

Orietta Ombrosi
History, Memory, Forgiveness:
the Philosophy of History of Levinas and Benjamin

Cette manière de compter les hommes sans les voir...¹
(This way of counting human beings without seeing them ...)

It might be strange, in other words, unaccustomed, to address together two figures such as Emmanuel Levinas (1906–1995) and Walter Benjamin (1895–1940). They appear at first glance so distant and distinct, and are not usually read in any sort of proximity. This essay does precisely that: it attempts to bring the two together in order to undo this practice and to decipher what links one with the other while resisting, as much as possible, giving way to the typical philosophical temptation of submitting to a diptych and focusing on what appears to be an essential, shared feature: in this case the philosophy of history.

Naturally, the attempt to bring authors that belong to the same period into dialogue with each other – despite the fact that one could not and did not want to follow the barbaric changes of the century (Benjamin), whereas the other insightfully witnessed the disastrous onset of the new millennium (Levinas) – who, however, neither met nor read each other, entails some risks. To begin with, the risk of forgetting their specificities and the differences between the two philosophers, or omitting their accentuation; the risk of levelling them out, of relying on the memory, capabilities, and knowledge of the reader; but also the risk, no less dangerous in that it represents the signature of the text itself, of focusing on the singularity of a perspective and a point of view, i.e. in this context, that of the philosophy of history.

With these risks spelled out, I need to address the meaning of singularity in my approach that inscribes itself in the wake of a philosophy of witnessing, i.e. follows the traces of an examination of the conditions of the possibility of a thinking that may serve as carrier of memory capable of carrying the witnessing of history's disasters and therefore of taking advantage of the breach opened between the two authors to listen in on their thoughts and in that context, on a decisive point for them as well as for me: the suffering of the victims of history. In this respect, the choice of Benjamin justifies itself, as one will see, if one is willing to take notice

and to realize his “Copernican revolution” according to which nothing is lost in the past of history. And by doing so, further, to learn from him this knowledge that is remembering, this knowledge of listening to the silent calls that reconnect us to the past, this ability to respond to the “tacit encounters” they, the victims of history, demand from us at the moment of our unique presence. With regard to Levinas and with regard to this “face to face” with Benjamin, it justifies itself in shedding light on what seems to inform his thought at the deepest level without ever having been duly emphasized, as his interpreters have remained too concerned with limiting their scope to the ethical, to think here the concern for the nameless of history, the effort to open the airways to give them a voice in the hard-pressed web of forgetting and, maybe, to confide to them another time, another instance, a future, in the instance of the other, of this other that we, generations later, *are*.

More precisely, these considerations on the concept of the philosophy of history in the works of Levinas and Benjamin aim to reread a few excerpts from *Totality and Infinity* by the French philosopher and from *Über den Begriff der Geschichte (On the Concept of History)* by the German philosopher, and to compare those excerpts that echo and unexpectedly reference one another so as to demonstrate how these two philosophers carried out, in distinct ways that are similar, a radical shift of focus concerning historical reflections, in which both paid particular attention to *singularity* at the expense of *universality* in interpreting history and the philosophy of history.

Despite their distinct approaches and backgrounds as Jewish intellectuals, as well as the different time periods in which they lived (Benjamin, until the outbreak of World War II, while Levinas passed away during the late twentieth century), their conclusions on the theme of history are strikingly similar – conclusions or openings that may arouse a certain interest in reinterpreting this past century and the one that has just begun.

In fact, for both philosophers, who never met, the inability of the majority of historians and historiographers to understand the *singularity* of historical events and above all to consider the *singularity* of those who are subject to their course and progress, depends on the ideal of abstract *universality*. The “tyranny of the universal,” according to a very appropriate expression of Levinas, or rather, the impossibility, on the part of most, to think that only that which cannot be traced back to the universal is worthy of being taken into consideration, depends on the fact that this “tyranny” dominates

not only philosophical thought in general, but also that which concerns us even more directly in this relationship, as well as from my point of view: the notions of history and historiography.

Or, when Levinas states, in the preface to *Totality and Infinity*, the need for a breach in totality, or rather in history – as if these two words were synonyms – and the consequential possibility, found throughout the book and his oeuvre, of thinking, beginning with “a *signification without a context*,”² with a signification “beyond,” with an “other” signification that distances itself from the paradigms of universality, of continuity, of randomness and textuality/contextuality, and, on the contrary, draws upon the singularity of the “particular,” of the “personal,” up to a “gleam of exteriority.”³ What his preface begins, precisely, is his philosophical struggle against the tyranny of “totality,” that is, a “tyranny” that reaches the field of history and historiography.⁴ This “tyranny,” which according to Levinas dominates and seduces more than merely the history of philosophy and philosophical thought in general as conceived by the West, at the same time explicitly manifests its power, its imperialism, above all upon history and historiography. In fact, in the presence of the judgment of History, irreducible *singularity*, or rather, the singularity of single events just as of the singularity of single individuals is lost in the totality of temporal flux – continuity – and in the generality of events; in historiography, the *singularity* of the event is eclipsed in its narration, in the words of historiographers. In the same way, the *singularity* of unique and unrepeatable existences, of single individuals, are lost in formless faces, in the identical continuity of everything – time. Similarly, the single and unique voices of the dead are suffocated once and for all, forever, in the identical sentences, one after the other, of historiographers. Paradoxically, history and historiography in the totality of their course and in the verbosity of their arguments lose their most singular traces, the faces, the gestures, the voices of those who have died. “*Totalization*,” Levinas writes,

