Undone:
Benjamin and the Future of the Past

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> This only is denied even to God, the power to undo what has been done –
> Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*.[1]

In the solemn aftermath of Charles Lindbergh's historic solo flight across the Atlantic, Walter Benjamin indulged himself in what he calls the 'arabesque of a joke'. To re-tell the punchline here: Benjamin relates that, on Lindbergh's arrival in Paris on 10 May 1927 someone telephoned all the newspapers with the 'news' that the École Normale Supérieure had decided to bestow upon the great aviator the honour of being 'a former student'. Yet, it seems that all the city newspaper editors were taken in by the hoax: a Lindbergh lookalike was paraded for photographers, the story was written up as fact and the aviator became, fleetingly, a Normalien. This self-declared arabesque of a joke – an 'arabesque' is a pose in Ballet in which one leg is extended backwards at right angles, the torso bent forwards, and the arms outstretched, one forwards and one backwards – was not only a joke, though, because it, too, extended forwards and backwards into time. In Benjamin's words, this new act of re-writing the past was actually the secular conclusion of a much older theological project:

> Among the medieval Scholastics, there was a school that described God's omnipotence by saying: He could alter even the past, unmake what had really happened, and make real what had never happened. As we can see, in the case of enlightened newspaper editors, God is not needed for this task; a bureaucrat is all that is required.[2]

To be sure, Benjamin is clearly recalling here a – today rather obscure and almost eccentric –theological debate in the Middle Ages about God's power. It turned on the classic question of whether God have the power do absolutely anything He wants or is He in some way bound by the laws of nature, physics or even his prior decisions. According to the medieval theologian Peter Damiani (1007-72), who is arguably the most extreme spokesperson for the doctrine of divine omnipotence, God's absolute power over his creation finds its best expression in the apparently fixed order of the past. For Damiani, to recall his most famous or notorious claim, 'God has power to restore virginity to any woman no matter how many times she has been married, and to renew in her the seal of integrity, just as she was when taken from her mother's womb'.[3] If Benjamin never comments on this debate about divine omnipotence

anywhere else in his work, it could be argued that – for all the vast differences between them – his philosophy of history re-activates its defining theme, namely, the real redemption of the past. In one sense, Benjamin's famous claim that the past still holds a 'weak messianic power [*Kraft*]' over the present might be read as a historical materialist re-constellation of Damiani's own idea of the past as a theatre for the exercise of divine power.[4]

This article is a set of notes towards a new genealogy of Benjamin's philosophy of history from its beginnings in the 'Theologico-Political Fragment' (1921) through to its most complete formulation in the 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' (1941). It seeks, in particular, to explore the origins of a notoriously obscure claim that Benjamin makes in his Second Thesis: 'happiness', he writes, 'exists only in the air we have breathed, among people we could have talked to, women who could have given themselves to us' ('Theses', p. 254). To risk stating the obvious, Benjamin's theory of what he calls *Glück* – happiness, happenstance, chance – is one of the most cryptic aspects of his thought because, as he describes it, it seems to consist primarily in memories of experiences that *never* actually happened: people who could have been our friends or lovers but were not. If such virtual 'experiences' never took place, Benjamin insists that they somehow still exist in the present and are capable of being redeemed – brought back or retrieved – in the future. In what follows, I will seek to argue that the origins of Benjamin's theory of happiness lie in an experimental synthesis of theology (divine omnipotence; messianism; redemption), psychoanalysis (involuntary memory, trauma, repression) and cosmological materialisms (eternal recurrence, constellation, shock) and which produces something we might paradoxically call a 'political theology' of psychoanalysis. What, then, are the roots of Benjamin's philosophy of history? How, if at all, can we reconcile the classic messianic and materialist antinomies of his thought? Finally, what happens if we take absolutely literally – and not merely figuratively or imagistically – Benjamin's strange proposition that it is possible to undo what has been done?

1: Undone

In a discussion with Desiderius, Rector of the Abbey of Monte Cassino, sometime around 1065, the Benedictine monk Peter Damiani was asked whether he thought God could restore the virginity of a fallen woman. It was no idle speculation but a question that brought back to life a long theological debate about the limits of divine omnipotence. As Damiani well knew, it had already been answered centuries earlier by a distinguished theologian: 'I dare say although God can do all things', Jerome argued, 'he cannot raise up a virgin after her fall'.[5] However, if Jerome was willing to place limits upon divine power – and undoing what has been done is something even God cannot do – Peter staunchly defended divine omnipotence. To unpack the argument of his letter to Desiderius, 'On Divine Omnipotence in the Restoration of

What is Destroyed and Undoing What is Done', Damiani's God has the power to act outside of the laws of nature despite – or *because* of – the fact that He himself has created those laws: 'he who brought nature into being, at will easily abrogates the necessity of nature' ('On Divine Omnipotence', p. 370). For Peter, God's omnipotence even or especially extends into what is apparently the most irrevocable order of all: the past. If God is not subject to time, if He exists in an eternal now outside past, present and future, if His power cannot diminish or increase with the passage of time, then 'God can cause things that have happened, not to have happened' (p. 383). This is why we can say without absurdity that He can unmake what has been made: 'we also say that God has the power after Rome was founded that it be non-founded (p. 382). In this way, Damiani concludes that Desiderius' question could be answered with an emphatic 'yes': 'the omnipotent God has power to restore virginity to any woman, no matter how many times she has been married, and to renew in her the seal of integrity, just as she was when taken from her mother's womb' (p. 353).[6] What is at stake in the debate around divine omnipotence?

