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Correspondence from Baedan 2

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## Correspondence from Baedan 2

baedan

Friends,

I read (the rest of) *Bædan* with great interest. I will respond in a number of ways.

The questions I'll ask here about *Bædan* concern your engagement with Lee Edelman's *No Future*, specifically how he and you understand the queer as figure, as exemplar, and maybe as reality—and how you develop that understanding in the direction of anti-politics. The background of these questions is obviously the issue of nihilism—passive and active, or maybe just nihilism.

“Nothing of what we have achieved is as negative as the behavior and opinions of those who say yes to the world we live in, those who accept it without question and shove as much of it as they can down their gob without a thought about it—that's true nihilism. And we are very pale imitators by contrast.” This is Frere Dupont, from the dialogue about Sam Moss in *Letters* 1.)

I will set up my questions by rehearsing some of your argument in the first long essay in your journal. Edelman states that the queer is called upon to play a certain role in the social order, specifically, “to figure the death drive” (*No Future*, 9). He repeatedly refers to this figuration as a call. This call and its resultant figura-

tion can be enjoyed by the queer, or denied; the denial is liberal LGBTQ politics, the politics of ‘we are just like you,’ marriage & other rights, alternative families, etc. Enjoyment is to be the ‘bad’ queer, the non-reproductive, non-productive queer, of which Edelman has one sense, and you have a very different (though not entirely unrelated) sense.

You propose to read Edelman closely and overthrow him. You write that you aim to extract “the vital elements of the theory without the baggage of the academy” (7). When you engage with J. Halberstam alongside Edelman, you place Edelman as apolitical and situate yourselves as anti-political (18-19). Edelman’s life project, his version of being the ‘bad’ queer, is for you pathetic and an example of building one’s own prison. Your answer is anti-politics, which you also call active nihilism.

You write:

we’ll attempt to show that the lack in Edelman’s thought would be completed by the anti-political tendencies of an insurrectionary anarchist practice of self-organized attack (19).

So Edelman describes queer as a position with respect to the symbolic, in the social order. Certain bodies, certain practices are figured in a certain way—as against that order, other than it, destructive of the future it is building. This is the interest in his writing as a contribution to negative theory. And those so figured can accept that, and live it, or not. But for Edelman to live it basically seems to mean to do what the figuring says queers do, *and enjoy it excessively*; and to what degree this is possible or available as a practice (or really, an attitude towards a practice) is not, so it would seem, up to anyone. For you, on the other hand, there seems to be something more active, far more voluntary, which is why you can distinguish between the practices that are already figured as queer, and the “insurrectionary anarchist practice of self-organized attack,” which for you has an exemplary role.

This is one of the places where you say more about this difference between you and Edelman:

... futile attempts to identify with or name *jouissance* can lead to a reification of the categories which we'd call upon *jouissance* to abolish [...] Any attempt to situate *jouissance* as a positive project can only ever be a step away from it. Circuit parties, pornography, social networking applications, political demonstrations, activist organizations, art: all of these strive to recuperate *jouissance* into some alternative structure, and yet must always fail because *jouissance* is inherently that which evades capture and ruptures the coherent narratives which justify such structures (47).

For you Edelman “fails to do the work of locating *jouissance* within the actual subversive histories of queerness.”

You also write:

The material force of negation must be one that goes on, not only to disrupt the daily circulation of society, but also to sabotage the apparatuses which function to reproduce us as subjects within those flows. We must, as Edelman says, ‘break open with *jouissance* and launch [ourselves] into the void around and against which the subject congeals.’ (49)

... which, I take it, is one of the anti-identitarian moments in which you coincide with Edelman. The practice of attack does not (at least should not) congeal into a new kind of subject or subjectivity. This (for you) is an important component of anti-political practice, which ‘must’ be as you describe.

Meanwhile Edelman writes that embracing the impossibility and inhumanity of what he dubs *sinthomosexuality* is “the ethical task

for which queers are singled out” (*No Future*, 109). Or elsewhere, the “ethical burden to which queerness must accede” (*No Future*, 47). That would be what queers ‘must’ do, according to him.

Now I will ask my questions:

1. Politics and anti-politics aside, and supposing we want to play along with this story, can anyone actually *be* what the symbolic *figures* in a certain way? Isn’t it, for Edelman, more an issue of how one does or does not live the death drive? Isn’t there a rather obvious Lacanian (or at least structuralist-theoretical) response to your overthrowing that would overthrow you in return, saying that the absolute negation you invoke in principle cannot be brought about by anything one does on purpose, including an “insurrectionary anarchist practice of self-organized attack”? In Edelman’s terms, can you really divide sinthomosexuality from what he calls “the futurism desperate to negate it” that “keeps it alive” (66)? In more general terms, and to be pithy, a cruel structuralist could argue that the world will end because of passive nihilists who don’t care about anything and not because of those who claim the position of active nihilism (i.e. closer to the circuit parties and other crap that Edelman invokes than attack in any form). The relevance of this for anti-politics might be (in pithy terms, again) that the truly anti-political force in society is the incompetence, apathy and hypocrisy of politicians, who are the real nihilists. (I mean this non-morally, i.e. what is socially destructive here is their non-coincidence with the official story about the social order and its morality, not their ‘evil’ as such.) The rest of us, whatever we call ourselves, insofar as we speak in the name of something (anything) without apathy and hypocrisy, insofar as we try to be competent at what we try to do, would then just be... political. (This is only the first turn in this spiral.)

