

Essay

# Historiography and Remembrance: On Walter Benjamin's Concept of *Eingedenken*

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**Abstract:** Engaging with Walter Benjamin's concept of *Eingedenken* (remembrance), this article explores the pivotal role that remembrance plays in his attempt to develop a radically new vision of history, temporality, and human agency. Building on his essay "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" and on his last written text, "Theses on the Philosophy of History", it will trace how memory and historiography are brought together in a curious fusion of materialist and messianic thinking. Emerging from a critique of modernity and its ideology of progress that is cast as crisis—the practice of remembrance promises a 'way out'. Many of Benjamin's secular Marxist critics such as Max Horkheimer and Rolf Tiedemann, however, denied the political significance of *Eingedenken*—dismissing it as theological or banishing it to the realm of aesthetics. Rejecting this critique, I suggest that the radical ethical aspects of *Eingedenken* can be grasped only once the theological dimension is embraced in its own right and that it is in precisely this blend of materialist and messianic thought that revolutionary hope may be found.

**Keywords:** Benjamin; Baudelaire; modernity; progress and catastrophe; materialism and mysticism; remembrance and historiography

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*Only our momentary and accidental knowledge makes something rounded and changeless of the past. The smallest modification of that knowledge, such as any accident may occasion, sheds new light upon the "unchangeable" past, and suddenly, in that new light, everything acquires a different meaning and actually becomes different.* (Lukács [1910] 2010, p. 180)

What I want to do in this essay is share my engagement with and understanding of Walter Benjamin's concept of *Eingedenken* (remembrance). Although Benjamin did not treat the concept in its own right in any extensive way, we can nonetheless hear it reverberating through the entire corpus of his writings. Neologisms—like *Eingedenken*—suggest rupture, innovation, and a movement reaching outward—yet the word itself evokes familiar German words like *Gedenken* (remembrance, commemoration), *Andenken* (souvenir, reminder, or as a verb *andenken* to honor and commemorate someone or something) which, in conjecture with the prefix *ein*, denote an embracing inward-reaching movement. As we shall see later, both these aspects—inwardness and outwardness—are present. In the first layer of this essay, I wish to explore Benjamin's reconceptualization of remembrance on the basis of his essay *On Some Motifs in Baudelaire* (1939). In the second layer, I turn to Benjamin's last written text—his *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (1940)—in order to consider how memory and history are brought together in a peculiar fusion of messianic impulses and historical materialist thinking.

## 1. *Eingedenken* and Deterioration of Experience [Erfahrung] in Modernity

Benjamin's reconceptualization of history emerges from a radical critique of modernity and its ideology of progress. By capturing the ephemerality and fleetingness of life in the metropolises, the poetry of Charles Pierre Baudelaire (1821–1867) provides a rich archive for Benjamin's attempt to unlock the preconditions and central "motifs" of modernity. In *On some Motifs in Baudelaire*

(1939), Benjamin points to the deprivation of *Erfahrung* (experience) as one of the central ‘losses’ in modernity. Coordinating one’s movement within the constant flow of amorphous metropolitan masses, traffic, and information, the individual is involved in a series of shocks, collisions, and overstimulation—moments reminiscent of Baudelaire’s time, Benjamin’s own time—and perhaps still stretching out to our time.

Benjamin writes, “The greater the share of the shock factor in particular impressions, the more constantly consciousness has to be alert as a screen against stimuli; the more efficiently it does so, the less do these impressions enter experience (*Erfahrung*), tending to remain in the sphere of a certain hour in one’s life (*Erlebnis*)” (Benjamin 1968a, p. 163).

In modern means of communication—embodying the principle of spontaneity, brevity, and immediate comprehensibility—Benjamin finds essential evidence of isolated temporal structures which deprive us from the ability “to assimilate the data of the world around [us] by way of experience. [The] intention is just the opposite, and it is achieved: to isolate what happens from the realm in which it could affect the experience of the reader” (ibid., p. 159).