To be sure, Peter Damiani's hyperbolic apology for God's absolute power is – for all its audacity – arguably just an extension of the classic Christian doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. It seems entirely logical at first glance to argue that, as well as the power to create something out of nothing, God possesses the equal and opposite power of what John D. Caputo nicely calls *reductio ad nihilum*: to return something to nothing, to annihilate.[7] At the same time, though, Damiani's God also constitutes the beginning of a famous debate within medieval theology between the competing demands of necessity and contingency that will persist for more than 200 years. For Damiani, God's absolute power over his creation is purchased at the cost of divesting the created order of any necessary rational or natural structure of its own and consigning it to a state of total contingency. In 'On Divine Omnipotence', Damiani confronts us with a state of exception in which the natural, rational and logical order is subject to the seemingly arbitrary will of a God who may interrupt, reconstitute or annihilate it at any moment: 'he who created nature has power to change the natural order as he pleases; and while ordaining that all created things should be subject to the dominion of nature, reserved to the dominion of his own power the obedience of a compliant nature' (pp. 370-1).

It quickly became clear that Damiani's disturbingly radical solution to the ancient aporia of necessity and contingency – God's power is not obliged to, or constrained by, the world He has created but can change it any point – was tantamount to a kind of divine anarchism or even gnosticism from the perspective of the Christian Aristotelian theology of the 12th century. As a means of reconciling Greek necessity with Christian contingency, Scholastic theology devised the famous distinction between God's absolute power (*de potentia absoluta*) and His ordained power (*de potentia ordinata*): God has the power to do whatever He wills but he freely limits himself to act in accordance with what he has already ordained. [8] To put it simply, God could have created any world he wanted – or not created it all – but the fact is

that He chose to create the world as it is, and so will He will not change it. If Scholastic theology obviously does not wish to return to the pagan universe of Aristotelian necessitarianism – creation remains the product of an original divine decision – it does seek to contain God's absolute power within the realm of hypothetical, counter-factual possibility: it refers to what could have happened, but did not, because He decided otherwise. This attempt to bind God to His prior decisions also restores a certain immanent, rational even 'economic'[9] order to creation as the product of divine ordination. For Thomas Aquinas (1225-74), God may well possess the absolute power to restore the virginity of a fallen women but this act would be contrary to the laws of nature that He himself has already ordained. In Aquinas' account, God's power is not demonstrated in his capacity to do 'incomprehensible or unimaginable things, e.g. to make the past not to have been' – and so Peter's hypothetical fallen woman must remain forever fallen: 'God can remove all corruption of the mind and body from a woman who has fallen; but the fact that she had been corrupt cannot be removed from her'.[10]

For the Nominalists of the later Middle Ages, however, God's absolute power could never be constrained by the chains of his ordained power. It is not necessary here to rehearse the general implications of the Nominalist Revolution for the kind of Christian Aristotelianism promulgated by Thomist theology – the move from realism to empiricism, from universals to singularities and so on – to observe the extent to which it offers an (albeit qualified) rehabilitation of Damiani's God.[11] As Michael Gillespie observes, Duns Scotus (1266-1308) and William of Ockham (1287-1347) restore God to his original sovereign power after Thomism's attempt to bind Him to his prior decisions: 'omnipotence means the supremacy of God's *potentia absoluta* over His *potentia ordinata*'.[12] Yet, revealingly, it is again the past – as the supposed last refuge of necessity in being – that becomes the arena in which the theological battle over divine power is joined. To Damiani's classic question 'Can God make things otherwise than he has ordered them to be made?', for instance, Scotus answers an emphatic 'yes': God's absolute power does not describe a merely hypothetical realm of possibility – which could have been realized in the past, but was not, and now never will be – but a real capacity that He can actualize at any given moment.[13] If the original Scholastic distinction between absolute and ordained power was never intended to describe a field of divine action – God chose to create this world, and once He made that choice, as we have seen, He would never reverse it – Scotus' so-called theory of 'synchronic contingency' re-inscribes divine *potentia absoluta* as a field of present agency: God retains the power to make things otherwise than He ordered them to be made at any point whatsoever. In this radical operationalization of God's absolute power, Scotus renders creation itself absolutely contingent for both divine and human alike: any given state of affairs is accompanied – not merely in an earlier or later moment but at *every* moment – by the simultaneous logical and real possibility that it could be otherwise.