2. Supposing you are right, and one *can* be what the symbolic figures; and supposing further that an “insurrectionary anarchist practice of self-organized attack” is a way to do this, to live the death drive as queers, do you claim that this practice (this congeries

and a much revised version of the essay was finally published in the *Zeitschrift* in 1939 as “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire.”

Though Gershom Scholem later collaborated with Adorno on republishing Benjamin’s works, he always regretted Benjamin’s association with the Frankfurt School, as did Hannah Arendt. While both were thankful to the Institute for supporting Benjamin financially, neither believed that Marxist critical theory was a meaningful enterprise, or that the term adequately described what was truly important about Benjamin’s writings. And although Benjamin appreciated Adorno’s mind, one senses in his letters a frustration with the editorial constraints imposed by Adorno and Horkheimer, which was exacerbated, no doubt, by the fact that his relation with the Institute was based on financial obligation.

If we find this ‘editorial constraint’ and harsh dogmatism nauseating, we can only be bewildered by the fact that someone would want to continue this tradition. Your attempt to save Benjamin in death feels all too similar to these efforts to save him from himself in life.

of practices, really) is in some way exemplary? Wouldn’t the sole support for this claim be to say that this is the only practice that truly performs the negation that the symbolic figures as the undoing of the social order? Aren’t there all sorts of ways in which the social order can be, or gets, undone? Or is at least figured as undone, which is probably another matter altogether? Moreover, isn’t locating *jouissance* in the “actual subversive histories of queerness” another futile attempt (a historical, anti-/political attempt) of defining it? A further aspect of the second question: where you and Halberstam call Edelman apolitical, thereby illuminating your antipolitical approach by contrast, why do you not address the fact that Edelman does define an *ethical* task for queers—ethics, I imagine, in the sense of way of life, flourishing (of pleasure, at least), not morality? Is an “insurrectionary anarchist practice of self-organized attack” related to ethics, or ethical tasks, and how?

I’ll leave it there. Thanks for a stimulating read. There will be more responses in other fora.

*Critila*

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Dear Critila,

Thank you for your close and incisive reading of the first issue of *Bædan*. The questions you pose, here and elsewhere, are helpful in moving beyond the provocations laid out in that initial piece. If I’m reading your recitation of our engagement with Edelman correctly, it seems that two issues emerge as central: nihilism and ethics.

To embark on an inquiry into the interplay of these issues, I’ll return to a text we engaged with in our archeology of gender as domestication, “Against the Gendered Nightmare.” We invoked “History as Decomposition” from the journal *Attentat*, primarily to give shape to a way of reading against the historic view of gender. For

the moment, we'll draw on an earlier discussion within the text which plays with a few different understandings of the nihilism in the background of our present discussion. In *Attentat*, we are presented with two competing understandings of nihilism—one being diagnostic of the world at large, another being aspirational on the part of those who, in one way or another, understand their own projects as nihilist. The author describes a motion of such a label first as an accusatory pejorative, next as a simplistic reclamation, and finally as a more advanced theoretical position. From this theoretical position, we are able to explore our relationship to these views of nihilism. Is our project merely an expression of the decomposition around us, or is our project to hasten it? The author of the text proposes neither, but instead that “we may take ‘no future’ and ‘everything must be destroyed’ less as slogans of a supposedly self-evident sort and more as dark mottos that guide our explorations of a complicated and dangerous terrain.” Such a dark motto would be less a theoretical position and more an art of life, a way of engagement with the dangerous terrain of decomposition. In imagining these ways of life, we come upon the issue of ethics.

Before grappling with ethics, I should mention an experience with decomposition I had recently. While taking a small break from writing about familiar topics, I went for a solitary walk through a nearby forest. Following a path to its conclusion, I came upon a waterfront and turned to walk the narrow zone between the forest and the beach. As I walked, I had a distinct sense of forgetting the problems I'd set out to ponder and, as if in some sort of hedge crossing, started paying sole attention to the little details of my path. I realized, at some point, that this thin corridor was littered with all sorts of detritus from both the churning waters and the dense forests. Bird bones, fragmented sea shells, dead slugs, broken eggs, fallen leaves, and the occasional crushed can, all interwoven into a teeming layer of decay. I realized that the decomposition around me was not unlike that which plagues history and of which we're presently speaking. Looking at my little zone, it became rather dif-

bound up with his original theological concerns ever to be fully disentangled. He cites another example regarding Adorno's influence on the *Arcades Project*:

Some responsibility for the wreck of the \*Arcades Project \*must be assigned to Adorno, who in a series of long letters forced Benjamin to reconceive the project again and again. The letters make clear, however, that Adorno genuinely believed he was saving his friend from himself. Adorno, who saw the *Arcades Project* as a potential model for secular critical theory about bourgeois culture, worried to see it oscillating in Benjamin's hands between a vitalistic mysticism and a simple-minded Marxism. Adorno rejected the 1935 prospectus on the grounds that it was “undialectical” and that Benjamin was still “under the spell of bourgeois psychology.”... Later that month Benjamin replied in a sad, self-deprecatory letter (to Gretel, not Theodor), agreeing with most of the criticisms and promising to do better next time.