*is accomplished only in history – in the history of the historiographers, that is, among the survivors. It rests on the affirmation and the conviction that the chronological order of the history of the historians outlines the plot of being in itself, analogous to nature. The time of universal history remains as the ontological ground in which particular existences are lost.*⁵

This passage from *Totality and Infinity* shall serve as a guide for my discussion, which offers at least two possible directions for an interpretation of

history that is attentive to the threat of totalization and to the annulment of singularity in history's intricate mesh. My analysis here shall follow, and elaborate these two directions. On the one hand, Levinas's words suggest the need to analyze further the difficulties in making the decidedly awkward distinction between the history of historiographers and the history of survivors. This affirmation carries with it the, at times, thorny problem of the right to speak on part of the historiographer, a right that has been taken away from the dead, from those who cannot say anything, who can no longer defend themselves or state their own case before the court of History. On the other hand, these words of Levinas once again advance the issue of how time is conceived according to history: in the same moment continuous and irreversible, "universal history," in which the singularity of individuals, but also the singularity of unique moments, are dissolved. Levinas, and Benjamin before him, oppose a discontinuous time, a fragmented time, a time that, on the contrary, may show the gleam (and the glory) of faces, according to Levinas, and the flash of instants, according to Benjamin.

1. History of Survivors

First direction, first question. Even if Levinas's identification of totality with history is clear-cut and without misunderstanding right from the start of the book – "totality *or* history,"⁶ writes Levinas in the introduction – the idea that totalization par excellence unfolds in history, "that is to say," in the history of historiographers, "that is to say," with the "survivors," remains quite surprising. The equivalences established here lead us to think of, and raise a series of questions: in the opinion of Levinas, are historiographers indeed "survivors"? But "survivors" of what? Of whom? And why "survivors"? Historiographers – those who write history – and therefore have the privilege – or the fault – of being present, in place of those who have died? Of writing, and also of speaking, above all, in their place?

On an equally dramatic page, Levinas seems to answer this difficult, painful question, giving an answer that is in complete accord with what Benjamin writes in the seventh thesis of his concept of history: "Historiography," writes Levinas, "recounts the way the survivors appropriate the works of dead wills to themselves; it rests on the usurpation carried out by the conquerors, that is, by the survivors; it recounts enslavement, forget-

ting the life that struggles against slavery.”⁷ Historiography, the history of survivors, narration and word on the part of the winners, is “violence” upon the dead, “enslavement” of dead wills. It is an attack upon life, upon a life that struggles – now and forever – against slavery, against the slavery of totalization, and against the prison of oblivion. An attack upon the unique and single life of those who lay prostrate. Of those who no longer exist. Who no longer speak. It is, according to Levinas, “violence” because, in their interpretation, historiographers “utilize the works of the dead,”⁸ manipulate their works, or rather, the products of their lives or, in the best-case scenario, even their “complete works,”⁹ thus extinguishing each of their words. In the same way, according to Benjamin, the “non-materialist” historiographer empathetically identifies himself with the winner:

All rulers are the heirs of prior conquerors. Hence, empathizing with the victor invariably benefits the current rulers. [. . .] Whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which current rulers step over those who are lying prostrate. According to traditional practice, the spoils are carried in the procession. They are called “cultural treasures.”¹⁰

As I have shown elsewhere,¹¹ one of the tenets of Benjamin’s theory of history revolves around the fact that “the *continuum* is that of the oppressors,” whereas “the history of the oppressed is a *discontinuum*.”¹² This distinction, which might seem too easy or too easily manipulable by a simplistic approach able to distinguish the oppressors from the oppressed each and every time, highlights the importance of the catastrophic dimension in Benjamin’s concept of history. Catastrophic in history is, in effect, the eternal repetition of the same: the repetition of the same narrative, of the same violence, of the same insignificance attributed to the victims, to those who have been suppressed, subjected, exploited, beaten, destroyed, violated, annihilated. Without a name. For what the catastrophe consists in, is that “the things continue to go as they go,” i.e. that they are perpetually identical and obedient to the masters of the moment, always oblivious of those who lie on the earth, those who crawl on the ground, who battle and lose. It is precisely for the memory of those that Benjamin seeks history to return: “In memory of those without a name is the construction of history dedicated.”¹³ History has to reconstruct itself, therefore, with regard to another tradition, absolutely discontinuous, opposed to that of the victors. It has to become the tradition of the forgotten: tradition of those without

a name by opposing itself to the tradition that celebrates the great men, the great peoples, saluting the illustrious men of the Pantheon that claims events like an inheritance, or like the booty of triumph in honor of those, for whom the arches have been built and thousands of people destroyed.

