

GAIL JONES

*“Growing small wings”: Walter Benjamin, Lola Ridge,
and the Political Affect of Modernism*

The Dopey Smile: The Sphere of “Character” Opens Up

Between 1927 and 1934 Walter Benjamin carried out a series of “experiments” into the effects of hashish. In Berlin, Marseilles, and Ibiza he ingested large quantities of narcotic substances and then recorded the results in what he called a series of “protocols,” apparently random jottings about sensation, affect, imagination, and perception. Like many of the truly stoned, Benjamin got the giggles, began to suffer paranoia, and noticed the odd radiance of ordinary objects. “My walking stick,” he writes, “begins to give me a special pleasure.”¹ He experienced a tenderness towards girls’ names inscribed on small boats, and people with particularly ugly faces. He noticed the jollity of puns: having ordered paté de Lyon at a café, Benjamin hopes, with a “witty smile,” for “lion paste.” From his very first experiment, he recorded the auratic quality of objects and people, and developed his influential theory of the aura soon after.² He is interested in the optics, the trance, and the aesthetics of intoxication; he is interested in the body, in the fact, for example, that he sees a beautiful woman in a white shift coming towards him in the darkness, but feels no “desire,” only the amusing marvel of her transient display. More generally, especially in Marseilles, Benjamin talks of “the wonderful beatific humour” that dwells within him; his “incomprehensible gaiety,” the “ecstasy” of his dislocations, the “amorous joy”—desexualized, he says, but full of “love”—that overtakes him at the end of an evening, as he sits by himself, eats an ice-cream, and contemplates the sweet sequence of his hashish visions.³

¹ Walter Benjamin, “Hashish in Marseilles,” in *One Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (London: New Left Books 1979), 216.

² Benjamin, “Hashish in Marseilles,” 218. See also Willem van Reijen, “Breathing the Aura—the Holy, the Sober Breath,” *Theory, Culture and Society* 18.6 (2001): 31-50.

³ Benjamin, “Hashish in Marseilles,” 222.

In a clear tribute to Baudelaire and his writings in *The Artificial Paradise* (first published in France in 1860, and on what he calls the “profound joy of wine” as well as opium and hashish),⁴ Benjamin wished to induce a productive symbolist derangement that was not a simply willed dissolution of the subject, nor a decadent or vaguely orientalized retreat, but an epistemological inquiry, “a transformation of reason itself.”⁵ The hashish writings interest me, therefore, as a link between symbolism and modernism, but also because of the ways in which they coincide with Benjamin’s key formulations on modernist aesthetics, Surrealism, and the nature of revolutionary art, and because of their explicit—indeed over-determined—insistence on affect.

Here are three of the “protocols” from Benjamin’s first experiment:

5. Boundless goodwill. Falling away of neurotic-obsessive anxiety complexes. The sphere of “character” opens up. All those present take on hues of the comic. At the same time, one steeps oneself in their aura.

6. The comic is elicited not just from faces but from incidents. One *seeks* occasions for laughter. And perhaps it is only for this reason that so much of what one sees presents itself as “arranged,” as “experiment”—so that one can laugh about it.

[...]

8. Connection; distinction. In smiling, one feels oneself growing small wings. Smiling and fluttering are related. You feel distinguished because, among other things, it seems to you that fundamentally you enter into

⁴ The version I’m referring to is Charles Baudelaire, *On Wine and Hashish*, trans. Andrew Brown (London: Hesperus Press, 2002), in which a clear preference is stated for wine over hashish (27).

⁵ Here I concur with Marcus Boon in his introduction to *On Hashish*. Boon argues that Benjamin’s “philosophical immersion” in intoxicants was *not* interested in derangement of the senses but in the production and expansion of new capacities of reason; Walter Benjamin, *On Hashish*, intro. Marcus Boon, trans. Howard Eiland (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), viii-ix.

nothing too deeply: that, no matter how deeply you penetrate, you are always moving on the threshold. A sort of toe dance of reason.⁶

What is interesting here is the strange combination of depersonalization (there are no first person pronouns) with a relaxed dis-inhibition of the prose, evident both in syntax and the metaphorical use of terms. So the aura, which we are accustomed to read as the inexorably diminishing capacity of objects to evoke their historical being, is here cast as communalism, as a kind of casual, feel-good solidarity. The smile is the metaphoric means by which we grow wings, not the unhallowed *Angelus Novus* of Paul Klee, which we habitually associate with Benjamin,⁷ but a personal joke, his face opening like a butterfly. Fluttering is a mode of fluctuant surface perception, in contradistinction, perhaps, to scholarly contemplation. The comic is a kind of sovereign response, humane, easily elicited, and generally enjoyed. And then there's an over-all fascination, to which affect I'll return later. These are fragments, not essays, but they found some crucial elements of the "character" of Benjamin's writing, and of his early ideas of revolutionary re-visioning.