This disapproving and controlling tone continued on Adorno's part for several years afterwards:

In 1938, as Europe prepared for war, Benjamin submitted an enormous manuscript on Baudelaire as a miniature model of the *Arcades* book, only to encounter the same objections that Adorno had raised in 1935. “Let me express myself in as simple and Hegelian manner as possible,” Adorno begins, without a trace of irony... Adorno then added, unhelpfully, that “the materialistic determination of cultural characteristics is possible only when mediated by the total [social] process.” Benjamin was devastated, more letters were exchanged,

but perhaps the most incomprehensible sacrifice to the confusion of religion and politics.

Mark Lilla, citing this and other examples, describes the relationship between Benjamin and Brecht as tragically deferential in a way which had an unfortunate effect on Benjamin's; writing, Benjamin's correspondences with Adorno and Brecht are littered with countless moments of these two reprimanding him for his infidelity and mysticism. They figure less as mentors and more as disciplinarians, striking his knuckles whenever he strayed from his assignment.

Lilla gives an example in the form of Brecht's criticism of Benjamin on Kafka:

The Kafka essay does much to confirm Scholem's claim, first made in the frustrated-sounding letters of the early Thirties and later in his memoirs, that Benjamin's most important ideas came from his concern with theological issues, while his idiosyncratic materialism only confused them. It also receives surprising confirmation from Bertolt Brecht, with whom Benjamin was staying in the summer of 1934. As we learn in the previously unpublished "Conversations with Brecht," translated in *Reflections*, Brecht, a consistent materialist, was disappointed in, and baffled by, Benjamin's theological backsliding in the Kafka essay. Benjamin faithfully reports Brecht's objection that Kafka is an "obscurantist," a "Jewboy," a "skinny, unlikable creature" whose mystical depths were at the farthest remove from the "crude thinking" the times demanded. Benjamin's celebration of Kafka's failed messianism simply advanced "Jewish fascism," Brecht charged.

Benjamin was clearly not meant for Communist intellectual labor; his Marxism, if it can be called that, remained too intimately

difficult to distinguish the diagnostic nihilism from the aspirational one. Maybe more correctly, I could see how either could function to explain what was going on around me. I could easily see this decomposition as a natural process, one necessary for the nourishment of both the beach and the forest. I could also, of course, recognize a diffuse array of willful acts which composed the decomposition: the slaying of the fish and birds, the crushing of the shells underfoot, the abandonment of the trash. Depending on the vantage point, I could locate both senses of decomposition at play. The question then became one of will, and perhaps of animism. The birds picking apart the dead crab might imagine themselves the active nihilists, whereas we might see a secular decomposition. How might the maggots or bacteria view the scene? What about the waves?

As I returned from my walk, it occurred to me that perhaps a nihilist ethics does not need to resolutely distinguish between these two forms. Maybe, as offered in *Attentat*, this interplay is something to "think through, as well as live out." I'd say that a nihilist ethics might instead be an orientation towards decomposition; both an awareness of its playing-out and an attention paid to where we might participate. There are obvious ways that we might amplify or quicken this decay, but this isn't the sole prospect. Equally at play in such an orientation would be a survey of the opportunities and potentials offered by the ferment around us. *Attentat's* conception is based partly on a reading of Fredy Perlman, who would say that Leviathan is constantly in decay because it is itself death. It takes on the appearance of life solely because living beings are caught inside it, moving its levers and wheels. The beast decomposes when people simply choose not to—when they set fire to its components or flee it altogether. If 'no future' is a motto to be carried in my pocket, then it is also a reminder to be seeking these weaknesses and ways out. It is an *ars vivendi* against the world.

This orientation becomes a little more clear when we shift the focus to daily life. It is possible to recognize a postmodern nihilism

in the attitude of a hipster shopkeeper carelessly browsing Tumblr instead of watching the merchandise. An ethical response would be to seize the opportunity to fill my bag with as much as possible. From this lens, it is easier to examine the differences between Edelman's ethics and our own. You pose this difference as Edelman's enjoyment of what queers are figured to do versus our "more active, far more voluntary" proposals. I'm not entirely sure that the key difference is on the level of voluntariness; I'd argue that it takes quite a bit of action to fly around the country chasing circuit parties, or to spend a few hours in the gym every day. I imagine that some might spend as much time preparing an outfit for a party as another would to trash a bank. I'm also unsure it can be understood on the level of enjoyment; I couldn't begin to quantify the ways I've enjoyed my projects.

The difference lies elsewhere, and perhaps can be found in the corollary to *Attentat's* conception of decomposition: recomposition. If decaying parts can always be re-organized into a new composition, then our orientation must also consider how to evade or undermine this chance. *Attentat* cautions that we must be sure not to do "the innovative work that future systems will be built upon." By our account, a whole system has already been built upon Edelman's enjoyment! This system of enjoyment—the sexual labor, the circulation of pornographic images, the mediations of desire, the pharmaceuticals, the instrumentalization of the erotic body—is precisely the machine in which I've found myself ensnared, and against which I take aim. We can't take issue with the opening gestures of his ethics, but absolutely must critique the lack of follow-through.

Bearing these themes in mind, let's turn to your questions.