The identification of historiographers with survivors and the victorious, as formulated by Levinas and by Benjamin, continues to unsettle me. In fact, who indeed are these survivors? Must those who were spared wars and massacres also be considered survivors? Must those who were saved, those who survived even though they were “on the side of” the losers, also be included? Levinas’s denouncement and Benjamin’s point of view perhaps foretell the subtle distinction Primo Levi made in 1986 between those who are “drowned” and those who are “saved,” according to the title of his famous book?¹⁴ Between those who are lost forever, on the one hand – those bodies that continue to be trampled upon, even now, each time there is rhetorical commemoration – and, on the other hand, those who are still standing? Or should we consider that these survivors – the historiographers who are “with” the survivors, who are survivors – are precisely those, in the end, who group with the winners? Those who speak *on the part of* the losers? Those who in the triumphal parades of history or behind the ruins of its catastrophes stand or sit up in front to recuperate, to regain, to collect the spoils of those who will always “lie on the ground”? Spoils that, among other things, are made up of that which is commonly defined as “cultural heritage”¹⁵ (*Kulturgüter*) or “complete works”?¹⁶

Here, the considerations of Levinas and Benjamin, though formulated with a distance of about twenty years between them, and although they rest on rather different presuppositions, are similar, and this not just in their implicit critique of Hegel’s history of philosophy: they touch upon one another, they dialogue, without knowing one another; not only do both philosophers accuse historians, historiographers who are on the side of the survivors, who relate to the winners, but they are also comparable in their criticism aimed at what they call the judgment of history: for Levinas, the uniqueness of the words of the dead, the singularity of individuals and moments of the past lose themselves in the judgment of history; in an even more clear-cut way, for Benjamin, the instantaneousness of the past and the uniqueness of its instants are swallowed up by the continuity of “a homogenous, empty time.”¹⁷ Even if both consider and propose a breach in the notion of continuous time – which I shall analyze further in the second part of this essay – it is precisely this loss, this oblivion of

singularity – it would be better to speak of singularity in plural terms – this standardization of uniqueness that guides, perhaps even obsesses, their thoughts. “The virile judgment of history,” writes Levinas,

the virile judgment of ‘pure reason’ is cruel. The universal norms of this judgment silence the unicity in which the apology is contained and from which it draws its arguments. Inasmuch as the invisible is ordered into a totality it offends the subjectivity, since, by essence, the judgment of history consists in translating every apology into visible arguments, and in drying up the inexhaustible source of the singularity from which they proceed and against which no argument can prevail. For there can be no place for singularity in a totality.¹⁸

In this quote, in an explicit and extreme way, once again we see Levinas’s denouncement of the universal and its norms. Before history, before the court of history, in which “pure reason” decrees its rulings, the singularity, the *singularities*, are reduced to silence. The universal norms of that reason, qualified as “virile,” silence the singularity of any apology, of any defense – be it of events or individuals. Since in the judgment of history, that which is invisible, small, microscopic, that which is in the end the spiritual, the subjective, interior life, according to Levinas – that which is in the moment and is that very moment – must be brought to evidence, brought to light. The singular and the unique – which are not visible – must become so, according to a history that is as old as the history of philosophy itself, where only that which is found under the light spectrum, only that which is brought to light may be understood and grasped by reason. Be it event or individual, it is in evidence, in the order of evidence, and therefore of the visible, that reason and, consequently, the judgment of history, which is made by reason, can go forth and manifest themselves. Thus evidence becomes the category, the norm par excellence that regulates reason, the supreme judge of history.

In the judgment of history, moreover, those who could have defended themselves, who, better yet, could have spoken, are forced into anonymity, are obliged to “lend their lips to an anonymous utterance of history.”¹⁹ In fact, words – unique, often the expression of concealed suffering – may only be suffocated – or amassed, condensed into an indirect discourse, into a coherent discourse spoken in third, and not first person, a discourse that is, in short, universal. These words (these singular words) – the words of the dead, words of absent witnesses, even words inscribed in their silence – are considered useless or, in the best-case scenario, are simple facts in the inquiry into the “objective wisdom of the universal judgment.”²⁰ In

short, they have no right, no place in the judgment of history. They may be listened to, perhaps acknowledged, but they are certainly immediately violated when traced back to discourse, in a pronouncement on history in general or on universal History with a capital H. And so it is only History – and historiography – that have the right “to the last word.”²¹ The words of the dead, words in defense of the losers, are left with nothing but silence. Only this – this silence – may welcome them.

Now, according to Levinas, in order for this “offense,”²² this cruelty, this action/work that conceals the invisible, in order for invisibility of the offense – the “offense universal history inflicts on particulars”²³ – to be left behind, in order for “history to lose its right to the last word, necessarily unjust for the subjectivity, inevitably cruel,”²⁴ offense must transform itself into denouncement, into “cry and protestation”²⁵ – as Levinas seems to say in *Totality and Infinity* – but also in the invisible, or rather in the uniqueness of interiority and subjectivity, for offense to be changed, turned into responsibility for another human being. In other words, the offense inflicted – inflicted upon those who have been forgotten – must be acknowledged by the living and each of them – each of *us* – must be “able to see [. . .] that offense of the offended,”²⁶ or in other words, be able to feel responsible before the face of another man.

In the same manner – and what allows me to bring Benjamin closer to Levinas, has allowed me to consider them elsewhere in terms of a philosophy of witnessing, as it appeals precisely to *us* who are present and to come – there is, according to Benjamin, a need for the gift of “fanning the spark of hope in the past,” a gift that belongs to that historian “who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he his victorious,”²⁷ so that history may not have the final word and the dead may be placed in safety – that is, protected by the second offense of their blatant “anonymity.” A gift that belongs to *us* all, since “like every generation, that preceded us, we have been endowed with a weak messianic power, a power on which the past has a claim. Such a claim cannot be settled cheaply.”²⁸ Given to each of *us*, like to the historiographer imagined by Benjamin, and persuaded that the notion of a history that neglects even a single suffering is neither sustainable nor feasible, who must feel and listen to the “suffocated words”²⁹ and voices to reawaken those unfulfilled hopes of past victims and realize them. In fact, history is not simply a science, but it is also a form of *remembrance/commemoration* (*Eingedenken*), since in memories what seems lost is actually not lost. As