In re-asserting God's real power to re-make – or even unmake – what He has already made, Duns Scotus gives new life to Damiani's original thought experiment. It is possible to find one more – albeit highly specialized – recuperation of divine omnipotence over the past in William of Ockham's treatise *On Predestination and God's Foreknowledge with respect to Future Contingents.*[14] As is well-documented, this treatise is an attempt to solve the classic problem of theological fatalism: how can humans be free agents if God always already knows everything that is going to happen to them? To square the circle between freedom and determinacy, Ockham invents a distinction between what Nelson Pike famously calls 'hard' and 'soft' facts about the past: a hard fact is one which solely concerns the past (e.g. 'John went to London yesterday') whereas a soft fact is one whose factuality is conditional upon some future event taking place (e.g. 'Jane will go to Paris tomorrow').[15] If God's foreknowledge of the future must be considered a soft fact – insofar as it obviously concerns things that have not happened yet – this means that its factuality does not necessarily exclude the operation of human agency or natural contingency before the event takes place: Jane may well decide to go to Berlin instead tomorrow, not Paris, or something completely unforeseen could happen which means she can't go anywhere at all. For Ockhamists, God's past foreknowledge (as soft fact) would not be negated or contradicted by this future contingency – as if God had somehow been proved 'wrong' or we had succeeded in changing God's belief – but rather this contingency retroactively transforms what we understand God's foreknowledge to be: we have determined through our own agency what the past really was like. In positing this special category of the past – open, contingent and future-oriented rather than closed, necessary and past-dependent – Ockham thus accedes to at least the bare logical possibility that the past can be 'changed' by the future: certain past 'facts' could become radically counterfactual if the future contingencies to which they refer take place otherwise than predicted.

What does Peter Damiani's thought experiment bequeath to political theology? It is now widely recognized that this new activist paradigm of God's absolute power as entirely unbound by and irreducible to ordained power was translated, whether rightly or wrongly, into a paradigm of political power within both the ecclesiastical and civil orders in the Middle Ages. As Courtenay observes, the Pope famously possessed 'plenitude of power (*plenitudo potestatis*) through which he could, on an individual basis, temporarily suspend or alter particular, lesser laws through dispensations or privileges for the common good of the church at large (the *ratio ecclesiae*)' (*Capacity and Volition*, p. 92). To turn to modern political theory, Peter Damiani's apology for divine power also constitutes something close to the theological origin of sovereign exceptionality: Carl Schmitt's *Political Theology* (1922) compares the omnipotent God to the omnipotent lawgiver and his *Constitutional Theory* (1928) specifically draws an analogy between the medieval theological concept of God's *potentia absoluta* and political constitution-making power.[16] Perhaps Benjamin's own 'Critique of Violence' (1921) – for all its difference from Schmitt – does not escape this history: his distinctions between justice and law,

between law-making violence and law-preserving violence between mythic violence and divine violence could equally be read as a 'cryptotheological' re-activation of the opposition between absolute and ordained power.[17] If all this has already been well-documented, though, I want to propose that Damiani's real (poisonous) gift to political theology is what Caputo calls that curious power of *reductio ad nihilum* – the sovereign capacity to render worlds uncreated, cities like Rome unfounded, lives unlived. For me, Damiani's God is sovereign not merely over life and death but over something I want to call *unbearable life*: He places the subject in an original state of exception where its very existence becomes a question of sovereign decision.[18] In order to reinforce this point, I want to consider one final disturbing counter-factual possibility that arises from Damiani's famous thought experiment about the fallen women restored to virginity that (to my knowledge) has never been entertained by any of the theologian's commentators. What if the woman who lost her virginity had gotten pregnant? What if she already has a child at the moment God decides to restore her virginity? What will happen to that child after God decides she never lost her virginity in the first place – will it continue to exist as a kind of miraculous virgin birth or will it simply disappear into the void of unbearable life?

2: Unlived

In Benjamin's philosophy of history, I want to argue that we encounter a curious historical materialist recapitulation (*Wieder-holung,* bringing back) of this medieval theological debate about divine power. [19] It may be relevant here that the writing of the 'Theologico-Political Fragment' – which Gershom Scholem dates to 1920-1 – coincides with the period of its author's deepest immersion in scholastic theology: Benjamin's (later abandoned) plan for a Habilitationsschrift in 1920 focused on a reading of Duns Scotus on language. To be sure, Benjamin's theory of the redemption of history has many plausible origins –Proust, Baudelaire, the Christian idea of *apokatastasis* or the Judaic *tikkun* – but I want to propose here that it can also be read as a profane or immanent re-writing of the concept of divine omnipotence over the past: a divine power 'from below'.[20] If Peter Damiani insists upon God's power to change the past. Benjamin famously assigns to the present generation what we will see to be an equivalent weak messianic capacity to short-circuit the teleological progression of time from past to present – as well as the ontological progression of being from the potential to the actual – by synchronically actualizing real but virtual alternative potentialities that lie unrealized in history. This attempt to redeem what we might call the originary 'potentiality' of the past – to restore the totality of possibilities life originally promises us but cannot in its natural finitude deliver upon – also immanently re-activates the idea of the past as a contingent field of force for the operation of (albeit human rather than divine) power. In reading Benjamin's historical materialism in this ancient theological context, I want to argue that we can also begin to make sense of one what I have suggested is one of its most essential –