To your first question I'd simply say no, none of us can actually be what the symbolic order figures. As with all identities, the ones it offers us are always unattainable chimaeras from which we always feel a degree of failure or distance. And yet the answer is much more complicated than that. In our previous issue,

ity. Your attempt to brush the dictatorship of the proletariat away as simply a "misreading" of Marx, without actually critiquing its basis in Marx, mirrors the laughable Maoist rhetorical strategy of branding as 'revisionist' any uncomfortable result of the theory. If you really want to break from this inheritance, it's your burden to thoroughly critique this fetish for production and technology. Camatte's writing could be seen as an example of this break and Jasper Bernes' piece in the third issue of *Endnotes* is another, with tragically little in between. Without such a critique, we have to ask how Marx can be misread so intensely that millions are murdered as a result. Your invocation of the mass graves of fascism is duplicitous in the context of your attempt to obscure the (far more) mass(ive) graves of Marxism.

5. Yours is only the most recent attempt on the part of Marxists to firmly lay claim to Benjamin. This legacy goes all the way back to Adorno and Brecht, (who in a creepy euphemism you describe as Benjamin's "marxist [sic] mentors"). Scholem criticized his relationship with these two, and with Marxism more generally, in a letter to Benjamin where he wrote:

I am so dismayed that I must say to myself that this self-deception is possible only because you desire it, and more: that it can last only as long as it is not put to the materialist test. The complete certainty I have about what would happen to your writing if it occurred to you to present it within the Communist party is quite depressing.... It would become unambiguously and explosively clear that your dialectic is not that of the materialist whose method you try to approach, at the very moment you were unmasked by your fellow dialecticians as a typical counterrevolutionary and bourgeois.... I fear that the high cost of this error will be borne by you.... You would not, of course, be the last



Materialism must now withdraw with “monastic discipline” from this belief in a progressive historical continuum, replacing it with a conception of history closer to that of traditional Judaism, which believed that “every second of time was the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter.” As Scholem later remarked, **nothing remains of historical materialism in this hermetic text but the term itself.** [emphasis added]

This puts your criticism into a funny position. You must contend with an interpretation of the “Theses” by a Benjamin scholar and one of Benjamin’s closest friends which not only thoroughly contradicts your argument, but also by the very act of its contradiction easily disproves your claim of universal agreement. When you say of Benjamin’s supposed fidelity that “this is like [sic] just a fact,” you do more than merely demonstrate your failure of comprehension and extension of speech disfluency into your writing: you also reveal the ideological blinders which prevent you from seeing how plainly wrong you are.

4. Your wounded reaction to our critique of Marxism reveals a great deal about your intentions. We must take a moment to respond to your claims in defense of Communism with regard to Benjamin’s writing. It is pretty clear that the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact was simply the last straw of a litany of atrocities carried out in the name of Marxism. This point is made rather explicitly in several readings of the “Theses.” Your characterization of Stalinism as a uniquely deviant “hellish deformation” of the Marxist project reads as a desperate attempt to sever your dogma from this legacy. Elsewhere in this issue we cite Fredy Perlman’s argument in “The Continuing Appeal of Nationalism,” which straightforwardly illustrates that the nightmares of the Gulag stem directly out of Marx’s blindspot regarding industrialization, and that Lenin himself was the zealous architect of this horror. Perlman lucidly shows that fascism’s death camps are a rationalization of Lenin’s monstros-

we discussed the figures of anarchist and queer which are figured as threats by the symbolic order. Following this discussion (and discussions elsewhere in this issue) we could add nihilist and witch to the list. While we obviously cannot achieve some perfect attainment of the dark fantasies of the symbolic, there is some visceral level where we realize that these images are about something very real within us. Queer, anarchist, nihilist, witch; some might shy away from these but we find in each an alluring call.

You illustrate the contradiction that the futurism which attempts to abolish these figures is also what keeps them alive. A way of addressing this contradiction might be to apply the formulation of *Attentat* in recognizing that each of these subjects carries within it a pejorative, an identity, and also a range of positions from which to act. It could help to sort these potentials by viewing them through the lens of the operation of government. Leviathan doesn’t construct these identities out of coherent communities, but rather groups together a wide array of practices and forms of life which it perceives as threatening. (For example herbalists, folk-healers, rebellious women, and practitioners of magic are grouped together by the Holy Inquisition within the category of witch; all manner of deviant and aberrant sex acts and gender expressions constitute queer.) These new subjects are then identified, differentiated, disciplined and finally either assimilated or annihilated. The move from pejorative to badge-of-pride can happen any number of ways. We can see contemporary witches attempting to reconstruct a spiritual practice out of the trial statements of accused witches and the handbooks of inquisitors. We also know too many cases of the State actively intervening to entrap idealistic young anarchists into buying bombs from its agents.<sup>1</sup> These inverse identifications with symbolic figures end up playing the State’s game, recomposing yet another structure of capture and constraint.<sup>2</sup> It is understandable how this identitarian mode is seductive and easy to follow, but we would insist on an ecstatic mode instead. Proposing an ecstatic mode of response is to imagine a way out of the game

of identities. Rather than aspiring to these identities, we might try to discover the gestures, orientations, and ways of life those identities were constructed to obscure. Such an ethics of *ek stasis* would strive to push us outside of our selves, but without locating us in new ones. Nihilism, witchcraft or anarchy might all be tools in this queer ethics, but each would have to be defined anew through an ongoing process of experimentation and play.