I want to argue that the dopey lyricism of the hashish writings is linked explicitly to poetics as a political form of affect and apprehension. It was Hannah Arendt who first pointed out that Benjamin, "without being a poet, thought poetically [*dichterisch dachte*]" and that for him metaphor had to be the greatest and most enigmatic gift of language, because its 'carrying over' made it possible to make the invisible sensuous."⁸ Leaving aside the many debates about Benjamin's propensity for allegory and metaphor *vis a vis* his interest in the image,⁹ my concern here is briefly to assess how this preoccupation with altered consciousness might relate to poetic modernism, and how the swerve to affect, sometimes hyperbolic or indeed whimsical affect, connects to revolutionary zeal.

⁶ Benjamin, *On Hashish*, 19-20.

⁷ See Beatrice Hanssen, "Portrait of Melancholy: Benjamin, Warburg, Panofsky," in *Benjamin's Ghosts: Interventions in Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory*, ed. Gerhard Richter (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 174-7.

⁸ Quoted in Gerhard Richter, ed., *Thought-Images: Frankfurt School Writers' Reflections from Damaged Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 44.

⁹ See, for example, Esther Leslie, *Walter Benjamin* (London: Reaktion Books, 2007).

In his famous essay on Surrealism (1929) Benjamin enlists the language of pharmacological intoxication to call for a new political dialectics: concentration and expansion, individualism and community, revolt and passivity all in concord with eschatological transformation. He makes two interesting claims. The first is that what he calls “the loosening of the self by intoxication” is undertaken in order to “step out of” another form of intoxication, which is the subordinating delusion of bourgeois values. So Benjamin confuses things somewhat by using metaphors of intoxication to indicate both ideological liberation and submission. The second claim is to do with the recommendation of a new form of vision: “true creative overcoming,” he writes, “does not lie in narcotics. It resides in a *profane illumination*, a materialist, anthropological inspiration, to which hashish, opium, or whatever else, can give an introductory lesson.”¹⁰

It’s a disorganized essay, sometimes preposterous in its rhetoric, but what is striking is the discourse of an *innervated* subject, the subject conceived as a vitalist premise engaged with the transmission of energy.¹¹ In this allegory *ennervation* is the mode of bourgeois capitalism, geared to consumption, conformist rationality and spiritless expenditure. Here we have imagined a different economy of energy, a critique, among other things, of a kind of consumerist melancholy. The ideological conflation of aesthetics and politics, the insistence on their poetic mutuality, is evident in Benjamin’s conviction that *profane illumination* is at the centre of any transfiguration. A notoriously vague term, the concept of profane illumination refers to a moment of discerning perception; it is not a model of critique, or a theory, or a proposition. It is a moment of access, as Adorno puts it, “to the density of experience.”¹² It is the assumption that the mystification of theological illumination might give way to

¹⁰ Walter Benjamin, “Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia,” in *One Way Street and Other Writings*, 227.

¹¹ Miriam Hansen mentions innervation as both vitality of will and a mode of regulation and interplay between humans and technology; see Miriam Hansen, “Benjamin and Cinema: Not a One Way Street,” in *Benjamin’s Ghosts*, ed. Richter, 41-73.

¹² This recovery of density is central to Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory*. The direct comment on Benjamin is quoted in Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 205: “Profane Illumination is a discerning moment. It describes a mode of apprehension distinct from critique or commentary.”

the clarification of a materialist one. This derives in part from the discourse of revolutionary sensuousness we associate with Marx's early writings, *The Grundrisse*, and *The Economic and Political Manuscripts of 1844*. The *locus classicus* is the famous opening to the *Theses on Feuerbach* of 1845, in which Marx argues that sensuousness has not yet been accounted for in terms of political practice.¹³ Marx's interest in sensuousness is part of his critique of alienated relations between people and people, and between people and objects under industrial capitalism, and particularly of his model of commodity fetishism and the monstrous, paradoxically both depleted and phantasmogoric nature of everyday life in relation to the commodity. When Benjamin praises the surrealists for converting "destitution"—which he says "is not only social, but architectonic, the poverty of interiors, enslaved and enslaving objects"—into revolutionary nihilism, he is invoking this classically Marxist paradox in which exorbitance and depletion work together in relation to commodities, images, and even feelings.¹⁴

In narcotic perception, Benjamin claims, is evident inklings of the profane illumination of liberated vision: objects blaze forth, with felicitous precision, their space-time density; they link historical materialism with the *vague de rêves*, the wave of dreams of historical unfolding; they remind us all of the capacity we have for a kind of intensified vision, for "the redemption of physical reality," to use Kracauer's suggestive title,¹⁵ that might be the basis for an *innervated* political and civic life.