yet still most enigmatic – tasks. Why does Benjamin insist that what is called happiness in the past is not simply the dead, the forgotten or the oppressed but rather what was *never* lived?

To answer this question, I want to focus on Benjamin's famous series of late aphorisms which were published as the 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' (1941). It is, of course, the over-arching objective of the Theses to overcome what they see as the twin fatalism of both the vulgar naturalist theory of historicism and the social democratic idea of progress which leaves them in thrall to the idea of a linear progression of 'homogeneous, empty time' from past to future ('Theses', p. 254). For Benjamin, the Theses famously propose that the true task of the historical materialist is not to recuperate the past 'as it really was' but rather just the opposite: what must be redeemed from the past is not what once existed for us, so that it may exist once again in the present, but rather what *never* existed in the first place. If the past really is as contingent as the future – in the sense that it contains a permanent excess over its own determined actualization as historical past – then the true litmus test of this thought experiment is the power to re-live a past that was wholly *unlived*. In the Second Thesis, Benjamin makes absolutely clear that what his philosophy seeks to redeem is an original state of happiness that *never was*:

> Reflection shows us that our image of happiness [*Gluck*] is thoroughly coloured by the time to which the course of our own existence has assigned us. The kind of happiness that could arouse envy in us exists only in the air we have breathed, among people we could have talked to, women who could have given themselves to us. In other words, our image of happiness is indissolubly bound up with the image of redemption. The same applies to our view of the past, which is the concern of history. The past carries with it a temporal index by which it is referred to redemption. There is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one. Our coming was expected on earth. Like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a weak Messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim ('Theses', p. 254).

It is clear even in this notoriously obscure passage that what we envy is not simply a past that was once really present and is now not – the past of lost causes, oppressed classes or forgotten barbarism that official history occludes – but an *absolute* past that was never present in the first place. As Benjamin describes it, *Gluck* – and we should perhaps hear the alternative meaning of 'chance' or 'happenstance' here too – is a political affect that exists only in the counter-factual past of contingent possibilities that were never, in reality, lived by us: 'the air we have breathed', 'people we could have talked to' and 'women who could have given themselves to us' – but did not. To put it in Werner Harmacher's words, Benjamin offers us a political theology of the 'miss' – the lost, deferred or unseized possibility – that 'only proves to be a possibility in the miss, and only by virtue of this miss preserves itself as a

possibility for the future' ('Walter Benjamin on Historical Time', p. 39). If the naturalist perspective of historicism sees this void or excess at the heart of history as a simple absence, what the historical materialist recognizes is that this missing past is emphatically *not* beyond redemption; indeed, it is precisely because it never existed in the past that it exists as a real possibility for the present. By arguing that our happiness refers to a past that never actually happened, Benjamin is not consigning that past to the hypothetical realm of 'what might have been' but *preserving* it in virtual form as the locus for future action: what never happened in the past does not belong there, but persists as a possibility in the future. For Benjamin, historical materialism transcends any diachronic succession from past to future to create a radical synchronicity – a constellation – *between* then and now: 'A historian who takes this as his point of departure stops telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary. Instead, he grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one' ('Theses', p. 263). This unlived past continues to exist as a real synchronic contingency (to recall Scotus' concept) that is capable of being actualized by the present generation in the 'now-time' (*Jetzeit*) of danger. In restoring to humanity the infinity of possibilities that were foreclosed by life's own finitude, I want to argue that Benjamin's historical materialist repetition of the theology of divine power thus seeks to gives the absolute past a future: we in the present generation are bestowed with the power to realize the unrealized possibilities of history.