You offer that the world might more likely end because of Edelman's apathetic nihilists or hypocritical politicians rather than our own activities. But I think that neither of us really believes the world will end at all, for whatever reason. At this point, the functions of politics and government is simply to manage its own decomposition, cultivating recomposition where it can. Caught in this dynamic, we're really searching for ways of life which carve an escape route.

And so we arrive at your second question. Again I'll answer no, that insurrectionary anarchy is not an exemplary practice nor the sole way to perform the negation figured as the undoing of the social order. It is an example of a set of practices, but it is a set among many. The proposal of insurrection is useful in our inquiry firstly because it offers a diverse set of methods of attack and evasion. More so, it was a convenient focal point for drawing the connections we desired between subversive currents within queer theory and within anarchist thought. We've pointed to several interesting events and tendencies eating away at the social order, and could surely point to more.

You're correct for criticizing our locating *jouissance* solely in the "actual subversive histories of queerness." The understanding of history offered by the concept of decomposition helps to re-imagine this search. With the benefit of this new shape to time, we might say that the endless splitting of the social order has torn us apart as well, recomposing us as subjects of a dualistic world. *Jouissance* is to be found in those events where we overcome this dualism, if only momentarily. These moments do not occur in the meta-narrative

at random any number of your prized academics. We'll go with Mark Lilla's reading of Benjamin's correspondence and of "On the Concept of History" to demonstrate this:

The "Theses" reflect Benjamin's apocalyptic vision of European politics in the late Thirties and his disappointment with communism's betrayal in the Hitler-Stalin pact... Stalin's pact with the devil finally shattered any illusions he may have had about communism's redemptive mission. In the Twenties Benjamin had played with the ideas of divine violence, radical decisionism, and political nihilism; in the early Thirties he could still idealize the frenzy of what he called "the destructive character." But now the real apocalypse approached, bringing with it satanic violence, not the Messiah.

At a deeper level, the "Theses" represent the last dramatic encounter between Benjamin's theological metaphysics and his historical materialism. The essay opens with an image of the philosophy of history as a chess game, which a puppet called historical materialism can win only "if it enlists the services of theology, which today," he says, "is wizened and has to keep out of sight." And what can materialism learn from theology? Essentially that the idea of historical progress is an illusion, that history is nothing but a series of catastrophes piling wreckage upon wreckage, reaching up to the heavens. The members of the working class had been corrupted by the idea of progress, which blinded them to the regressive social consequences that accompanied increased domination of the natural world. They were lulled into ignoring the "state of emergency" caused by the rising forces of fascism, and failed to respond.

Here he has infinitely more in common with a conception of history as decomposition and tragedy than with any ideology which believes that redemption might be built into these monuments. Toward any such ideology, *we have more than contempt*.

In summation, we can only insist, against a reading of the “Theses” that would make it our moral obligation to save the dead, that instead our task, and our desire, is to experience those moments that break the continuity of history and, insofar as it is possible, to inhabit them. In doing so, we are not called to the past by any group with its martyrs and its morality of death. We are motivated only, by a sense of recognition, to “blast open the continuum of history.” You accuse us of ahistoricism. What we intend is far worse.

Most sincerely,

*the bædlings*

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#### Notes

1. It has become widely known that at various moments our enemy has deployed a ‘strategy of tension’ to push people into an armed struggle which can only end a handful of ways. The Cleveland 4 are only a few of the most recent victims of this strategy of subjection.

2. I’m reminded of the newly launched *Mask Magazine* which ironically markets itself as a magazine by and for an accumulation of symbolically-figured identities: anarchist, hacker, hipster, queer. Through these reclaimed subjectivities, the magazine goes on to celebrate other figures: ‘sell-out,’ ‘gentrifier,’ etc. On a relevant note, the magazine defines ‘queer’ through a series of hashtags (#parties, #poppers, #pills, #processing, etc.) which are undoubtedly nihilist, but from which we can only feel a tragicomic distance.

3. Your haughty claim to the agreement of “anyone who has read one book by or on benjamin [sic]” can be quickly deflated by citing

of history (even queer history) but on a much smaller scale, in the rebellious lives which remain hidden or tragically lost to us. To conclude with your final question, an insurrectionary anarchy might be related to ethics in the pursuit of a connection to these moments of overcoming. This ethics could give new meaning to “armed joy.” Hopefully you’ll find the texts in this issue enjoyable on this point.

Looking forward to your next contribution to this strange thing we’re doing together,

Yours,

*Tegan*

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hi tegan,

i just got to reading yr essay in baedan on theses on the philosophy of history. i guess i should begin by asking if this is your essay. i wouldn’t like to presume that it is necessarily...?

so i have some questions about this reading that i’m suggesting are debated here, meaning between us in correspondance. i had a fleeting thought that i might write a critique of this piece, but it wouldn’t really have utility for anyone who actually reads benjamin or the frankfurt school. that’s to say that it would be platitudinous to someone in this field to read my exposition on why benjamin is a marxist with full fidelity to the method of the dialectic. this is like just a fact. anyone who has read one book by or on benjamin knows this. the dizzying pastiche of historically and theoretical distant figures and notions is unfortunate, but there’s only one thing in this connection that i am sort of disturbed by. this is the oversight of the primary context of the theses, but also of benjamin’s nihilism in general: and this context is fascism. i’m put off by your mentioning of stalinism (“state communism”) as the historical context for benjamin’s heretical marxism [sic], without any

mention of fascism, of benjamin's jewish background, of his exile into paris which was at the time under nazi occupation, or of his suicide at the border of nazi france and nazi spain, where he was denied entry by the gestapo, (not the soviet police).