¹³ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Theses on Feuerbach* (1845), in *Marx/Engels Selected Works*, vol. 1 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1969), 13-15: "The chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism—that of Feuerbach included—is that the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the *object of contemplation*, but not as *sensuous human activity, practice*, not subjectively."

¹⁴ See Richard Wolin, "Benjamin, Adorno, Surrealism," *The Semblance of Subjectivity: Essays in Adorno's Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Tom Huhn and Lambert Zuidervaart (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 181-2.

¹⁵ Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960). A useful contextualization here is provided by Esther Leslie, *Walter Benjamin: Overpowering Conformism* (London: Pluto Press, 2000), in which she links Benjamin's poetics to Dadaism as well as Surrealism, and to the hyperinflation of Germany in the 1920s.

This connection (objects and images, renovated vision, destitution concealing essences) reveals not simply a coincidence of rhetoric, but the link between amplified and disordered sense experience—a fundamentally poetic impulse, I think—and a *political aesthetics of redemption and optimism*. We habitually read Benjamin through the melancholic temperament,¹⁶ but here is another Benjamin, much less discussed; here is a figure asserting the levity and intimacy of the world—albeit aided by psychoactive drugs—and writing of a particular form of the image that cracks open time, as it were, and that carries the promise of historical liberation. Richard Wolin, writing on Benjaminian aesthetics, talks about “the *redemption* of phenomena from the profane continuum of historical existence and their transformation into images of fulfillment or *now-time*.”¹⁷ Setting aside the idiosyncrasy of Benjamin’s model of redemption and notwithstanding the famous imprecision of the formulations in his essay, I want nevertheless to recommend the efficacy of *profane illumination* as a way of thinking about poetics. Moreover, I want to consider the association in the late twenties between repudiation of, and indulgence in, poeticized affect as the mark of a modernist methodology.

The epistemology of the image—its cognitive power and its particularized mode—is implicated in the affective dimensions of literary modernism. One might argue that modernism has *always* been preoccupied with images that summon affective economies—the “moments” of being, the links between immanence and futurity, the circulation of expressive bodily tropes; and in a sense too the “rush” of intoxication (*rausch* in German and *ivresse* in French texts)¹⁸ signifies the velocity of sensation that we associate with poetry. When the intoxicated Benjamin sees the woman in the white shift it recalls Pound’s 1913 Imagist poem “In A Station of the Metro.” Presences glowing in the darkness, a sense of the image advancing towards the viewer, the construction of a synthesized, hyperreal moment: this is the moment in which a sort of modernist

¹⁶ Susan Sontag cast him irretrievably under the sign of Saturn; see her “Introduction” to *One Way Street and Other Writings*, citing Benjamin himself (8 ff.).

¹⁷ In Wolin’s view this is an implicitly political act: it consists of plucking an image or object from the blurry continuum of being, and giving it back its plenitude and integrity as the precondition to revolutionary clarity. See Richard Wolin, *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 125–6.

¹⁸ See the foreword note about translation in Benjamin, *On Hashish*, 12.

haecceity is circumstantially evoked. Pound insisted it was not the image as such, but a “lovely ... sudden emotion” he was trying to retrieve, yet his thirty line poem, later reduced to the two that give us the world’s most famous example of Imagism, renders the apparition unemotional.¹⁹ What Pound called his inspirational “metro emotion” has been converted to pure image. Fascination is also at work here, the sort that Blanchot describes as the affect of the image, a touch at a distance. “What is given to us by this contact at a distance,” Blanchot writes, “is the image, and fascination is passion for the image.”²⁰ There’s a strange negotiation in modernism with the status of the image—in regard to whether it generates, mobilizes, or is preceded by affect; here I want to bring the Benjamin of the redolent image, the dialectical image, into a specifically modernist conceptual framework.

Sleeping Constellations: Method and Space-Time

My interest in Benjamin’s autobiographical essays as methodologically generative follows the lead of Gerhard Richter. These essays, he says, announce the “figurative dimension of the political.”²¹ It is not orthodoxy or pronouncement, but indirection, a commitment of ideas to the radical, even peculiar specificity of things and to the particularity of one’s own response, that so distinguishes Benjamin’s political thinking. His autobiographical writing insists, among other things, that the body is the synaesthetic location of memory; and it is vexed and confounded relations of body, space, and time that govern so many of the hashish protocols and provoke some of his most unusual thinking. On 18 December 1927, at 3.30 a.m., Benjamin wrote the following:

¹⁹ Ezra Pound, “In a Station of the Metro,” *New Selected Poems and Translations*, ed. Richard Sieburth (New York: New Directions, 2010), 39. The poem reads: “The apparition of these faces in the crowd: / Petals on a wet, black bough.” Pound wrote: “Three years ago in Paris I got out of a ‘Metro’ train at La Concorde, and saw suddenly a beautiful face, and then another, and another, and then a beautiful child’s face, and then a beautiful woman, and I tried all day to find words for what this had meant to me, and I could not find any words that seemed to me worthy, or as lovely as that sudden emotion”; quoted in Marjorie Perloff, *21st-Century Modernism: The “New” Poetics* (London: Blackwell, 2002), 190.