Benjamin writes in response to Max Horkheimer's famous letter dated March 16, 1937, in *Das Passagen Werk*:

What science has "determined," remembrance can modify. Such mindfulness can make the incomplete (happiness) into something complete, and the complete (suffering) into something incomplete. That is theology; but in remembrance we have an experience that forbids us to conceive of history as fundamentally atheological, little as it may be granted us to try to write it with immediately theological concepts.³⁰

This, therefore, is theology because that force – the force of the materialist historian/historiographer, but also the force that dwells in each of *us* – is a *messianic* force. A "weak" force, surely, yet able to redeem, in the past, the pain of the victims and to fulfill the lost hopes of the oppressed; finally, a force that can *retroactively* vanquish, in the present, the power of the "Anti-Christ,"³¹ and with it its ever-new, unexpected, fascist tentacles and disguises. And if this implies, as Horkheimer suggests in his letter, the need to also believe in universal judgment,³² Benjamin's reply is clear. As he writes in his third thesis, "On the Concept of History":

The chronicler who narrates events without distinguishing between major and minor ones, acts with the following truth: nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost to history. Of course only a redeemed mankind is granted the fullness of its past – which is to say, only for a redeemed mankind has its past become citable in all its moments. Each moment it has lived becomes a *citation à l'ordre du jour*. And that day is Judgment Day.³³

Therefore, in Benjamin's version of history, poised between historical materialism and theology, events – be they "minor" or "major" like individuals in their singularity, like the most unique and unrepeatable moments, must not be, are not, lost. Yet, they are or will be *entirely* saved and redeemed, recuperated and remembered only on Judgment Day. *In part*, they already are, thanks to commemoration, in our memories, typical of history – of that history able to learn from news reports and from the theology that Benjamin advocated – but also thanks to the "weak *messianic* power" that resides in each human being. And yet, in order for the past to be *entirely* redeemed, *entirely* quotable, one needs to "await," a waiting that is vigilance in "*now-time*" (*Jetztzeit*), on the Day of Judgment. Perhaps, according to Benjamin, the Day of Judgment does not present itself at the end of a historical process but, on the contrary, must be inscribed in each day, in any day, and, above all, in every moment in the "*now-time*" of this

day. As if the Day of Judgment does not differentiate itself in any way from any ordinary day and as if, in turn, the moment of each now were its true place of revelation/redemption. As is well-known, following the famous aphorism by Franz Kafka, Benjamin came to the conclusion, in a preparatory note to his thesis, that universal judgment is a martial court that is called to order every day and according to which each moment bears judgment upon previous moments. Thus the moment becomes the privileged place in which the breach of historical temporality and the eruption of the possible, of the absolutely new, unfolds.

It is not simple to decipher what exactly Benjamin meant with Universal Judgment and, besides, I shall not analyze this idea any further, as this would imply a more detailed analysis of his concept of the Messianic. In any event, it is worth calling to mind that, like Benjamin, Levinas reaches in his critique of the concept of universal history very similar conclusions regarding the final judgment. In fact, according to Levinas, the idea of the “judgment of God”³⁴ is the limit-concept of a judgment that differs from the one of universal history, and which takes into account the invisible, or rather, that which is minor, that which is not evident, that which is singular par excellence, subjectivity,³⁵ since “God sees the invisible and sees without being seen.”³⁶ But, concretely, the judgment of God unfolds every time the inflicted judgment is transformed into redeemed justice and granted responsibility; every time that, instead of contemplating the face of God, we contemplate the face of the other, the face of the “foreigner,” of the “widow,” of the “orphan,” according to a Biblical commandment to which Levinas refers. Every time that, instead of hearing an impersonal and implacable verdict – like in the judgment of history – we hear, rather, a singular, unique appeal, an appeal that echoes singularity, the uniqueness of each person. An appeal to responsibility *and* to justice. An appeal so singular, as to be considered an election by Levinas. An election to infinite responsibility *and* justice.³⁷ Finally, an appeal that transforms judgment into justice.

To place oneself beyond the judgment of history, under the judgment of truth, is not to suppose behind the apparent history another history called judgment of God – but equally failing to recognize the subjectivity. To place oneself under the judgment of God is to exalt the subjectivity [. . .] The judgment of God that judges me at the same time confirms me. But it confirms me precisely in my interiority, whose justice is more severe than the judgment of history.³⁸

Subjectivity, interior life – psychism – that is concretely present in life, like a modality, like *the* modality (perhaps) of God’s judgment that, moreover, goes beyond the “virile” judgment of history, that “clandestinely” opposes its “visible judgment,”³⁹ also presumes an infinite time, a discontinuous time, a time in which everything is possible.

Thus, in their notion of history, both Benjamin and Levinas speak not only in almost identical terms – rescuing the singularity of individuals and moments before history – but, thanks to the idea of final judgment, resort to another concept of time, another with respect to the temporality typical of universal history: not a time that unfolds as homogenous, as the continuity and sum of identical moments, as a continuous flux, but, on the contrary a time that in every moment lies open to that which is possible. To the possible in the past. To the possible able to modify, even devastate the past. Time as counter-time.

*2. History and Counter-Time*⁴⁰

After the critique of history, insofar as it is the history of survivors and victors, Benjamin and Levinas continue with a critique of the traditional notion of time and more so, precisely of temporal continuity, in order to save the legacy of the losers before the court of history.

