Foreword:

Wings of Patience

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The new does not lie in what is said, but in the event of its return.

—Michel Foucault

_L’Ordre du discours_ (my translation)

The essence of a thing never appears at the outset, but in the middle, in the course of its development, when its strength is assured. Having transformed philosophy by posing the question of the “new” instead of that of eternity (how are the production and appearance of something new possible?), Bergson knew this better than anyone.

—Gilles Deleuze

_Cinema I: The Movement-Image_

I.

An inquiry about newness can easily come across as one about modernity, and hence as banal. Our concern with modernity has never seemed to cease, primarily if not solely because of the connection of modernity with capitalism: so long as capitalism stays, the problem of modernity is with us. Whether globalization is regarded as the newest—and the last—version of modernity or as a radical break with it, the good and ill of things contemporary are more often than not taken to be the effects of modernity.

There is, to be sure, validity to such a sustained interest in modernity. Yet the issue of newness need not be confined to that of modernity alone. Newness is also about creation, about metamorphosis, about our curiosity as to how “the production and appearance of something new [are] possible” (Deleuze 3). Admittedly, modernity broadly defined can translate as an impulse for the new; at the end of the day, however, “the modern” evokes some sort of periodization or generation differences. A rare exception is perhaps Paul de Man’s attempt to configure “literary
modernity.” Although eventually he sticks to the same term, the thrust of “modernity” for him lies in its being not only a temporal but also an ontological concept; hence his attentiveness to Nietzsche’s proposition of “life” (de Man 142-65).

Part of what we have hoped to see engaged through the theme “Angel of Newness” is exactly this ontological dimension of “concepts that are in essence temporal” (de Man 144).

II.

Much has been said about Walter Benjamin’s interpretation of Paul Klee’s *Angelus Novus*. Of the more recent renderings, Giorgio Agamben’s and Samuel Weber’s both discuss the New Angel alongside some other angelic figures. For Agamben, this other figure is the pensive angel in Albrecht Dürer’s 1514 engraving *Melencolia I*, which Agamben suggests represents the angel of art. His argument is that, by reading Klee’s New Angel as the angel of history incapable of withstanding the storm of progress, Benjamin is pointing to the forever lost transmissibility of tradition, to the discontinuity between the past and the present. Our salvation, Agamben contends, rests in art. Art can help settle the tension between the old and the new not by restoring a usable past, but by materializing the very intransmissibility of the past. In other words, what art transmits is precisely the impossibility of transmission. If Dürer’s angel is melancholy, it is because he has chosen knowledge over truth and is willing to suffer his own isolation (Agamben 107-12). “[A]rt succeeds . . . in transforming man’s inability to exit his historical status, perennially suspended in the inter-world between old and new, past and future, into the very space in which he can take the original measure of his dwelling in the present and recover each time the meaning of his action” (114).

The key term here is “each time”: now that truth is unavailable, we strive to gain knowledge over and over again in our action, and in our aesthetic practice. Creation of the new in the act of repetition.

Weber, too, has noted the knowledge-truth distinction that Benjamin takes pains to make, and the Saturnian message in some of Benjamin’s writings. In the chapter “Song and Glance” in his recent book, whose complexity I can in no way reproduce here, Weber advances an original reading of “Agesilaus Santander,” the text in which Benjamin alludes to the New Angel picture in his possession. The title of the text invites speculation, to begin with: “Agesilaus” is the name of a Spartan king whereas “Santander” refers to a town in northern Spain; neither is referred to
explicitly in the text itself. Taking his cue from Gershom Scholem, who has famously read “Agesilaus Santander” as an anagram of “Der Angelus Satanas” (The Angel Satan), Weber draws our attention to the centrality of the Satan figure in Benjamin’s theory of baroque allegory: Satan the tempter of man is also the one initiating man into knowledge (Weber 211-21). Weber then furthers the discussion by turning to other celestial beings mentioned in “Agesilaus Santander”: in addition to the New Angel, there is his female counterpart out on a mission to take revenge on Benjamin—or, rather, the Benjamin persona—for having disturbed the Angel’s work; there are also those “new angels,” countless in number, that God in the Kabbalistic tradition creates at every instant (Weber 221-23).

While a lot of these angel references in “Agesilaus Santander” remain obscure (even the allusion to Klee’s watercolor is suggestive of allegory), Weber comes to suggest that the Benjamin persona’s response to the interruption of the angel’s work—that is, to catastrophe—amounts to the “weak messianic power” that Benjamin has proposed elsewhere (Weber 225). Weak messianism is the answer to a world that witnesses the stark conflict between knowledge and truth. If allegory is in order, if Satan takes center stage, and if melancholia is inevitable, Weber reminds us, it is because the allegorical “intention” is all about “the pure curiosity which is aimed at mere knowledge with the proud isolation of man” (Benjamin, Origin 229; qtd. in Weber 216).

In “Agesilaus Santander,” the motif of weak messianism crystallizes in what the Benjamin persona calls “patience,” and this patience is presented as yet another winged creature:

Perhaps he [the Angel] did not realize that he thereby mobilized the strength of the one against whom he moved. For my patience yields to nothing. It beats [its wings] in a way not unlike the Angel’s, since very few strokes are required to render it unmovable in face of the one it has decided to await. It, however, with claws like the Angel’s and beating wings sharp as knives, gives no sign of pouncing upon the one it has in its sights. (qtd. in Weber 223; Weber’s translation)¹

By beating its wings, Benjamin’s patience seeks not to confront its antagonist head on, but to stay “unmovable.” As Weber puts it astutely, the mission of such patience is to “mark time,” to “mak[e] ‘interruption’ into the possibility of salvation,

¹ There are two versions of “Agesilaus Santander”; Weber is here citing the first one. For the different versions, see Benjamin, Selected Writings 712-16.
however slim” (224, 225). In times of catastrophe, the mere act of marking time is ennobling enough.

Benjamin has certainly offered trajectories other than melancholia. Nonetheless, this figure of the wings of (Benjamin’s) patience, I want to suggest, can serve as a timely reminder that inquiries about newness, if taken anew, can open up conversations much broader than those centered on the usual suspects in modernity scholarship.

And who says melancholia can’t be an auspicious message?

Works Cited