²⁰ Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), 32.

²¹ Gerhard Richter, *Walter Benjamin and the Corpus of Autobiography* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2000), 15.

One is very much struck by how long one's sentences are. This, too, connected with horizontal extension and (probably) with laughter. The arcade is also a phenomenon of long horizontal extension, perhaps combined with vistas receding into distant, fleeting, tiny perspectives. The element of the diminutive would serve to link the idea of the arcade to laughter.²²

This is an aspect of what Benjamin called the "colportage of space," a bizarre sense of elongation and proprioceptive disorder, a preoccupation with extension into space that might be enlarged to an idea of community (and links architecture and language). Elsewhere the figure of Ariadne's thread is connected to intellectual adventuring in prose;²³ finding one's way in words is a feature of the search for lost time, just as it is for imagining a future. Together with incandescently blazing objects, Benjamin has a fascination with visual distortion, good humour, and the comic as crucial forms of creative thinking.

In his childhood Benjamin possessed a "reading box," a box which held alphabet cards which could be chosen at random and fixed together in tight grooves to form words and sentences. Considered as a *writing* box, this apparatus represents a paradigmatically modernist method of composition.²⁴ Another of Benjamin's toys was a myriorama, a nineteenth-century optical game in which a panoramic scene is vertically divided, usually into sixteen panels, and then shuffled to make hundreds of thousands of new combinations. Recombinative space, based on the image or on words and letters, links the self-in-time, the body, and the textual body. That which had been occulted or scattered becomes momentarily elucidated and coherent. This play combines constitution, cultural practice, and critical analysis.

²² Benjamin, *On Hashish*, 20.

²³ See Benjamin, *On Hashish*, 53: "The certainty of unrolling an artfully wound skein— isn't that the joy of productivity, at least in prose?" (29 September 1928).

²⁴ Walter Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, trans. Howard Eiland, intro. Peter Szondi (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006). See Szondi's comments in his introduction on the reading box (16).

But what of the representation of feeling and how might the private become social? It was Brecht who pointed out that there is a kind of social theatricality to the way we learn to express emotions. “One easily forgets,” writes Brecht,

that human education proceeds along highly theatrical lines. In a quite theatrical manner the child is taught how to behave; logical arguments only come later. When such-and-such occurs, it is told (or sees), one must laugh. It joins in when there is laughter without knowing why; if asked why it is laughing it is wholly confused. In the same way it joins in shedding tears, not only weeping because grown-ups do so but also feeling genuine sorrow. [...] These are theatrical events which form the character. [...] And weeping arises from sorrow, but sorrow also arises from weeping.²⁵

This is prescient with regard to affect theory, but it also underlines a kind of anxiety about the category of the aesthetic: that art is always performing emotions with a degree of ineradicable inauthenticity. For Brecht this is not a problem, since he is striving for alienation effects, and indeed alienation is a significant dimension of modernist poetics, exemplified perhaps in T. S. Eliot’s statement that “Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion,”²⁶ and in his insistence on impersonality and correlatives as the chief form of emotional transference. It’s also present in Futurism, for which, especially in its fascist forms, dehumanization was an achievement, a necessary sublimation, and the ultimate mark of its machinic efficiency. Benjamin met Filippo Tommaso Marinetti on Capri in 1924. In a letter to Gershom Sholem he writes: “I met the famed heads of futurism. Marinetti, whom I visited for tea in very interesting company, Vasari, and the likable painter Prampolini. Marinetti is certainly quite a lad. He performed a ‘noise poem’ to great effect: neighing, booming guns, rattling carts, machine gun fire etc.”²⁷ One can imagine the

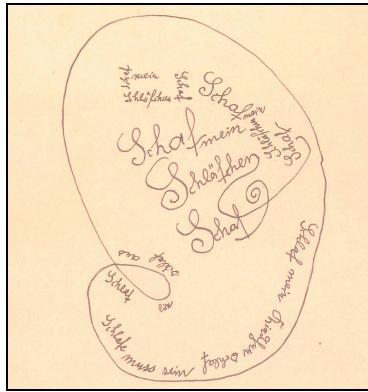
²⁵ Quoted in Terry Eagleton, “Brecht and Rhetoric,” *New Literary History* 16.3 (1985): 633-8 (635).

