics*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2021, pp. 230-231. Meanwhile, Benjamin takes up similar themes in the Goethe essay.

⁵⁰ - F. Jameson, *The Benjamin Files*, cit., pp. 220-221.

⁵¹ - *Ivi*, p. 235.

⁵² - W. Benjamin, *On the Concept of History*, trans. H. Zohn, in *Selected Writings Volume 4*, cit., p. 391.

sults.⁵³ Yeats was friend to both Eoin O’Duffy and Ezra Pound – to whom the opening passage of *A Vision* is addressed. There is an open question in this of what degree prophetic reasoning and reinterpretation naturally serves any particular end – politics of liberation do not necessarily have a singular claim on prophetic speech, just as a work has no particular belonging to its own period, and can be repurposed for a later one.⁵⁴

Benjamin is once again helpful here. Returning to his writing on language, we can find in him not only an account of language’s fragmentation but its temporal limitation. «Language,» he wrote in one fragment, «is merely a transitional phrase within the entire life cycle» of a word’s pure meaning.⁵⁵ The underlying feeling, or divine content of a word cannot be expressed in human language or objects, due to humanity’s limited, fallen character.⁵⁶ For Benjamin, this extends to revelation itself, of which he is skeptical; the divine mind which seeks to express itself in revelation must do so through language, and language’s tie to sound renders it imperfect.⁵⁷ As pure expression is impossible in language, even the Bible itself is only of initial importance, being bound to the time and place of its origin.⁵⁸

Acknowledging Revelation is never permanent, we are forced to reckon with the fact that all prior revelation is a factor of a historical moment in which it was created. And yet, those historical moments also created our own time – and still exist. This lends a deeply charged atmosphere to Benjamin’s writing on history, and even to his citational practice. Ian Balfour writes that

That Benjamin conceives of language, history, translation, and critique all in terms of completion, fulfillment, redemption, and even the Messianic indicates the pivotal role the prophetic plays in virtually every sphere of his thought. Prophecy emerges as a model and not a special case for the historian and critic, be-

⁵³ - G. Kruzhkov, *Once More on a Discarded Poem*, cit., pp. 140-141.

⁵⁴ - Cf. D. Rudrum, *Slouching Toward Bethlehem: Yeats, Eliot, and the Modernist Apocalypse, in Ecstasy and Understanding: Religious Awareness in English Poetry from the Late Victorian to the Modern Period*, Continuum, London 2008, pp. 60-61. For a further application of Benjamin’s political critique to this point, one can look to his criticisms of Martin Buber’s political activities and writing. Cf. A. Wycoff, *Between Prophecy and Apocalypse: Buber, Benjamin, and Socialist Eschatology*, in «Political Theory» 49/3 (2021), pp. 354-379.

⁵⁵ - W. Benjamin, *Language in Trauerspiel and Tragedy*, in *Selected Writings Volume 1*, cit., p. 60.

⁵⁶ - W. Benjamin, *On Language as Such and the Languages of Man*, trans. E. Jephcott, in *Selected Writings Volume 1*, cit., p. 68.

⁵⁷ - *Ibidem*.

⁵⁸ - *Ibidem*.

cause every text, every event that is cited attains, if only retroactively, a prophetic aura.⁵⁹

By this reading of Benjamin, the prophetic is not proclamation of the future, but of the "present." It is by prophetic citation of the past that the present can be explained, and not only made clear but properly politicized. The present, as we experience it, is always ahead of commentary; the prophetic project is the not attempt to make claims on what is to come, but what is happening now. The "weak" Messianic mode is misunderstood, if it is described as a claim to describe what is to come. For Benjamin, "the present is the future." «The Messianic is a figure for an end, for Benjamin,» and the world is always ending.⁶⁰ There is an element of the eschaton in every passing moment.

The role of art is as constant reflection of monadic time; this is why Baudelaire, and the rest of Benjamin's personal canon, can impact his contemporary. In his final note on soothsaying, the past is "experienced" in remembrance; it is not a pure image of the forgone but a phenomenal experience simultaneous to the contemporary. The past is endless catastrophe, while the future is a pregnant non-place.⁶¹ It exists beyond any perceptible vision – it is the place from which the present comes as a wind blown out of paradise, and from which the Messiah could arrive. As Jameson describes it, «a pure present, on the threshold of the future honoring it by averted eyes in meditation on the past.»⁶² The current moment is always becoming, from a catastrophic past to a future which could always be made new. «There is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism» but these documents lay the groundwork for the potential upsurge of a coming utopia.⁶³