"the enemy" in the writings of benjamin and brecht, his marxist mentor, is the fascist enemy, not the stalinists. it was obvious to marxists at the time, especially german ones, that stalinism was a hellish deformation of the project of communism. and the hitler-stalin pact of 1939 was what drove many communist parties in europe as well as marxist organizations, to radically reconsider their allegiances. the most theoretically sophisticated of these, johnson-forest tendency among them, returned to the texts of hegel and marx to understand what could have happened; others hold that the dictatorship of the proletariat is a misreading of the self-abolition of the proletariat, which is attended to in marx's exposition on real subsumption. this is a long debate. but it suffices to say that the revision of marx's form of value, historical determinism, etcetera has a long standing and complex trajectory that much anarchist theory approaches selectively. i think about this when i hear mao in the mouths of my nihilist friends, perhaps something left over from the influence of groups like the raf; or when thinking about italian autonomism as the unstudied undersong of so much political thinking in the bay specifically, without any recognition of the primary text of autonomism, which was the grundrisse.

this is just to say the dialectic of anarchism and communism historically is far more interesting than the micro-political polemics that our milieu is so preoccupied with. but i will say that your desire to make a jab at communism in the aforementioned section of yr essay at the expense of recognizing the historical mass grave which is fascism is simply bad taste, and not only that, but in a way contradicts the stakes of benjamin's entire argument in the theses—that it's our responsibility to save the dead—and recasting history to serve our own tendencious purposes is about as far from this as possible. our own writing on the dead obviously concerns

we explicitly critique his understanding of capital in our engagement with him), though we might naturally feel inclined to take his side for the moment when he is accused of unfaithfulness to the proper conception of domination and history. Here we might reemphasize that it is a person's tendency to deviate that draws us, as deviants, to them. Not so we can form a new deviant position to adhere to or deviate from, but to hold a palaver, discoursing in a manner not only idle but aimless.

This is, of course, a matter of taste.

We play with Camatte, and more importantly Perlman, for the same reason we play with Benjamin: for their endeavors in heresy.

3. Yes, of course. Did you read it?

4. Here is an interesting question, however uninteresting your method of approach, and without acceding to speak for nihilism, we will offer an interpretation of the line. While there are several ways to approach nihilism, for now we could say that nihilism means an orientation toward reducing what exists to rubble rather than toward a way through it. For us, this approach corresponds to a strategic interpretation of the situation, a provisional understanding that, firstly, what we are faced with is not yet rubble but structures (and so why concern oneself with navigating a path that has not been opened), and secondly that all attempts, however marginal, at radicalizing and even destroying these structures may result in their improvement. Were you to excavate your cherished History, you'd likely see that every such attempt has lead directly to a labor camp.

Elsewhere we've discussed an ethics which seeks to find escape routes from the structures which constrain us. Your reading of 'a way through' seems to betray a desire to recompose such rubble into some new dialectical arrangement of capture. Without shying away from the delight we take in the rubble, we must also imagine that a 'way through' would mean a way out.

We could counter with Benjamin's call "to recognize the monuments of the bourgeoisie as ruins even before they have crumbled."

2. Certainly, the progressivism and anti-civilization thought you mention are not square nor can they be placed squarely, but can only be erratically played against each other. The great heap of wreckage that Benjamin calls history is what we'd call Leviathan—Death itself which captures the living. Progress can only describe a view from within this monster, as the refinement of its mode of capture, and also as the decimation and accumulation of countless bodies. Benjamin calls it a storm which blows us out of paradise. While we agree with Benjamin that we cannot return to paradise, we must also insist that history can be read and lived in a way that tends to inspire and strengthen us, rather than merely squashing human beings into the gross narrative of progress. We might consider your inquiry in light of Benjamin by returning to Löwy again as he outlines Benjamin's interest in the past through the lens of German Romanticism:

One might define the Romantic Weltanschauung as a cultural critique of modern (capitalist) civilization in the name of pre-modern (pre-capitalist) values—a critique or protest that bears upon aspects which are felt to be unbearable and degrading: the quantification and mechanization of life, the reification of social relations, the dissolution of the community and the disenchantment of the world. Its nostalgia for the past does not mean it is necessarily retrograde: the Romantic view of the world may assume both reactionary and revolutionary forms. For revolutionary Romanticism the aim is not a *return* to the past but a *detour* through the past on the way to a utopian future.