According to Benjamin, the ideology of novelty and progress is closely linked to a concept of homogenous, empty time. The tragedies and sufferings of the 20th century conflate the continuum of history with the “permanence of the unbearable”, and progress is founded in “the eternal return of the catastrophe” (Habermas 1979, p. 38). While the obsessive orientation towards the future—as in *Erlebnis* (the passing moment)—brings about “the new in the repeatedly same, and the repeatedly same in the new” (ibid., p. 39), *Erfahrung* (experience) is connected with tradition. By way of rituals, festivals, and ceremonies, stimuli are integrated to experience—both in respect to collective existence as well as private life. *Erfahrung* is defined less as the “product of facts firmly anchored in memory than of a convergence in memory of accumulated and frequently unconscious data” (ibid.), it “accompanies one to the far reaches of time, that fills and divides time” (Benjamin 1968a, p. 179). This point of convergence between experience (*Erfahrung*) and remembrance (*Eingedenken*) is also articulated in Benjamin’s emphatic reference to Henri Bergson, who considered the structure of memory as pivotal for experience in the strict sense of the term. For those who are deprived of experience—Benjamin laments—“there is no consolation” (ibid., p. 184). “They behave like the pedestrians in Poe’s story. They live their lives as automatons and resemble Bergson’s fictitious characters who have completely liquidated their memories” (ibid., p. 178).

The intimate correlation of forgetting and repeating evoked here resonates with psychoanalytic thought, which in fact also appears to be a reference for Benjamin. He points to Freud’s insight, that memory fragments are often most potent when the process which left them behind never became conscious (cf. ibid., p. 160). In *Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through*, Freud writes that what is forgotten, not remembered and repressed, is acted out (cf. Freud [1914] 1950, p. 150). Instead of producing a memory, the traumatic event is unconsciously repeated in action over and over again. The suggestion brought forward here subverts the common opposition of remembering and forgetting, and points to the persistence of forgotten and repressed matter. In his essay on Kafka Benjamin writes, the “fact that it is now forgotten does not mean that it does not extend into the present. On the contrary: it is actual by virtue of this very oblivion” (Benjamin 1968b, p. 130). Given that for Benjamin the loss of experience (*Erfahrung*) is closely related to a crisis of remembrance, revitalization of remembrance promises a way out of impoverished experience in the modern world.

## 2. Eingedenken as a Practice of Remembrance

It is again in the poems of Baudelaire that Benjamin finds not only traces of shock—but also moments that overcome the human suffering in modernity. Here we are introduced to the structure of *correspondances* [equivalents/Entsprechungen], which bring about “days of completing time [...]”. They are days of recollection, not marked by any experience. They are not connected with the other days, but stand out from time. [...] The important thing is that the *correspondances* record a concept of experience which includes ritual elements [...] What Baudelaire meant by *correspondances* may be

described as an experience which seeks to establish itself in crisis-proof form. [...] The *correspondances* are the data of remembrance—not historical data, but data of prehistory. What makes festive days great and significant is the encounter with an earlier life” (Benjamin 1968a, pp. 181–82).

While modernity in its obsession with sensation and progress is piling up catastrophes—the days of *Eingedenken* cut through the linear, necessary, and continuous vision of time. Time draws to a stop, comes to a standstill, to “now-time” (*Jetztzeit*). Temporal homogeneity is interrupted and a few, yet meaningful days open up. In another instance, Benjamin speaks of *Eingedenken* as the insertion of an empty time sequence to which man is released to a temporal becoming [*durée*/duration] (cf. Benjamin 1968a, pp. 180–99). This temporal structure of now-time stands out from the continuum of history, marks a point of repetition, and allows for a new form of historical experience.