Benjamin's apocalypticism points to tension between present and past, with the potential future hanging about in dialectical contrast to what precedes it. The relationship of this constant apocalypse to art appears in his quotations and references to his friends Brecht and Klee. The quotation from *Threepenny Opera* which heads Thesis VII, an invitation into the dark and the cold, serves as an invitation (via verse and the stage) to the lifeworlds of the oppressed. This is what art becomes: an invitation. Recall, from *The Storyteller*, how he addresses the difference between the storyteller and the novelist – the listener to the former sits in direct

⁵⁹- I. Balfour, *Rhetoric of Romantic Prophecy*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2002, p. 18.

⁶⁰- *Ibidem*.

⁶¹- There is a similar sense of apocalyptic history in Yeats. Cf. G. Watson, *Yeats' View of History: The Contemplation of Ruin*, in «The Maynooth Review» 2/2 (1976), pp. 27-46.

⁶²- F. Jameson, *Walter Benjamin, or Nostalgia*, in «Salmagundi» 10/11 (1969), p. 68.

⁶³- W. Benjamin, *On the Concept of History*, cit., p. 392.

company, and lives with him, the reader of the latter remains solitary and lives through the character.⁶⁴

There is thus a further turn in aesthetic interpretation. Not only is there the creation of a work, but a temporal and spatial place between the work and the audience. This is what immediacy in its contemporary sense renders impossible. When the audience is immediately handed a meaning, instead of creating the meaning through interpretation, prophetic sensibility becomes a moot point, and the artwork is disenchanting of its potential. Art as commercial product is damaging not only to the artwork itself but to the audience as well. As it cannot create a distinct temporal and spatial distance from the viewer, it cannot speak. The immediate artwork has no voice, and the audience takes nothing away. In immediacy, there is nothing to understand. As Benjamin wrote regarding Disney cartoons, «in these films, mankind makes preparations to survive civilization.»⁶⁵ The immediately accessible artwork shoves off the real bedrock of human culture, which is the prophetic authority granted to a critique which both understands and recreates its subject.

In *The Storyteller*, Benjamin associates this authority with death; the removal of death from modern life is the end of storytelling.

Just as a sequence of images is set in motion inside a man as his life comes to an end—unfolding the views of himself in which he has encountered himself without being aware of it—suddenly in his expressions and looks the unforgettable emerges, and imparts to everything that concerned him that authority which even the poorest wretch in the act of dying possesses for the living around him. This authority lies at the very origin of the story.⁶⁶

I am tempted to think of Yeats, writing *Under Ben Bulbin*, Long distances between the living and the dead, or between the past and the yet-to-come, are caught in a welling-up, a becoming that in its arrival and passing away creates a *now*: a mystical time that is here, but may as well be no time at all. It is only in the creation of a distance that truth can be perceived. In the story, as in the artwork or poem, the prophetic thrives by standing apart, as what Benjamin once called a «voice from another world,» standing in the gap, pontificating from above.⁶⁷ To have any potential future, we must create a distance and depth to the present. Only such

⁶⁴ - W. Benjamin, *The Storyteller*, cit., pp. 73-74.

⁶⁵ - W. Benjamin, *Mickey Mouse*, trans. R. Livingstone, in *Selected Writings Volume 2*, H. Eiland and M. W. Jennings (eds.), Belknap, Cambridge 1999, p. 545.

⁶⁶ - W. Benjamin, *The Storyteller*, cit., p. 151.

⁶⁷ - W. Benjamin, *Program for a Proletarian Children's Theatre*, in *Selected Writings Volume 3*, cit., p. 204.

commentary, which stands far away and abstracted from the world of its creation, can be made into prophecy by its critical reception.

Section 1 theorized our moment as post-modern. It laid out a genealogy of the arrival of the post-modern, and a theoretical history of artistic practice in post-war capitalism. But what I have theorized in section 2 is the eternal potential of a new history, from which the remnants of beauty can be snatched out from under the shadow of defeat. This second theorization, arguing for the recontextualization and re-reading of old texts as new prophecy, allows for the readoption of old forms into new futures; a “re-modernism.” This term, introduced by artists Charles Thompson and Billy Childish, will be the basis of further work on the spiritualization of the art object. But for now, this paper must conclude on the hope that the conception of art as mystical expression is not gone, and the loss of the poetic in immediacy is not permanent; if distance can be regained between mythological past and future, we may speak of prophecy again.

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