For Benjamin, the mental organ or apparatus which captures this attempt to redeem a past that never was is what Marcel Proust calls 'involuntary memory [*mémoire involontaire*]'. It is his opening gambit in the essay 'The Image in Proust' (1929), recall, that what involuntary memory 'remembers' is not 'a life as it actually was, but a life that was remembered by the one who lived it'.[21] As he goes on to make clear in later essays like 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire' (1939), this distinction itself turns upon Freud's account of the 'incompatibility' of consciousness and memory in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1921): Freud famously claims in this text that consciousness is the living organism's defense mechanism which protects it against the shock of external stimuli leaving a trace as memory. Yet, what this means is that the memory becomes the repository of traumatic stimuli too powerful for consciousness to permit us to directly experience'.[22] To put it in Benjamin's words in the Baudelaire essay, Proustian involuntary memory is likewise a memory of what was never experienced consciously as such:

> [O]nly what has not been experienced explicitly and consciously, what has not happened to the subject as an experience [*Erlebnis*], can become a component of *mémoire involontaire*.[23]

If psychoanalysis enables us to re-conceptualize Benjamin's concept of historical redemption in more immanent terms – a past which was never consciously lived first time around but is (re-)lived in every traumatic shock – I think we can still find a

messianic residue even within this apparently modern theory of memory: what Proust's involuntary memory remembers is not simply Freud's return of a repressed or unconscious past trauma, in Benjamin's account, but something close to Damiani's re-activation of an absolute past that was never present *even* as traumatic experience. This is why Benjamin argues that what returns in involuntary memory is paradoxically the 'trauma' of what *never* happened to us, but which is still 'somewhere remembered': Proust is 'filled with the insight that none of us has time to live the true dramas of the life that we are destined for', he writes, 'This is what ages us – this and nothing else. The wrinkles and creases on our faces are the registration of the great passions, vices, insights that called on us; but we, the masters, were not home' ('The Image in Proust', pp. 211-2). In this context, Benjamin psychoanalysis seems to take on the same (real or possible?) messianic dimension that is ascribed to translation in an essay like 'The Task of the Translator':

> It should be pointed out that certain correlative concepts retain their meaning, and possibly their significance, if they are not referred exclusively to man. One might, for example, speak of an unforgettable life or moment even if all men had forgotten it. If the nature of such life or moment required that it be unforgotten, the predicate would not imply a falsehood but merely a claim not fulfilled by men, and probably also a reference to a realm in which it is fulfilled: God's remembrance.[24]

In order to understand what this 'realm' of God's remembrance might look like within the strict immanent perimeters of historical materialism, I want to turn to one final obscure source for Benjamin's philosophy of history: the French 19th century political activist and theorist Louis-Auguste Blanqui's theory of eternal recurrence.[25] It is Blanqui's eccentric cosmological treaty *Eternity According to the Stars* (1872) – which Benjamin himself apparently first encountered in 1938 – that we find a kind of historical materialist iteration of the theological cosmology of radical contingency at work in the debate around divine omnipotence. According to Blanqui's materialist cosmology, every star is composed of a finite number of chemical elements but the universe itself is infinite: what this means is that every possible combination of material organization must necessarily play itself out temporally and spatially in order to fill the infinity of the universe. To jump ahead to his remarkable conclusion, Blanqui's claim is that this infinite recurrence of finite matter means that everything that has ever happened in our lives – or could have happened or will happen to us – will happen again or is even already happening somewhere in the universe to an infinite number of doppelgängers:

> We are, somewhere else, everything that we could have been down here. In addition to our whole life, to our birth and death, which we experience on a number of earths, we also live ten thousand different versions of it on other earths (*Eternity According to the Stars*, pp. 125-6).

If Benjamin himself read Blanqui's theory somewhat fatalistically – as a kind of diabolic cosmological precursor to the endless repetition of the self-same which is commodity mass production[26] – Miguel Vatter has recently argued that eternal recurrence actually offers a more positive material ground for Benjamin's own messianic idea of history: "the happy life that could have been ours, but was not, does exist; it is the life of avatars in parallel universes where every possible variation of what did not happen, but could have happened, is actually alive and present' (*Republic of the Living*, p. 322). For Vatter, what Benjamin's philosophy of history adds to Blanqui's cosmology is the intriguing possibility that the infinite number of doppelgängers which exist in parallel universes could overlap, experience and change each other's timeline in order to 'change' history itself: I myself, not just some avatar of me, will be able to re-live and complete my past life in the future. In Blanqui's multiverse – where an infinite set of avatars actualizes every possible contingency – we arguably find a kind of materialist space which is equivalent to what Benjamin calls the realm of 'God's remembrance' in which nothing is lost or forgotten.