²⁶ T. S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” in *The Sacred Wood* (London: Methuen, 1920), 42-53 (52).

²⁷ Quoted in Momme Brodersen, *Walter Benjamin: A Biography*, trans. Malcolm R. Green and Ingrida Ligers, ed. Martina Dervis (London: Verso, 1996), 139.

perplexion with which Benjamin listened to this emptying of the subject, though his letter is not derisive, but impressed.²⁸

The modernist denaturalization of language and sound is of interest to Benjamin;²⁹ and publication of the archive of his collections and manuscripts has revealed how frequently he relied on aleatory composition.³⁰ The archive also contains what might be considered examples of concrete poetry, some of them written under the paranormal influence of narcotics:



Source: Marx, *Walter Benjamin's Archive*, 239

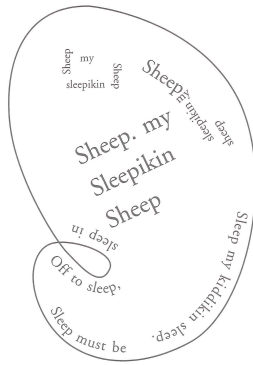
Drawn under the elastic morph of mescaline in 1934, this is a text in which Benjamin reconstellates words of a German lullaby in the form of an embryo. (Or it could be read as an ellipse, in which Benjamin elsewhere figures out his ideas on Kafka.)³¹ This image is about sleep and might be considered a representation of curling into the shape of sleep. Here is the English translation:

²⁸ It is important to note that this is more than ten years before Marinetti wrote the fascist manifesto for Mussolini. At this point Marinetti was also linked to anarchism; see Gunter Berghaus, *Futurism and Politics: Between Anarchist Rebellion and Fascist Reaction 1909-1944* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1996).

²⁹ This is first mentioned in Walter Benjamin, *The Origins of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: New left Books, 1977), 289.

³⁰ Ursula Marx, *Walter Benjamin's Archive: Images, Texts, Signs*, trans. Esther Leslie (London: Verso, 2007).

³¹ Marx, *Walter Benjamin's Archive*, 232. Another reading of this is through the "thought



Source: Marx, *Walter Benjamin's Archive*, 232

Either way, this hieroglyphic form, graphic creativity, if you will, is crucial to the ingenious mutations, puzzles, and riddles by which allegory comes into being. Images allegorize words, of course, and the strange relation of synecdoche and incarnation is too complex to discuss here.

However, the detachment we associate with Imagism or with this sort of play of signs is conspicuously less a feature of modernist narrative (cinema, diaries, and fiction). Deep ontology of character insists on the authority of affect, and narrative representation incorrigibly provides access to feelings, both in the privacy of reading and in collective mass experience. "In the cinema," Benjamin writes, "people whom nothing moves or touches any longer, learn to cry again."³² And weeping, to return to Brecht, is an interesting case to consider. The last line of *Moscow Diary* reads like this: "With a large suitcase on my knees, I drove weeping though the darkening streets towards the station."³³ Benjamin has just left the lover he desperately pursued, and feels, even though she is waving behind him, the desolation of his departure as a capsizing sorrow. The whole of *Moscow Diary* is dedicated to the mesmeric sorrow of love, and to the power of desire to invade and reconfigure an entire city. Fascination and infatuation are its

image" (*denk-bild*); see Richter, *Thought-Images*.

³² Quoted in Hansen, "Benjamin and Cinema," 43.

³³ Walter Benjamin, *Moscow Diary*, ed. Gary Smith, trans. Richard Sieburth (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), 153.

key registers. Ackbar Abbas wrote of Benjamin that “[h]e sees fascination not as a will-less affect, [...] but a willingness to be drawn to phenomena that attract our attention yet do not entirely submit to our understanding.”³⁴ Fascination is no doubt a distinctive form of affect,³⁵ and here desire—unmediated, humiliating, pathetic desire—is moving because it seems blankly authentic and wholly without artifice, removed both from social theatre and from displacing poetics.