That in the past, the definitive is not definitive, the complete is not complete, that everything is not lost in the face of history is one of the central ideas that profoundly inhabits Benjamin’s reasoning. Similarly for Levinas, not only has the past not concluded, but it is also open to its “not yet,” to its incompleteness. This inevitably implies for both philosophers a new notion of time that seems to find its origin, even its roots – though in differing ways – in a messianic vision of time.

Benjamin, on various occasions throughout all his theses, challenges the concept of a “homogenous, empty time,”⁴¹ or rather, time insofar as it is a series of identical, successive moments, time as the sum total of such moments. Linear time, continuous time, this time considers the past, present, and future as successive segments in a straight line, a straight line that can also be bent and formed into a circle, even the trajectory followed by the hands of a clock. This is objective time, the time of civic towers, time precisely measured by clocks, the main objects against which a revolt is unleashed when the continuum of history explodes.⁴² It is this quantitative

time Benjamin places in opposition to qualitative time, that is, to the time in which each moment unfolds in its incomparable singularity. In short, it is the time pregnant with *Jetztzeit*, with “*now-time*.” A time in which past, present, and future are condensed, contracted into the *Jetztzeit*. And, in this contraction, the present is no longer a passage, but a “standstill,”⁴³ a flash and image. This present, and more precisely this “*now-time*,” is also able to gather within itself the “shards of messianic time.”⁴⁴

Historicism that describes the past “the way it really was”⁴⁵ is still tied to a continuous and irreversible time, whereas the materialist historiography assumed and followed by Benjamin finds his analysis of history on the blocking, the interruption of time, on the “tiger’s leap”⁴⁶ (*Tigersprung*). Beyond connections, beyond “contexts,” beyond the concatenation of events and sum of moments, materialist historiography therefore proceeds according to pauses and interruptions, leaps. Leaps capable of understanding the past in the pertinence of its redemption; able to shatter the past into images, into images that unfold in the “moment of danger”⁴⁷ and in the “state of exception,”⁴⁸ able, finally, to understand the moments of the past like “monads.” According to Benjamin in his seventeenth thesis:

Historicism rightly culminates in universal history. It may be that materialistic historiography differs in method more from universal history than any other kind. Universal history has no theoretical armature. Its procedure is additive; it musters a mass of data to fill the homogeneous, empty time. Materialistic historiography, on the other hand, is based on a constructive principle. Thinking involves not only the movement of thoughts, but their arrest as well. [. . .] The historical materialist approaches a historical object only where it confronts him as a monad. In this structure he recognizes the sign of a messianic arrest of happening, or (to put it differently) a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past. He takes cognizance of it in order to blast a specific era out of the homogenous course of history; thus, he blasts a specific life out of the era, a specific work out of the lifework. As a result of this method, the lifework is both preserved and sublated *in* the work, the era in the lifework, and the entire course of history *in* the era.⁴⁹

For Benjamin, the work of the historiographer who struggles to save “the oppressed past” consists not only in the task “to brush history against the grain,”⁵⁰ according to this philosopher’s celebrated expression, but rather in grasping the revolutionary *chance* concealed within it, igniting the spark of hope suffocated in the past, but also in enlarging that which is microscopic. The historian must possess a magnifying lens that detects what is tiny, detects the *detail*, distinguishing it from the indistinct, the nebulous, the uniform in the totality of history. To stop at the experience “that re-

mains *unique*” of the encounter with the past⁵¹ and block the moment in a flash. Since in the moment/instant – which is a detail, unique, singular par excellence – there are “shards of messianic time.” The moment, since it is not a passage between past and future, but rather a diving board that allows the “tiger’s leap” towards the past, is in the end, the “small gateway in time through which the Messiah might enter.”⁵² In its immobility, in its interruption and suspension, the moment, the *Jetztzeit*, withholds the past in a flash, in the flash of an image. Thanks to the instantaneousness of this image, to the contraction of that light, the “secret index” (*heimlicher Index*)⁵³ that rests like embers becomes known, acknowledged, recuperated, redeemed. The *Jetztzeit* is thus the moment in which that sun or that star of redemption rises, ascends in the sky of history.

Now, this notion of Benjamin concerning historical time deserves a more in-depth analysis. It approaches, in certain ways, its interpretation by Levinas. Benjamin and Levinas, having quite similar outlooks on history, also take an analogous approach to time and, in particular, focus attention on the incomplete, on the unfinished, on discontinuity in time. In any event Benjamin, unlike Levinas, holds that this interruption of time, this pause is possible in the same historical moment, whereas according to Levinas it is the dimension of interiority, though it remains open to absolute exteriority, which can break the *continuum* of historical time. As clearly suggested by Stéphane Mosès in his book *The Angel of History* – though without underlining this difference between the two philosophers – Benjamin seems to have carried out an outright revolution:

transporting the experience of lived time from the personal sphere to the historical sphere, deformalizing the time of history like Saint Augustine and Bergson had deformalized psychic time, substituting the idea of objective and linear time with the subjective experience of a qualitative time in which each instant is lived in its incomparable singularity.⁵⁴

Focusing on the – messianic – force of the instant, and on its consequences for the present, Benjamin nonetheless dared to conceive that instant (*Jetztzeit*) not as a state of mind or a “modality” of interiority, but as an “inscription in history,”⁵⁵ like a moment in history. Levinas, on the other hand, seems to remain more bound to the potential of interiority. In fact, he resolves the paradoxes unleashed by the interruption of totality and by the pause of historical time, by appealing to the secret of inner life – psychism – and that of fecundity. In *Totality and Infinity* he writes: “Interiority insti-

tutes an order different from historical time in which totality is constituted, an order where everything is *pending*, where what is no longer possible historically remains always possible.”⁵⁶ But how does this break in, and of, history take place? How can we conceive of establishing a different order? How can interiority shatter not only the totality of history, but also the totality of historical time?