What is at stake, then, in this curious constellation between Walter Benjamin and Peter Damiani, between weak and strong divine power, between the redemption of the women who could have given themselves to us and the fallen woman, married many times? To return to the central theme of this essay, I want to argue that what is taking place here is a – literal and metaphorical – *contretemps* between two competing versions of the politics of unbearable life: the power to render worlds uncreated, cities unfounded, worlds, lives unlived by political means. It was Benjamin's 1927 claim, recall, that, Damiani's God is no longer needed to change the past: 'a bureaucrat is all that is required'. After a century of the politics of enforced disappearance, this 'arabesque of a joke' is no longer funny: what Leon Trotsky called the 'Stalin School of Falsification' in the 1930s – where old history books, policy documents, the minutes of meetings and even photographs would be retroactively changed to bring them into ideological line with the present – might be seen as political Daminanism on an industrial scale.[27] For Stalin's state bureaucracy, a disgraced figure like Nikolai Yezhov, the NKVD chief who was quietly airbushed out of a group photo with Comrade Stalin after his arrest and execution in 1939, was perhaps the closest equivalent to Damian's fallen women: virginity in this case took the form of a (presumably ideologically more sound) stretch of the Moscow-Volga canal which now occupied the place where the unfortunate Yezhov once stood.[28] If this politics of enforced disappearance has a philosophical origin, then, it arguably lies in Damiani's metaphysics of radical contingency in which the past can be changed as easily as the future: what is at issue here is 'a kind of violence that seeks not only to eradicate the person who is the target of enforced disappearance but also to erase the fact that the person ever existed', Banu Bargu argues, 'it is not only about the destruction of the individual but also the elimination of the individual's prior presence'.[29] Perhaps we might thus read Benjamin's Theses as an attempt to critique Damiani's political theology of unbearable life - and the sovereign exceptionalism to which it gives rise – by seeking, weakly, immanently and 'from below' to make the

unbearable bearable once more. This politics of (re-)appearance is not human not divine, weak not omnipotent, given to us not willed by us, experienced by us without ever fully becoming an object of experience to be grasped, equally capable of producing suffering as well as happiness – and even of missing its meeting or appointment with the past altogether and deferring it yet again – but nonetheless it continues to exist as a real task for the present generation. In Benjamin's theory of a weak messianic power that gives us back the women who could have given themselves to us in the past but did not, we can find a kind of affirmative re-writing of Damiani's thought experiment of the fallen women, married many times, who can be restored to virginity: what was prevented from ever happening in the past still exists in real but virtual form and we have the power to actualize it. What if the woman who could have given herself to us could still give herself? What if she, too, could have a child? What if Benjamin offers a means of rendering that unbearable life bearable?

3: Unwritten

In the aftermath of Charles Lindbergh's transatlantic solo flight, Bertolt Brecht wrote the first of his *Lehrstücke* or 'didactic plays' for radio about the historic event: *Lindbergh's Flight* (*Der Lindberghflug*) was premiered at the Baaden-Baaden Music Festival in 1929. It appears that Brecht revised the play for its next performance on radio in 1930 to shift the focus away from the charismatic figure of Lindbergh himself to the collective labour which made his achievement possible. If Brecht's original text focused on glorifying the heroism of Lindbergh, it is revealing that the later iteration – now entitled *The Flight of the Lindberghs* (*Der Flug der Lindberghs*) - changed the name of the aviator from a singular personal into a collective plural: 'the Lindberghs', 'the Airmen'. For Benjamin, whose essay 'What is Epic Theatre?' (1939) is a kind of typology of Brechtian theatre, Brecht's *collectivization* of the proper name 'Lindbergh' was the decisive step in breaking away from traditional mimetic theatre and producing the shock effect of the didactic: *The Flight of the Lindberghs* 'is an exercise in refraction in which Brecht uses the singular experience [*Erlebnis*] as a source for the hues of "experience" [*Erfahrung*]', Benjamin writes, 'the experience that could be obtained only from Lindbergh's effort'.[30]

To draw this essay to a close, however, I want to recall a curious post-script to the story of Brecht's political *kenosis* – emptying out – of the proper name 'Lindbergh'. It seems that the dramatist was approached to approve a new radio production of the play in 1950 but only consented to do on the condition that Lindbergh's name be removed completely from the script. As he explained in a letter to the Südwestrundfunk (Southwest Broadcasting Company), Brecht's decision was a protest at Lindbergh's 'close ties with the Nazis' and his 'sinister role as a fascist in

the USA' in the years leading up to the Second World War: 'The title of my radio play must therefore be changed to *The Ocean Flight*, the prologue must be spoken and Lindbergh's name expunged'.[31] If *Lindbergh's Flight* had glorified Lindbergh's individual achievement, and *The Flight of the Lindberghs* the collective achievement of the workers, this final version – now entitled *The Flight across the Ocean* (*Der Ozeanflug*) – became something close to a historical materialist parable about a man who gains the whole world only to lose his soul. In the concluding words of Brecht's new prologue: 'Ten years / Of fame and riches, and the wretch /Showed Hitler's butchers how to fly /With deadly bombs. Therefore / Let his name be blotted out' (*Collected Plays* 3, p. 321).

In conclusion then, I would like to read Brecht's *reductio ad nihilum* of Lindbergh as one more small exercise in the politics of unbearable life. It is possible to see *The Flight across the Ocean* as yet another attempt to 'change the past' which transforms the celebrated aviator into little more than the empty avatar of a collective labour process. As the protagonist of the new version of the play himself says, 'My name doesn't matter…I am so-and-so' (*Collected Plays* 3, p. 321). To re-write history in this way – actualizing latent potentialities that lie unrealized within it – Brecht's play performs another Benjaminian redemption that returns us to a past every bit as open, contingent and unknowable as the future itself: the unlived past, the missed, unseized or deferred past, the past that never was. In Brecht's *Flight across the Ocean*, then, Benjamin's old 'arabesque of a joke' continues to echo backwards and forwards in time. What if the great aviator Charles Lindbergh, whose historical fate proves that time is not a chain of events but a single whole in which past, present and future all exist together, is the doppelgänger of that other famous flying machine imagined in Benjamin's Ninth Thesis?