Benjamin was the German translator of Proust and in modernist narrative it is the signification of time, and therefore loss, that foregrounds the teleological drives of both sexual and political desire. It might be useful in passing to recall Deleuze’s emphatic focus on the body-in-time. He argues that affect is principally to do with shifts and pulses in the body’s duration, the “passages, becomings, rises and falls, continuous variations of power (*puissance*),” and so on.³⁶ In this model fictional characters and diaristic personas enter *the time* of affect; there is a sort of passage to feelings that is “vectorial” and in thrall to a deeply subjectivist real. For Benjamin, the time and untimeliness of feelings, such as those occasioned by involuntary memory, ought to return us to the present with more attentive energy, not least because at some level these feelings exceed private experience and remind us both of community and the unredeemed quality of *now*.³⁷ If we are not to suffer the acedia of historicism, which Benjamin reads as “blotting out” the present in the service of narrative continuity and a progressive view of history, then the revolutionary qualities of loss must be retained; and even unpromising and derogated aspects of culture—forgotten objects, toys, quotations, ruins, postcards, beggars—might dimly prefigure a new cultural formation or the promise of profane illumination. Such objects summon obscure and possibly contradictory feelings: the pleasurable misery of salvage,

³⁴ Ackbar Abbas, “On Fascination: Walter Benjamin’s Images,” *New German Critique* 48 (Fall 1989): 43–62 (51).

³⁵ See Nigel Thrift’s persuasive “Understanding the material practices of glamour,” in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 289–308. Fascination is linked to the aesthetics of allure that is the basis for studies on glamour and commodity capitalism.

³⁶ Gilles Deleuze, “Spinoza and the Three ‘Ethics’,” *The New Spinoza*, ed. Walter Montag and Ted Stolze (Minneapolis: University Minnesota Press, 1997), 21.

³⁷ Jonathon Flatley, *Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 64–75.

for example, or the fascination for things made beautiful by neglect. “Happiness,” writes Benjamin, “is indissolubly bound up with the image of redemption.”³⁸ The giggling and smiling Benjamin, it could be added, was in a way autonomous, sequestered in his own zone, even as he announced feelings of tenderness and solidarity: the happiness of hashish is *ataraxia*, non-social happiness, that form of tranquility we achieve only when suspended in time and free from disturbance.³⁹

Anarchist Modernism: Lola Ridge

Let me now introduce the anarchist avant-garde poet, Lola Ridge.⁴⁰ Born in Dublin in 1893, she emigrated with her widowed mother to New Zealand when she was five and lived there for twenty five years, marrying, divorcing and then moving with her mother and infant son to Sydney. In Sydney Ridge enrolled at the Julian Ashton painting school in the Rocks, and began publishing poetry in *The Bulletin*. When her mother died, a few years later, Lola moved to New York, claiming she was Australian, lowering her age by ten years, and establishing herself almost immediately in the radical political and artistic scene centred around Greenwich village. She was a close friend of Emma Goldman and other well-known anarchists, and indeed might be considered a figure in what has been called “anarchist modernism,” or even, somewhat tendentiously, of “Yiddish modernism,” which takes Emma Goldman’s writings on art—in Yiddish and in translation—as indispensable to a reading of New York literary culture.⁴¹ As the American editor of *Broom* magazine,⁴² Lola Ridge knew and published Kenneth Rexroth, William Carlos Williams, Marianne Moore, Kay Boyle, Jean Toomer, and dozens of other writers. Her first volume, *The Ghetto*, a long poetic sequence on the Jewish community of the Lower East Side, was published in 1918 to

³⁸ Quoted in Flatley, *Affective Mapping*, 72.

³⁹ See Martha Nussbaum’s discussion of *ataraxia* in *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 308.

⁴⁰ Laurie Champion, ed., *American Women Writers 1900-1945: A Bio-bibliographical Critical Sourcebook* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000).

⁴¹ Alan Antliff, *Anarchist Modernism: Art, Politics and the First American Avant-Garde* (Chicago: University Chicago Press, 2001), and Marilyn Reizbaum, “Yiddish Modernisms: Red Emma Goldman,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 51.2 (2005): 456-81.

⁴² The journal ran from November 1921 to January 1924. Ridge was appointed the American editor in April 1922.

critical acclaim and was followed up by four other distinctive, radical, and interesting anthologies. She died in poverty, of tuberculosis, in 1941.

Ridge is a transnational modernist (though often described as “Australian,” as though this might efficiently signify her irreducible foreignness), remarkable for the extraordinary political charge to her work. Explicitly feminist—she wrote a lecture on “Woman and the Creative Will” in 1919 (ten years before Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*)⁴³—Ridge was engaged with the formidably large issues of her time: labour politics, anti-semitism, capital punishment, race riots, and the many forms of social protest. Her appeal was to the body, to sensation, and to an affective politics. Ridge was sometimes romantic and mystical—she had a fondness, for example, for enlisting martyrdom to her political ends and she engaged eschatological allegories in a rather Benjaminian fashion. (So, for example, the doctrine of apocatastasis, the restitution of all things in some kind of dazzling futurity, is present as a Marxist and theological trace in both writers.) Ridge’s magnum opus, *Firehead*, written in response to the Sacco and Vanzetti affair, recounts the crucifixion from various perspectives, among them Judas, the two Marys, Peter, and John, and it ends, controversially, with Christ’s thoughts as he dies. Ridge sometimes worked in forms despised by modernists (like the sonnet) and even her firmest supporters acknowledge her fondness for prolixity and melodrama, and the awkward unevenness of her poetic achievement.⁴⁴ Yet, for all this, she is a remarkable and significant literary “character” and a compelling example of political modernism.