Of course, firstly it is the *singularity* of the individual and his interiority that may interrupt the *continuum* of history and time, since the individual, in his birth and work, marks in every moment his beginning and a possible new origin. With his own birth, insofar as he is existing, he breaks not only the neutral flow of existence,⁵⁷ but also that of time and thus has the possibility of suspending it again, before dying, in the works he fulfills. But it is above all the “secret”⁵⁸ of this interiority, always already open to exteriority that upsets “universal time.” Each being has his own time, or rather his own interiority. And interiority, that is, psychic life, made also of its most hidden secrets, is “a dimension [. . .] beyond the possible and the impossible,”⁵⁹ a dimension that makes possible that which appears impossible. It thus introduces discontinuity into historical time, into the “continuous time of history.”⁶⁰

Moreover, it is then *memory*, the welcoming backdrop of this interiority or, rather, the nutshell of this very interiority, that picks up and suspends that which is complete, transforming the “already” into a “not yet,” translating the impossible into the possible. In fact, memory realizes, carries out the impossible by taking on the passivity of the past and, perhaps, dominating it. Thus memory inverts historical time, transforms the irreversible into the reversible. In “memory,” writes Levinas – but does this coincide with actual memory? – “the definitive is not definitive,”⁶¹ since each new moment gives to the past a new meaning. Each moment of memory does not unite with the past but instead “repairs” it.⁶²

Finally, it is *fecundity* that opens time beyond the possible and the continuous. The discontinuous time of fecundity makes possible an absolute youth and recommencement, while leaving the recommencement a relation with the recommenced past in a free return to that past (free with a freedom other than that of memory), and in free interpretation and free choice, in an existence as entirely pardoned. This recommencement of the instant, this triumph of the time of fecundity over the becoming of the mortal and aging being, is a pardon, the very work of time.⁶³

Unlike memory, fecundity is associated with a new beginning that not only recuperates and amends the past, but also forgives it. In resorting to forgive-

ness to explain the paradox of *retroaction*, Levinas carries out a veritable inversion of time: it is *as if* the moment that has flowed by has not left or, better yet, *as if* the past moment repeated itself in the present moment and, in this repetition, purified itself. By purifying the past in the present, forgiveness is therefore part of time itself. In time, the moments do not unite with each other, as is the case with linear, objective time, at the same time mathematical and unfolding according to succession and randomness. In the time of fecundity, the moments unfold starting with an other, with the otherness of the child. Beginning with that “youth,” that “new beginning” inscribed within the child. Thanks to the “absolutely new” of the child, to a new life that renews the time of the father, thanks to forgiveness that, without knowing it, fulfills its very existence, the past is thus purified. This novelty, this unexpectedness, this otherness the child embodies, redeems, and interrupts the definitive in the father’s time. It interrupts it in its continuity and continues with it in interruption. “Time,” explains Levinas, “is the non-definitiveness of the definitive, an ever recommencing alterity of the accomplished – the ‘ever’ of this recommencement.”⁶⁴ Therefore time is “dead” time – but how vivifying! – time that separates – though it unites – the time of the father from the time of the son. It is in that “between,” “between the two times,” “between” the time of the father and the time of the son: “between two times”, interval, discontinuous time, “the infinity of time.”⁶⁵

But a series of questions emerges: why does Levinas insist so much on time as forgiveness, even using the term “resurrection”?⁶⁶ Why “forgiveness”?⁶⁷ Why should the past be forgiven, purified? Should we not interpret this insistence on forgiveness as prompting us to see, precisely in fecundity – and therefore in the “new beginning” of future generations – the sole possibility of redemption of that recent, burning past which for Levinas, and for all of us, was the *Shoah*?

Perhaps the only possibility of *retroactively* forgiving, that which in the present of dark times is unforgivable, lies in fecundity; the only way to relive, thanks to children and the children of children – but without any substitution – time and instants, time and instants of others otherwise lost. A way of not conceding to exterminating power on the part of the victors who do not stop winning, as Emil Fackenheim also believes, during the same period as Levinas.⁶⁸ Finally, a way of transforming the irreversibility of historical time into reversible time, infinitely open and thus giving infinity back to time.