> This is how one pictures the angel of history. 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 hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress ('Theses', pp. 257-8).

1 Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics* trans. and intr. by Terence Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1999), 1139b, 6-10, p. 87. In Aristotle's ontology, the past contains no potentiality: 'We do not decide to do what is already past; no-one decides, for instance, to have sacked Troy. For neither do we deliberate about what is past, but only about what will be and admits of being or not being; and what is passed does not admit of not having happened. This is why Agathon is correct to say "Of this alone even a God is deprived – to make what is all done to have never happened"'".

2 Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Volume 2: 1927-1934* trans. by Rodney Livingstone and ed. by Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 50. All further references will be given in the text. I am grateful to John Schad for bringing this reference to my attention. In fact, the ringleader of the Lindbergh hoaxers seems to have been the young *Normalien* Jean-Paul Sartre.

3 Peter Damian, Letter 119 'On Divine Omnipotence', in *Letters 91-120*, trans. Owen J. Blum, *The Fathers of the Church*, volume 4 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of American Press, 1998), pp. 344-86, p. 353. All further references will be given parenthetically in the text.

4 Walter Benjamin, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, in *Illuminations* trans. by H. Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968), pp. 253-64, p. 254. All further references will be given parenthetically in the text.

5 Jerome, Epistle 22 *ad Eustochium*, § 5, in *Select Letters of Jerome* ed. by F. A. Wright (London: Heinemann, 1933), p. 62.

6 See Irvin M. Resnick, *Divine Power and Possibility in St Peter Damian's* De Divina Omnipotentia (Leiden and New York: Brill, 1992) for a detailed commentary on Damiani's Letter. It is worth stressing that there is some disagreement about what exactly Damiani is arguing about divine omnipotence. According to the 'weak' reading, Peter never explicitly states that God *can* change the past, merely that it is not for human beings to presume any restriction whatsoever upon divine omnipotence. In the stronger reading, which I set out here, Peter's defense of God's power to restore virginity to a woman who has lost it does indeed imply that God really can undo what has been done.

7 John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006), pp. 182-207, p. 183. In this study, which offers the only contemporary rehabilitation of Damiani I am aware of, the theologian is read as an important, if ambivalent, precursor for a deconstructive poetics of 'the event' that anarchically exceeds all determinate ontology.

8 See Francis Oakley, *Omnipotence, Covenant, & Order: An Excursion in the History of Ideas from Abelard to Leibniz* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984), William J. Courtenay, *Capacity and Volition: A History of the Distinction of Absolute and Ordained Power* (Bergamo: Pierluigi Lubrina Editore, 1990) and Francis Oakley, *Natural Law, Laws of Nature, Natural Rights: Continuity and Discontinuity in the History of Ideas* (New York, NY: Continuum, 2005) for classic

discussions of the history of divine power. All further references will be given in the text.

9 Giorgio Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government (Homo Sacer II, 2)* trans. by Lorenzo Chiesa (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011). All further references will be given parenthetically in the text.

10 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I 25, 4, ad 2.

11 To be sure, Nominalism's challenge to Thomism Christian Aristotelianism is a surprising omission from Agamben's theological genealogy of government in Agamben's *The Kingdom and the Glory* – perhaps because it constitutes an exception (in every sense of the word) to Agamben's master narrative about the rise of economic theology as the paradigm for governmentality. In Nominalism, we find something much closer to Schmittean political theology than economic theology because the immanent or domestic sphere has no autonomy but always exists at the behest of a sovereign decision.

12 Michael Allen Gillespie, *Nihilism before Nietzsche* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1995), pp. 1-32, p. 16.

13 Duns Scotus, *Contingency and Freedom: Lectura I 39.* trans. with Introduction and Commentary by A.Vos Jaczn, H. Veldhuis, A.H. Looman-Graaskamp, E. Dekker, N.W. Den Bok (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1994).

14 William of Ockham, *Predestination, God's Foreknowledge, and Future Contingents* trans. *by* Marilyn McCord Adams and Norman Kretzmann (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983).

15 See Nelson Pike, 'Divine Omniscience and Voluntary Action', *Philosophical Review* 74 (January, 1965), pp. 27-46; 'Of God and Freedom: A Rejoinder' *Philosophical Review* 75 (July, 1966), pp. 369-79 and 'Divine Foreknowledge, Human Freedom and Possible Worlds', *Philosophical Review* 86 (April, 1977), pp. 209-116. In the 50 years since it was first proposed, Pike's distinction between 'hard' and 'soft' facts in Ockham about the past has been the subject of extensive debate.