Consider the poem “Morning Ride,” written in 1923, on the scandalous lynching of Leo Frank. In 1913 in Georgia, the young Jewish factory manager, from New York, was falsely accused of raping and murdering a young white employee. Frank attested his innocence—and a janitor later confessed to the crime—but while serving a life sentence in Atlanta he was abducted by the Ku Klux Klan and executed. Photographs of his lynching were sold as postcards by the

⁴³ See Michele Leggott’s bibliography in “The First Life: A Chronology of Lola Ridge’s Australasian Years” (April 2006), *New Zealand Electronic Poetry Centre*: <http://www.nzepc.auckland.ac.nz/features/bluff06/leggott.asp>; accessed 13 June 2013.

⁴⁴ Daniel Tobin, for example, calls *Firehead* an “epic failure”; see Lola Ridge, *Light in Hand: Selected Early Poems of Lola Ridge*, ed. Daniel Tobin (Lexington: Quale Press, 2007), xxxv.

thousands and the crime remains a notorious measure of the anti-Semitism of the Deep South.

“Morning Ride”

Headlines chanting—

y o u t h
l y n c h e d t e n y e a r s a g o
c l e a r e d —

Skyscrapers
seeming still
whirling on their concrete
bases,
windows
fanged—
l e o f r a n k
l y n c h e d t e n
s a y i t w i t h f l o w e r s
w r i g l e y ' s s p e a r m i n t g u m
c a r t e r ' s l i t t l e l i v e r —
lean
to the soft blarney of the wind
fooling with your hair,
look
milk-clouds oozing over the blue
Step Lively Please
Let 'Em Out First Let 'Em Out
did he too feel it on his forehead,
the gentle raillery of the wind,
as the rope pulled taut over the tree
in the cool dawn?⁴⁵

This is the modernist metropolis—with its subway commuters, its intercepting advertisements (flowers, chewing gum, laxative pills), its vaguely Vorticist

⁴⁵ Ridge, *Light in Hand*, 95.

spinning of skyscrapers, and the fractured, broadcast commands to passengers. But it is also a still, relatively quiet, and interrogative elegy, and one that summons the most delicate trace of perception, “the gentle raillery of the wind,” as that which touches all with a potentially lyrical and enjoining address.⁴⁶ The lynching is only obliquely invoked; the perspective instead indicates how matters of grave consequence are both lost within, but also present, and encrypted, in the daily morning ride to work. The introduction of “feel” (“Did he too feel it on his forehead?”) is a crucial moment in the politics of the text; the poem moves to imagine not atrocity, not the hideous occasion of murder, but the capacity for a countervailing experience of gentleness—soft, fleeting, *inconsequential*—in which our humanity finally inheres. “[B]larney,” unusual diction here, may be metonymically intended to denote the “kiss.” The sense of time is also unexpected; although the poem commemorates an event ten years before, its imagining of the moment before death is registered as proximity, and the little word “too” perhaps signifies affective attunement.⁴⁷ So revolutionary dissent need not be rousing, loud, and rhetorically forceful; the achievement of this poem is that the word itself (*feel*)—the single modest word—insinuates a memory of the body and its vulnerability in the context of a world-historical injustice. Curiously, too, the time of affect resides in the apostrophe, not the image; this recalls Lauren Berlant’s work on apostrophe as a particularly “vitalizing moment of rhetorical animation” in which proximity, intimacy, and address all gain a kind of affective surge.⁴⁸

Allan Antliff, author of *Anarchist Modernism*, questions the assumption that American modernism is “dominated by abstraction [and] formalist innovation and not by the political subject”.⁴⁹ he wishes to retrieve the politics implicit in the term *avant-garde*. For Ridge, as for Benjamin, the personal is of course

⁴⁶ I’m indebted to the excellent reading of the poem by Nancy Berke, *Women Poets on the Left: Lola Ridge, Genevieve Taggard, Margaret Walker* (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida, 2001), 49-51.

⁴⁷ For an argument about “attunement” as the *social* mode of collective affect, see Flatley, *Affective Mapping*.

⁴⁸ Lauren Berlant writes on apostrophe and the “encounter” of the poem as a mode of affect in “Cruel Optimism,” *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 93-117.