This forgiveness inscribed in fecundity, which Levinas discusses is, in my opinion, of the same order – and the same disorder – as that “secret

agreement”⁶⁹ between past and future generations that Benjamin, in turn, cites. The time of fecundity, that infinite time, time as infinite and as discontinuity, as Levinas discusses, is of the same kind, though not identical, as the “weak messianic power” Benjamin explores. According to him, this is a possible force, thanks to *commemoration* (*Eingedenken*), to memory, and is implicit in a hermeneutical reading of history. A force that is concentrated, for both philosophers, in the uniqueness of the moment. Certainly, for Benjamin there is no fecundity for human beings – there is a great difference here between the two philosophers – but only redemption, or more precisely the redemption of historical time itself. Or, if one prefers, one could conclude that for him it is a matter of the fecundity of time. It is thanks to the remembering (*Eingedenken*) of the human being emerging and realizing itself in the moment, that history can be restored and redeemed. But is it not a matter of the redemption of historic time, after all? According to the words of the German philosopher: “*our life* [. . .] is a muscle strong enough to contract the whole of historical time.”⁷⁰

Like the ever new angels of which the Talmud speaks and which are invoked by Benjamin,⁷¹ these angels are created at every instant by the myriads having made their voices heard before God, silenced and reduced to nothing as at the same time the instants present themselves to us to make their call be heard, received, and resurrected, and finally to disappear in their evanescence. These instants like new angels – about which one does not know whether they sing to complain, denounce, or exult before God – are born and disappear in their flight. About them, too, one does not know whether they exist to say with their call, their lament, or their praise. Each angel, like each instant, thus announces in its voice “gone in the spur of the moment,” in its expiring breath, the last judgment. It announces the destruction and the redemption whose carrier it is as the last judgment becomes a “court martial,” which continues each day because “each instant is an instant of judgment of the instants that preceded it.”⁷² The last judgment, like redemption, grounds itself in the vanity and fecundity of the instant, in the pregnant void and carrier of its own realization and annihilation.

The time of fecundity, though, for Levinas – like the fecundity of the instant in Benjamin – is not concluded time, that is, the time of the end of time. It is nonetheless a fragment of messianic time, a fragment *inscribed* in the “extreme vigilance of the [. . .] consciousness.”⁷³ A fragment of the infinity of messianic time *inscribed* in the finitude of the flesh and in the psychism of subjectivity; in short, one of the traces of the Infinite in the

finite, a way of remaining loyal to it “one generation after the other.” In the same manner, for Benjamin, this messianic hope – where concrete hope inscribes itself in the instant, in its fecundity and even in its dialectics of birth and destruction – is an extreme vigilance that allows us to find at every moment the door through which the messiah may enter and, with him, perhaps, emerge the revolutionary novelty of redemption.

Finally, this infinite time of fecundity is also a way/modality that belongs to what Levinas calls the “eschatology of peace,”⁷⁴ that “beyond of history”⁷⁵ that tears man away from universal and virile judgment; a modality of that eschatology that gives back to each moment the full meaning of incompleteness, its non-finished sense. Does not redemption perhaps come to correct that same present moment? As Levinas writes, in a way that resonates with Benjamin’s ideas,

how could one sole tear, though it be effaced, be forgotten, how could reparation have the least value, if it did not correct the instant itself, if it did not let it escape in its being, if the pain that glints in the tear did not exist “pending”, if it did not exist with a still provisional being, if the present were consummated?⁷⁶

How, finally, not to think, not to hope, in agreement with these words of Levinas, but also according to the specific perspectivity of Benjamin that the instant in its fall or parable, shared with the angels in its fecund/pregnant void does not also await to be collected, to be surprised? To be received and judged by another instant that enters into a constellation with it? To be rescued by that Messianic instant of remembering, an instant capable, maybe, to turn, not without trace, the said entanglement of the skeletons into a non-order of “resurrection[s]”?⁷⁷

(translated by Emily Ligniti)

Notes

- 1 Emmanuel LEVINAS : *Carnets de captivité*, Paris: Grasset, 2009, p. 85 (our translation).
- 2 Emanuel LEVINAS : *Totalité et Infini. Essai sur l'extériorité*, Nijhoff, 1961; *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, Martinus Nijhoff, 1979, 23 (Levinas’s italics).
- 3 Ibid., 24.
- 4 “There exists,” writes Levinas, “a tyranny of the universal and of the impersonal, an

- order that is inhuman though distinct from the brutish. Against it man affirms himself as an irreducible singularity, exterior to the totality into which he enters,” in *ibid.*, 242.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 55 (my italics).
 - 6 *Ibid.*, 19.
 - 7 *Ibid.*, 228.
 - 8 *Ibid.*
 - 9 *Ibid.*
 - 10 Walter BENJAMIN: “On the Concept of History” in Walter BENJAMIN: *Selected Writings*, volume 4: 1938-1940, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Others, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, Cambridge, Mass, and London: Harvard University Press, 2003, 389-397, §7, 391 (trans. Harry Zohn).
 - 11 Cf. my: *Le crépuscule de la raison. Benjamin, Adorno, Horkheimer et Levinas à l'épreuve de la Catastrophe*, Paris: Hermann, 2007, esp. chapt. 2, section 2 “Catasrophe and continuum historique,” 65–73. A translation is forthcoming with Academic Studies Press, Boston.
 - 12 Cf. the preparatory notes to Benjamin’s “On the Concept of History” in Walter BENJAMIN: *Gesammelte Schriften*, edited by Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schwepenhäuser, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974-1989, vol 1:3, 1229–1252: here 1244 (MS 481), 1243 (MS 477).
 - 13 *Ibid.*, 1241 (MS 447/1094).
 - 14 Primo LEVI: *I sommersi e i salvati*, Turin: Einaudi, 1986; *The Drowned and the Saved*, New Yorke: Vintage, 1989.
 - 15 Walter BENJAMIN: *On the Concept of History*, §7, 391.
 - 16 LEVINAS: *Totality and Infinity*, 228.
 - 17 BENJAMIN: *On the Concept of History*, §13, 395.
 - 18 LEVINAS: *Totality and Infinity*, 243–244.
 - 19 *Ibid.*, 23.
 - 20 *Ibid.*, 242.
 - 21 *Ibid.*, 243.
 - 22 *Ibid.*
 - 23 *Ibid.*, 247.
 - 24 *Ibid.*, 243.
 - 25 *Ibid.*, 244.
 - 26 *Ibid.*, 247.
 - 27 BENJAMIN: *On the Conception of History*, §6, 391: “The only historian capable of fanning the spark of hope in the past is the one who is firmly convinced that even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he is victorious. And this enemy has never ceased to be victorious.”
 - 28 BENJAMIN: *On the Concept of History*, §2, 390.
 - 29 This expression refers to the important, and perhaps somewhat forgotten, book by Sarah KOFMAN: *Paroles suffoquées*, Paris: Galilée, 1987.
 - 30 Walter BENJAMIN: *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1999, [N 8,1], 471.
 - 31 BENJAMIN: *On the Concept of History*, 391.
 - 32 BENJAMIN: *The Arcades Project*, *ibid.*