The *correspondances* form the substance of these days of recollection—they are the principle by which the data of *Eingedenken* is structured. By way of this recollection (*Eingedenken*), the “murmur of the past” (ibid., p. 182) may be heard in the present; disparate fragments are disentangled or associated with each another. Images may be seized—creating a disruptive conjunction of the past and present, in which a yet unseen, or yet unheard moment is articulated. Stéphane Mosès points out that Benjamin, by “giving a new opportunity to everything that has been erased, forgotten or not accounted for in the past”—draws on the tradition of Jewish Mysticism and *Eingedenken* thus “continues the Jewish category of “re-remembering” (*Zekher*), which does not denote the preservation in memory of events of the past but their re-actualization in the present experience” (Mosès 2009, p. 109).

The past then is not conceived as a product of facts firmly stored in memory, but rather as the “convergence in memory of accumulated and frequently unconscious data” (Benjamin 1968a, p. 157). Instead of conveying an event per se—as in information—*Eingedenken* evokes the figure of the genuine storyteller, who embeds the event in her or his own life “in order to pass it on as experience to those listening. It thus bears the marks of the storyteller much as the earthen vessel bears the marks of the potter’s hand” (ibid., p. 159). Remembrance thus allows for experience [*Erfahrung*] and where there is experience in its emphatic form, elements of the individual past come into conjunction with material from the collective past—intimate and public aspects of remembrance are brought together.

According to Bernd Witte, the impoverishment of experience and memory in modernity is also a crisis of transmissibility [*Tradierbarkeit*] (Witte 2008). He points to the liturgical nature of Jewish historical memory, in which the medium of scripture is regarded as an essential component in the transfiguration of events into reenactments and commemoration. Benjamin finds a similar belief in Proust’s “lifelong exercises in which he strove to bring to light past things saturated with all the reminiscences that had worked their way into his pores during his sojourn in the unconscious” (Benjamin 1968a, p. 180). Liturgical time thus prevents remembrance to be left to mere chance—“rituals with their ceremonies, their festivals [...] kept producing the amalgamation of the [...] two elements of memory [voluntary and involuntary] over and over again. They triggered recollection at certain times and remained handles of memory for a lifetime. In this way, voluntary and involuntary recollection lose their mutual exclusiveness” (ibid., p. 159).

### 3. Memory and Historiography

With this tentative understanding of *Eingedenken* in mind, let us now turn to the *Theses on the Philosophy of History* to further explore the links between memory and history.

The essay on Baudelaire already indicated that, for Benjamin, history and memory are not separate categories, but should rather be understood as always already closely intertwined. For one thing, remembrance is historically specific, in that *Eingedenken* combines contents of the intimate-individual past with material of the collective-public past. For another, history is written by way of remembrance—history and memory, as suggested here, are holding each other in a close embrace. As mentioned before, Benjamin rejects the possibility of a past to be stored as facts in memory and reconstituted in history (as in historicism) and instead he thinks of the past as converging in memory—a process of re-actualization in the present moment. The past becomes visible by

way of *Eingedenken*—a practice of remembrance in the historian’s own present, in the here and now. This sensitizes us to the fact that the past is viewed and made intelligible by ‘writing’ history [historiography] and thus depends on *what* and *how* we remember, as well as what we choose to ignore or to honor.

“The true picture of the past flits by [and] the past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at an instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again” (Benjamin 1968c, p. 255).

Given this ephemerality of remembrance, how can historical events be made accessible and be transmitted?

The concepts of structure or construction [*Konstruktion*] constitute a response to this question: “History is the subject of structure [*Konstruktion*] whose site is not homogenous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now [*Jetztzeit*]” (ibid., p. 261). The concepts of *Jetztzeit* and *Konstruktion* remind us that remembrance takes place in a concrete historical situation within the historian’s present moment. The role of the historian is also addressed in Benjamin’s essay *Eduard Fuchs: Collector and Historian* (1937) where he speaks of an attitude of urgency and “unrest” as the beginning of a dialectical contemplation of history. He writes:

This state of unrest refers to the demand on the researcher to abandon the tranquil contemplative attitude toward the object in order to become conscious of the critical constellation in which precisely this fragment of the past finds itself in precisely this present. ‘The truth will not run away from us’—a statement found in Gottfried Keller—indicates exactly that point in the historical image of historicism where the image is broken through by historical materialism. It is an irretrievable image of the past which threatens to disappear in any present which does not recognize its common relation with that image. (Benjamin 1975, p. 28)

Rejecting the notion of an objectively reconstructed past, the term *constellation*—borrowed from astronomy—describes the disruptive instant, in which the present suddenly joins a moment of the past, or, in which a moment of the past is suddenly articulated in the present.