Here we could discuss nostalgia for pre-capitalist values as (*admittedly ahistorical*) resistance to modernity, but on this question we will again be met with your inability to mistake our *interest* for *adherence*. We have no 'allegiance to Camatte' to be spoken of (and

the dead we will be, and Benjamin is case in point. It is undeniable that he was a martyr in the war that fascism was waging on forms of life, and (at the time of his death) winning.

so, onto my questions:

1. considering the sophisticated conception of time in Benjamin's work, of which "non-teleological time" versus 'progress' is a reductive analysis, how does your writing understand (or not understand) the dialectical image of history?

because clearly we aren't talking about past-present-no future. we're talking about chronos and kairos, or now-time in relation to past, and victory in time as revision of past. do you understand non-teleological as 'out of sequence' or as multiple stimmung of time? what your calling "empty homogeneous time" is not history, in Benjamin's sense, but historicization. the movement of history for Marx, as for Benjamin is not immanent, but dialectical, and in this way it becomes a question of politics, instead of philosophy exclusively.

"no future" (to my understanding) is not chronic realism, it's a mood, or impending quality of time. I guess I'm wondering why your study of the essay privileges the question of the future, when the past and possible messianism of the present are clearly objects of import here.

2. how does one square a historical materialist conception of progress (history), with a trans-historical conception of civilization, à la Camatte? in so far as Benjamin explicitly denies a prelapsarian (what you call lost paradise) view, as well as the messianism that he alludes to in the end of the theses, due to the aforementioned fascist-inspired nihilism.

I'm also interested in the way you continue to recourse to "life under capital" despite your allegiance to Camatte, for whom capital is one mask on the face of some abstract domination of real humanness.

3. do any of your analyses in this bear a relation to a queer critique of reproductive futurity devised in the previous two essays?

4. most scholar of benjamin try to negotiate what exactly his style of dialectics are. but it remains that, as in hegelian dialectics, the negation of the negation, or *aufheben*, holds a special place for benjamin, as can easily be deduced by reading critique of violence. this is dealt with also in his text the destructive character (which i'm flabbergasted hasn't become some anarchist fetish yet), wherein he leaves the question of the double movement of negation somewhat ambiguous, the question being, "what of the traces? and "are they also destroyed"

in critique of violence we learn the inoperativity of a style of violence which resides in the dialectic of law and transgression, what brecht called "the reactionary darkness," such that the negation of the law is the definition of transgression. it is our project to produce a double movement which negates the negation, and only this will generation a style of revolutionary violence outside of law ontologically, not outside (outlawing, lawlessnessing) while remaining inside its dialectic. at the bastard conference you answered my question concerning this by speaking about de-positivizing as agamben discusses, and upon reflection it become clear to me that this fails to address the ontological status of law, (we could even use agamben to prove this, viz. inclusive exclusion) with violence as it's primary epiphenomenon. de-postivizing logic leads back to an undialectical, or immanent form of destruction, (the romanticization and reification of which i have more than contempt). what interpretation does nihilism have for a line like, "what exists he reduces to rubble—not for the sake of the rubble, but for that of the way leading through it."

thoughts?

JF

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Dear J.F.,

Now as to your questions:

1. Jargon aside, it is unclear how you concluded that our reading of the "Theses" holds the future in a position of privilege. We can only guess this was by juxtaposition with *No Future*, or perhaps simply because the future is a sort of default orientation one can hardly help but privilege. If the former, we might remind you that in that piece we only privileged the future as a subject in order to attempt to articulate how and why it captivates us, and ultimately to refuse it. If the latter, then we can only say that we are of course not free from this condition, though in turning to Benjamin, we were reminded to turn away from the future, if only for a time and more as gesture than as a break. We could even say that the reading of his "Theses" we presented was intended to be a reminder, or an invitation, in turn.

As you say, *chronic realism* was not the subject of our reading. In fact, since your letter kindly introduced the phrase to our ears, we can think of no term more fitting to describe the condition infecting this society. In the future we may even employ the phrase ourselves, if you don't mind. Chronic realism: the debilitating belief—long-term or life-long, and resistant to medication—in consensus reality. A bit too Crimethinc? We'll work on it.

It is true that in some very strange and inevitable way, there will be a future, even if there is not one for me, or you, or even humanity. One might cast one's vote for plurality and say that there will be no Future, that instead there are many futures. This position is preferable, but is made troublesome by what it inherits—nearly everything—from the conformist view of the future which it means to deviate from.

What remains—what may always remain—is how we intend to orient ourselves with regard to a future we have disavowed, at least in its political forms. Because what is at stake is more than a mood; it is a question of ethics, though far less straightforward than ethical questions are supposed to be. Here, where your line of inquiry leaves off, ours begins.

This elsewhere is undoubtedly to be found in Benjamin's mystical thought. It is interesting that you make some half-hearted effort to criticize us for neglecting his Jewish identity, when your entire reading is an attempt sever his thought from its Jewish influence. You describe this central dimension of his thought as an "unfortunate," "dizzying pastiche of historically and theoretical [sic] distant figures and notions." Your characterization reads as particularly nasty when compared to Gershom Scholem's assertion that Benjamin was "a theologian marooned in the realm of the profane," or his celebration of Benjamin's "intuitive affirmation of mystical themes which walk a fine line between religion and nihilism." Benjamin himself often described being torn between his 'cultic' and 'communist' desires. As he says in a letter to Scholem regarding his 'conversion' to Marxism:

If I were to join the Communist Party someday (something that, in turn, I am making dependent on one last twist of fate), my stance would be to behave always radically and never logically when it came to the most important things.... [T]here are no meaningfully political goals.