- 33 BENJAMIN: *On the Concept of History*, 390.
- 34 LEVINAS: *Totality and Infinity*, op. cit., 244.
- 35 This point certainly deserves further elaboration.
- 36 LEVINAS: *Totality and Infinity*, 244.
- 37 On the need for two moments, responsibility and justice, I refer to my “La traduction, ou la tentation de la tentation. La source hébraïque dans la pensée de Levinas” in *Emmanuel Levinas: Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, Brussels, 60, 235/1, 2006, 91–114.
- 38 LEVINAS: *Totality and Infinity*, 246.
- 39 Ibid. Moreover, Levinas specifies that this visible judgment of history also seduces the philosopher.
- 40 This title refers to the important book by Françoise PROUST: *L’histoire à contretemps. Le temps historique chez Walter Benjamin*, Paris: Cerf, 1994.
- 41 BENJAMIN: *On the Concept of History*, §13, 395.
- 42 BENJAMIN: *On the Concept of History*, §15, 395
- 43 BENJAMIN: *On the Concept of History*, §16, 396: “time takes a stand [*einsteht*] and has come to a standstill.”
- 44 BENJAMIN: *On the Concept of History*, appendix A, 397: “shot through with the splinters of messianic time.”
- 45 BENJAMIN: *On the Concept of History*, §7, 391: “the way it really was.”
- 46 BENJAMIN: *On the Concept of History*, §14, 395.
- 47 BENJAMIN: *On the Concept of History*, §6, 391: “as if flashes up in a moment of danger.”
- 48 BENJAMIN: *On the Concept of History*, §8, 392: “state of emergency.”
- 49 Ibid., §17, 396.
- 50 Ibid., §7, 392.
- 51 Ibid., §16, 396.
- 52 Ibid., appendix B, 397.
- 53 Ibid., §2, 390.
- 54 Stéphane MOSÈS : *L’ange de l’histoire. Rosenzweig, Benjamin, Scholem*, Paris: Seuil, 1993, p. 150 (our translation).
- 55 Ibid.
- 56 LEVINAS: *Totality and Infinity*, 55.
- 57 Cfr. LEVINAS : *De l’existence à l’existant*, Paris : Vrin, 1990.
- 58 LEVINAS: *Totality and Infinity*, p. 57. (Levinas’s italics).
- 59 Ibid., 57.
- 60 Ibid., 58.
- 61 Ibid., 281.
- 62 Ibid., 282.
- 63 Ibid., 282.
- 64 Ibid., 283.
- 65 This is the title of the paragraph that concludes the section “Beyond the Face” in *Totality and Infinity*, and which contains the reflections that have been outlined here.
- 66 Ibid., 283.

- 67 It is very likely that this insistence of forgiving is due to the interest that Levinas brings to this subject, in agreement with other French Jewish intellectuals such as André Neher, Vladimir Jankélévitch, and Eliane Amado Lévy-Valensi, who in 1963 had convened with Levinas a groundbreaking conference dedicated to the subject of forgiving. The publication of the conference proceedings remains an important document and witnessing for understanding the significance of “forgiving” two decades after the Shoah and at the beginning of the political negotiations regarding moral, resp. financial reparation by Germany with regards to Jewish institutions. Cf. Eliane Amado LÉVI-VALENSI and André NEHER (eds.): *La conscience juive face à l’histoire: le pardon*, Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1965. In this context, the idea of a possible confrontation of the volume’s authors with each other deserves some critical reflection.
- 68 Emil FACKENHEIM: *God’s Presence in History: Jewish Affirmation and Philosophical Reflection*, New York: New York University Press, 1968.
- 69 BENJAMIN: *On the Concept of History*, §2, 390.
- 70 BENJAMIN: *The Arcades Project*, [N 13a, 1], 479.
- 71 Walter BENJAMIN: “Karl Kraus” in *Selected Writings*, Volume 2: 1927–1934, trans. Rondey Livingston and Others, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith, Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1999, 433–457, 457.
- 72 See Benjamin’s preparatory notes “Concept of History”, in BENJAMIN: *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol 1:3, 1245.
- 73 LEVINAS: *Totality and Infinity*, 285.
- 74 *Ibid.*, p. 22.
- 75 *Ibid.*, p. 23.
- 76 *Ibid.*, p. 238.
- 77 Cf. Walter BENJAMIN: *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, intr. George Steiner, trans. John Osborne, London and New York: Verso, 1998, 235.