*Eingedenken*—based on a constructive principle within a specific constellation of past and present—unfolds in the reciprocity of “flow” (flashing images) and “arrest”. A present—not understood as transition between past and future, but as a standstill. “For this notion defines the present in which he himself is writing history. Historicism gives the ‘eternal’ image of the past; historical materialism supplies a unique experience with the past” (Benjamin 1968c, p. 262).

Historiography by way of *Eingedenken*—combining standstill and motion—simultaneously mobilizes disruptive and constructive moments. “Now-time”, on the one hand, creates *disruption*. It blasts open the continuum of history and establishes a present that “is shot through with chips of Messianic time” (ibid., p. 263). On the other hand, juxtaposing disparate yet corresponding temporal moments in the grasp of a secret constellation between different eras is an act of *construction*. It is within this tension that the dialectical image—the materialist presentation of history—appears. Encountering the historical subject as a “monad” the historical materialist “recognizes the sign of Messianic cessation of happening, or, put differently, a revolutionary chance in the fight of the oppressed past” (ibid.).

Before I engage with the messianic-revolutionary hope expressed here—let us briefly touch upon the following question regarding the mnemonic aspect of history: What makes remembrance—the practice of ‘seizing images’—“trueful” in regard to the past?

#### 4. Remembrance, History, Redemption

The criticism we encountered in Benjamin’s Baudelaire essay—namely of the idea of progress based on a continuous and homogenous vision of time—appears again in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*. The idea of progress “was, first of all [pictured as] the progress of mankind itself [ . . . ]. Secondly, it was something boundless, in keeping with the infinite perfectibility of mankind. Thirdly, progress was regarded as irresistible, something that automatically pursued a straight or spiral course

[ ... ]. The concept of the historical progress of mankind cannot be sundered from the concept of its progression through a homogenous, empty time" (Benjamin 1968c, pp. 260–61). Reflecting the direct experience of fascism, which, in Benjamin's opinion, had an opportunity to succeed because its opponents passively believed in progress as an irresistible and necessary course of history, and thus underestimated the real dangers of fascism. (Progress, as we read in *Baudelaire*, is cast as crisis.) From this vantage point, remembrance is endowed with 'rescuing' abilities (Habermas 1979). It allows past times to be experienced in a present that stands still and thus frees us from the seeming automatic course of history. Interrupting the time of necessity, remembrance opens onto a time of possibilities.

In a curious fusion of messianic and revolutionary aspects, *Eingedenken* triggers both human political agency, and an almost religious anticipation of a radically new reality. This blend of materialist and messianic is also expressed in thesis VI, where Benjamin writes: "To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'as it really was' (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger. Historical materialism wishes to retain that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to man singled out by history in a moment of danger. The danger affects both the content of the tradition and its receivers. The same threat hangs over both: that of becoming a tool of the ruling classes. In every era, the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it [ ... ]. Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious" (Benjamin 1968c, p. 255). The 'moment of danger'—that is the threat of history to empathize solely with the victors, and thus to become a tool of the ruling class. Benjamin reminds us that "there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism" (Benjamin 1968c, p. 256).