Where you would dismiss the fire for the ashes you prize, we recognize these ashes as meaningless and seek only the warmth of what you'd excise.

It is interesting that you write, however obliquely, of betrayal in relation to Benjamin. How can we betray someone who had no sense of the firm commitment you find in him? Is it not strange, that one who is dead can command one's attention so? We also feel this when we read the "Theses," though not, it seems, in the way you do. Not as a responsibility to save some faceless mass of corpses, nor a loyal party member. We read the "Theses" not as a warning against recasting history, but to the contrary as an invitation to cast history away and to recognize in the past the faces of friends.

Thoughts:

As tempting as it may be to detail why and how you are wrong—wrong about Benjamin's supposed "full fidelity" to the dialectic,<sup>3</sup> tragically mistaken about fascism deserving an exceptional status of enmity,<sup>4</sup> and dead wrong about what these unnamed and uncited "scholars of Benjamin" supposedly believe—the fact is that we are not interested in fighting over whether Benjamin truly belongs in our camp or in yours. We will leave it to ideology's adherents to seek adherence to their ideologies.

It is not that we concede the point, but rather that if Benjamin doesn't fit under your tent, neither will he fit under any other. As Michael Löwy put it in his introduction to *Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin's "On the Concept of History"*:

We usually classify the various philosophies of history by their progressive or conservative, revolutionary or nostalgic character. Walter Benjamin does not fit into these classifications. He is a revolutionary critic of the philosophy of progress, a Marxist opponent of 'progressivism,' a nostalgic who dreams of the future, a Romantic advocate of materialism. He is, in every sense of the word, 'unclassifiable.'

While we would not choose the same words as Löwy here, there can be little doubt that Benjamin's thought is characterized more by its promiscuity than by fealty to anything, much less something so rigid as *the dialectic*. Löwy goes on to say:

It is futile, then, to attempt to recruit him into one or other of the two main camps contending for hegemony on the stage (or should we say the market?) of ideas: modernism and postmodernism.

It is not hard to see how the same could be said of Marxism and whatever camp we might be accused of contending for (nihilism?)

ahistorical anti-civilizationism? mysticism?). We do not demand Benjamin's belonging to our camp, if indeed we feel part of any camp (we do not), and if we resist your claims to his belonging to yours, it is partly in the spirit of debate, to be sure, but it is also from a sensation we can only describe as ethical in nature. Not because we feel an obligation to "save the dead," as you claim a proper reading of Benjamin would persuade us is our duty. (The dead? Which ones?) It is rather that to *recognize* someone is to experience an ethical bond with them, especially in cases where the conditions elicit the instincts of preservation.

If we have almost no desire for a battle over ideological claims to Benjamin's legacy, we have even less for a contest over his interpretation by the academy at large. Your claim that anyone *working in this field* would disagree with us doesn't have the sting that you might have intended. You may, for some bizarre reason, be their sycophant, but our project (much like your writing) is not academic, and neither is it constrained by the dominant opinions of experts in their fields. Further, if the majority of Marxist academics do offer such a simplistic reading of someone so enigmatic, we would read this as a call to scandalize their comfortable certainty. What's more, you seem to have missed that our project could be understood, in a certain light, as an attempt to undermine the academic operation of sterilizing and de-clawing rebel thought. Just as we argued that Edelman's work functions to pacify Hocquenghem through the banality of form, those *working in this field* (you, by extension) labor to stultify the subversive qualities of Benjamin's thought through the tired routine of Marxist analysis. We have to ask what motivates you to affirm the *fidelity* of a man otherwise celebrated for his *promiscuity*? Forgive us if we read your inquiry as another effort to capture what remains ineffable, as the labor of a dogmatist, an ideologue.<sup>5</sup>

To invoke Benjamin himself with regard to critical reading:

If, to use a simile, one views the growing work as a burning funeral pyre, then the commentator stands before it like a chemist, the critic like an alchemist. Where for the former, wood and ash remain the sole objects of his analysis, for the latter only the flame itself preserves an enigma: that of what is alive. Thus the critic inquires into the truth, whose living flame continues to burn over the heavy logs of the past and the light ashes of experience.

We'll leave your accredited experts the task of picking through the materialist ashes; our gaze remains fixed on the dancing flames.

What we are interested in questioning at the moment is the line of inquiry which leads you to conclude that our piece betrayed Benjamin or his "Theses." First, however, we should make clear that any attack of ours on communism, whether in the first issue of the journal, in these pages, or elsewhere, is hardly motivated by a desire to score points as you suggest. If that was our interest, we would have simply mentioned the mass graves of communism and left it at that. In our engagement with Benjamin, we saw fit to recognize and appreciate his deviations from Marxism because, for us, such deviations are what interest us in the figures of the past. Insofar as a figure of history only seems to us to be a blurred face among many, we are incapable of recognizing him, much less conversing with her. Insofar as another figure appears only as the political face of some movement or other, they are incapable of holding our interest. But when we can sense a fragment of the past deviating from its course, resisting progress itself, then in a flash this fragment is alive and present with us and, however briefly, we grasp a bit of truth. Even you must admit that few if any would be interested in Benjamin's thought if he clung dogmatically to the method of the dialectic. Clearly, the enchantment of his life's work lies elsewhere.