16 Mika Ojakangas, '*Potentia absoluta and Potentia ordinate Dei*: On the Theological Origins of Carl Schmitt's Theory of Constitution' in *Continental Philosophy Review* (2012) 45: 505-17.

17 Agata Bielik-Robson, *Jewish Cryptotheologies of Late Modernity: Philosophical Marranos* (London: Routledge, 2014).

18 Arthur Bradley, *Unbearable Life: Genealogy of Nihilopolitics* (forthcoming). In this forthcoming book, I trace the politics of unbearable life from Ancient Rome to the War on Terror.

19 See Giorgio Agamben, 'Benjamin and the Demonic: Happiness and Historical Redemption' in *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy* ed. and trans. and intr. by Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), pp. 138-59; Eric Jacobson, *Metaphysics of the Profane: The Political Theology of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003); Werner Hamacher, '"Now": Walter Benjamin on Historical Time' trans. by N.

Rosenthal in *Walter Benjamin and History* ed. by Andrew Benjamin (London, New York: Continuum, 2005); Peter Fenves, *The Messianic Reduction: Walter Benjamin and the Shape of Time* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010); Sami Khatib, 'The Messianic Without Messianism: Walter Benjamin's Materialist Theology', in *Anthropology and Materialism* 1 (2013) and Miguel Vatter, *The Republic of the Living: Biopolitics and the Critique of Civil Society* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014) for recent readings of Benjamin's philosophy of history, which have influenced my own. All further references will be given parenthetically in the text. In fact, Giorgio Agamben is the only critic I am aware of who even briefly attempts to read Benjamin's work in the context of the debate on divine omnipotence: Agamben's essay on Melville's 'Bartleby the Scrivener' alludes to a school of medieval theology 'by which God can do anything (according to some, even evil, even acting such that the world never existed, or restoring a girl's lost virginity)'. See Giorgio Agamben, 'Bartleby, or On Contingency', in *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy* ed. and trans. and intr. by Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), pp. 243-74, p. 254. All further references will be given in the text.

[20] Jacob Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul* trans. by Dana Hollander (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), p. 103.

[21] Walter Benjamin, 'On the Image of Proust' in *Illuminations* trans. by H. Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968), pp. 201-16, p. 202. All further references will be given parenthetically in the text.

[22] Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, *Group Psychology* and other works in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 18: 1920-1922 ed. by James Strachey et al (London: Vintage, 2001), p. 27.

[23] Walter Benjamin, 'On some Motifs in Baudelaire' in *Illuminations* trans. by H. Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968), pp. 155-200, pp. 160-1. All further references will be given parenthetically in the text.

[24] Walter Benjamin, 'The Task of the Translator' in *Illuminations* trans. by H. Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968), pp. 69-82, p. 70.

[25] Louis-Auguste Blanqui, *Eternity by the Stars: An Astrological Hypothesis* trans. by Frank Chouraqui (New York: Contra Mundum, 2013). All further references will be given parenthetically in the text.

[26] Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 112. In a letter to Max Horkheimer, Benjamin writes of Blanqui's cosmology: 'We may call it theological, insofar as hell is a subject of theology. In fact, the cosmic vision of the world which Blanqui lays out, taking his data from the mechanistic natural science of bourgeois society, is an infernal vision. At the same time, it is a complement of the society to which Blanqui, in his old age, was forced to concede victory. What is so unsettling is that the presentation is entirely lacking in irony. It is an unconditional surrender, but it is simultaneously the most terrible indictment of a society that projects this image of the cosmos – understood as an image of itself – across the heavens'.

[27] Leon Trotsky, *The Stalin School of Falsification* (New York: Beekman, 2001).

[28] David King, *The Commissar Vanishes: The Falsification of Photographs and Art in Stalin's Russia* (London: Metropolitan, 1997).

[29] Banu Bargu, 'Sovereignty as Erasure: Rethinking Enforced Disappearances' in *Qui Parle: Critical Humanities and Social Sciences* 23: 1 (Fall/Winter, 2014), pp. 35-75, p. 43.

[30] Walter Benjamin, 'What is the Epic Theatre? (II)', *Selected Writings, Volume 4: 1938-1940*, ed. by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings(Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2006), pp. 302-9, p. 306.

[31] Bertolt Brecht, *Lindbergh's Flight* in *Collected Plays 3* ed. by John Willett, trans. by John Willett et al (London: Bloomsbury 2012), p. 321. All further references will be abbreviated parenthetically in the text. In his preface, Brecht is referring to Lindbergh's pre-war praise of the technological prowess of the German Luftwaffe, his support for the isolationist America First movement and his 1941 speech blaming American Jews for disloyally inciting the USA to enter the war – all of which led to him being denounced as a Nazi sympathizer.