A history of the winners erases the memory of those who had to carry the weight of 'progress', those who fell by the wayside, were oppressed, exploited, not heard and recognized. The materialist historiography Benjamin has in mind intends to "brush history against the grain" (ibid., p. 257). Concerned with 'the tradition of the oppressed', it addresses the things that were not embraced by triumph and victory. It refrains from "empathy with the victor [that] invariably benefits the rulers" (ibid., p. 256) and instead addresses the hidden flowers of the past that did not yet "turn towards that sun which is rising in the sky of history" (ibid., p. 255). Historicism—by viewing the past through the lens of irresistible progress—is grounded in forgetfulness. It creates a history that is, in the name of progress, doomed to repeat the tragedies again and again. A materialist historiography, on the other hand, steps into a "secret agreement between the past generation and the present one" (ibid., p. 254) and remembers the struggles and sufferings of those 'lost in history'. The materialist historian recognizes the unresolved claims of the past. "The past carries with it a temporal index by which it is referred to redemption" (ibid., p. 254). Benjamin's concept of redemption refers back to the Kabbalistic hope for *tikkun ha'olam* (Hebrew תיקון עולם, literally, "repair of the world")—the messianic restoration and perfection of a fragmented world. In a manuscript of Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, we find the following remark: History "is not only a science, but equally a form of remembrance. What has been 'established' by science can be modified by remembrance. Remembrance can make the incomplete (happiness) complete, and render the complete (suffering) incomplete" (Tiedemann 1989, p. 182). Though mainly informed by Jewish religious experience, remembrance is at the same time radically politicized: It is in the hand of the human, who in the here and now by way of historical consciousness is endowed with the "gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past" (Benjamin 1968c, p. 255).

What is crucial about *Eingedenken* is that it is not defined as a contemplative remembrance but as *actualization* and transformation of past struggles in the here and now. Emphasizing the redemptive power of memory, he writes, "to be sure, only a redeemed mankind receives the fullness of the past. Each moment it has lived becomes a *citation à l'ordre du jour*—and that day is Judgment Day" (ibid., p. 254).

The idea of retroactive intervention articulates a hope to "awaken the dead, and join together what has been smashed to pieces" (ibid., p. 257). Many of Benjamin's secular Marxist critics regarded



this as an illusion. Max Horkheimer, for instance, expressed the following doubt in a letter to Benjamin, written on 16 March 1937:

“I have long been thinking about the question whether the work of the past is complete. Your formulation can certainly stand as is. I have but one personal reservation: that I think this a relationship only to be perceived dialectically. The pronouncement of incompleteness is idealistic if it does not incorporate completeness as well. Past injustice is done and finished. Those who have been beaten to death are truly dead. Ultimately you are making a theological statement. If one takes incompleteness absolutely seriously, then one must believe in the Last Judgement. My thinking is too contaminated with materialism for that. Perhaps there is a distinction between positive and negative incompleteness, so that the injustice, the terror, the pain of the past are irreparable”. (Horkheimer as cited in Tiedemann 1989, p. 181)

Benjamin’s editor, Rolf Tiedemann articulates a similar doubt. He rejects the political significance of *Eingedenken* and treats it solely as an aesthetic concept:

“Rettung des Vergangenen, das ›Eingedenken‹ der mystischen Tradition ist wohl nicht, wie Benjamin in den Geschichtsphilosophischen Thesen wollte, eine Kategorie der Geschichte. Geschehenes Leiden lässt sich nicht wiedergutmachen, die Erschlagenen sind, nach Horkheimers Wort, wirklich erschlagen. An der Idee des Eingedenkens mögen die Kunstwerke ihre raison d’être haben. Nicht zu rechtfertigen ist eine Politik, die ihrerseits an der Ästhetik sich ausrichtet” (Tiedemann [1974] 2002, p. 209). [Redemption of the past—the practice of *Eingedenken* deriving from the mystical tradition—is not what Benjamin in his “Theses on the Philosophy of History” intended to be a category of history. Past suffering cannot be repaired; those who have been beaten to death are—according to Horkheimer—truly dead. The concept of *Eingedenken* may indeed prove its raison d’être for work of arts. What on the other hand cannot be justified is a politics that aligns itself with aesthetics]. (translated by this article’s author)

For one thing, we could ascribe Tiedemann’s and Horkheimer’s critique to their secular background and say that it is Benjamin’s embrace of theology that incites unrest. And indeed, it seems that the radical-ethical aspect and revolutionary potential of *Eingedenken* can only be grasped once its theological dimension can be embraced in its own right. Informed by the Jewish religious aspiration to find utopia and hope in the ritualistic renewal of memory, Benjamin’s concept of history is, to quote Stéphane Mosès once again, “guided by the concern to ‘linger at the disaster, to dress the wounds and awaken the dead’, remembrance, ‘in which we must see the quintessence of the theological conception of history of the Jews,’ can only be understood as a category of ethics” (Mosès 2009, p. 124).

But how else can we respond to Horkheimer’s and Tiedemann’s critique that *Eingedenken*—traversed by messianic hopes—stands in danger of annulling past injustice and aestheticizing suffering? Benjamin himself seems to be aware of this danger when he writes, “Like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a *weak* messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim. That claim cannot be settled cheaply. Historical materialists are aware of that” (Benjamin 1968c, p. 254).

Returning to the disruptive conjunction of past and present, in which a yet unseen, yet unheard, yet unsolved moment is articulated, *Eingedenken* seems to counter any attempt to prematurely pacify past suffering and reconcile past wrongs. It cuts through the illusion of a completed past and mobilizes an attitude of unrest.

To a certain extent, I share Tiedemann’s concern—remembrance is certainly not a revolutionary act in any overt and direct sense. On the other hand, I think Benjamin’s critics are mistaken to assume a lack of connection with material conditions. The preceding reflections rather suggest that we should conceive of *Eingedenken* as a necessary precondition and catalyst for revolutionary political practice. *Eingedenken* transforms the concept of memory, as a private activity, into a public event. It realizes its political potential by triggering wakefulness and sensitivity to past injustice.

The act of seizing an image, a fleeting flash, the “true picture of the past” (ibid., p. 255), the act of recognizing *correspondances* and affinities between present and past moments demands a perceptive

wakefulness for whispers, echoes, aftertastes, traces, and shadows. It demands sensibilities to capture the broken, buried, forgotten, oppressed pieces—the specters of the past reaching out to the present. Only on the basis of this mindfulness can the historian take on the task of collecting and reviving the scattered and hidden “spark[s] of hope” (ibid.).

*Eingedenken* is redemptive in that it unknots the contradictions and connects what has been torn apart. It mobilizes a radical obligation for change in the present and thus allows to untie the fixated and burdened relation to the past. The intimate relation of historiography and revolutionary practice is also articulated in what Karl Korsch claimed to be the central idea of Marxian theory, “the principle of historical specification”. This means to “comprehend all things social in terms of a definite historical epoch” (Korsch [1938] 2016, p. 12). Remembrance calls the naturalized ‘given-ness’ into question and allows us to perceive alternatives.

Instead of treating ‘what is’, ‘what has been’, ‘what will be’ as eternal categories, the present and past are understood as secretly linked in that the wounds of the past that reach out to the present and can be addressed and transformed in the here and now.

*Eingedenken*, as indicated here, is not merely an aesthetic practice of contemplating loss nor can its political implications be reduced to an ethical obligation to honor those who have been lost.

Redemption and the emergence of new utopian possibilities are not waiting for us at the end of history, but are projected into each moment of the present. What we witness here is the emergence of a radically new vision of human ability to perceive and to act—a vision of messianic hope shifted to human agency.

The materialist historiography Benjamin has in mind undertakes the task to actualize past struggles in the present and therein corresponds to the theological link between remembrance and redemption. And, as suggested in this essay, it is in this peculiar fusion of materialist and messianic impulses, that revolutionary hope may be found.

Benjamin and Jewish Mysticism teach us to be more wakeful: “For every second of time [is] the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter” (Benjamin 1968c, p. 264).

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