⁴⁹ Quoted in Reizbaum, “Yiddish Modernisms,” 465.

political, but Ridge’s artistic topics are essentially collective and grand-scale. And although anarchism is perhaps characterized by the ardency of its appeal, and perhaps also by privileging an activist “message,” modernist sensibility here refashions the topic of political violence as a kind of Cubist montage,⁵⁰ one within which rests an almost pastoral moment of humanity-before-it-is-destroyed. The task is to situate political circumstance in the midst of the urban commuter present, and to recalibrate historical reckoning so that it includes death and honour. In the twenties, American anarchism was a hotchpotch of Proudhonist mutualism, collectivism, and bolshevism—with a bit of Stirnerist individualism and Tolstoyan mysticism thrown in; finding the nuanced small scale of a single man’s suffering was no easy thing.

The Shock and the Charge: Convulsive Beauty

At one point in Benjamin’s hashish meditations, he remembers a toy, contained within a dome of glass, in which figures electrostatically are set aquiver and momentarily assemble:

At such hours, people and things behave like those little stage sets and figurines made of elder pith in the glazed tin-foil box, which, when the glass is rubbed, become electrically charged and fall at every movement into the most unusual relationships.⁵¹

I’m unsure of the name of this artifact, but interested in the compelling and symbolic aesthetics: a charge that realigns figures, that makes some stand and some fall, that works with the simplicity of tin foil and cartoons fashioned from pith. It’s a benign, charming object that Benjamin invokes in order to account for the discombobulations of space and time he experiences when stoned. It recalls Benjamin’s obsession with Nadar’s description of Baudelaire’s jerky walk (the *pas saccade*), upon which he constructed his model of the artist as the figure who

⁵⁰ And indeed as an effect of language: Benjamin noticed that Mallarmé was the “first to incorporate the graphic fusions of advertisement and topography”; cited in Margaret Cohen, *Profane Illumination: Walter Benjamin and the Paris of Surrealist Revolution* (Berkeley: University California Press, 1995), 192.

⁵¹ Benjamin, *On Hashish*, 55.

must withstand the shocks of modernity.⁵² Those movements that register new regimes of sensation and the body-made-object—and here Benjamin’s writings on Charlie Chaplin and Mickey Mouse are also relevant⁵³—link to anxieties about automated affect and reification as a paradigm case for alienation. Likewise it recalls how fundamentally metaphors of vibration, shock, and charge are in modernism allied both to emotional and revolutionary states. Much has been written on the use of neurological models of nervous vibration to express the affective basis of modernist aesthetics,⁵⁴ and it might be noted how the vibration of being that signifies our vitality might also be that which is the mark of subjection to impersonal external forces. *Blast*, the destructive vibration of tearing asunder, is of course Benjamin’s metaphor for revolutionary shock, and this trope is widespread: *Blast* was the name of Wyndham Lewis’s Vorticist (and proto-fascist) magazine, begun in 1914; *The Blast* was the title of Alexander Berkman’s anarchist magazine of 1916 and 1917. In aesthetics, convulsive realignment is an essentially Surrealist precept: André Breton’s slogan *beauty will be convulsive or it will not be* illustrates how radically electric or explosive rhetoric entered the discourse of the avant-garde.⁵⁵

Consider, in this context, extreme sensation, the literal convulsion of death by electrocution, which was the modern enterprise of state sanctioned violence. (The electric chair was introduced to New York surprisingly early, in 1880.) We tend to think of affect in its gentler forms, but responses to extremity and agony deserve attention in the consideration of a revolutionary politics. Ridge wrote unflinchingly of many forms of violence: lynching, castration, the throwing by white women of a live black baby into a fire, the gunning down of mine-workers. She was undaunted, in short, by the topic of the body-in-pain. She participated in

⁵² Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Verso, 1983), 80.

⁵³ See Esther Leslie, “Mickey Mouse, Utopia and Walter Benjamin,” *Hollywood Flatlands: Animation, Critical Theory and the Avant-garde* (London: Verso, 2002), 80-122.

⁵⁴ A good example is Andrew Shail, “‘senses that you don’t know’: Vibrating Modernists,” *The Senses and Society* 3.2 (2008): 169-86.

⁵⁵ See André Breton, *Mad Love*, trans. Mary Ann Caws (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), 19: “Convulsive beauty will be veiled-erotic, fixed-explosive, magical-circumstantial, or it will not be.”

demonstrations in support of Sacco and Vanzetti, being knocked down by a police horse when she refused to move, and was subsequently arrested.⁵⁶ Coincidentally, Benjamin participated in demonstrations for the same cause in Paris with his friend Gershom Scholem on the unusual occasion of them being together for a short time after Scholem had moved to Jerusalem. Here is the poem, a sonnet, that Ridge wrote after the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti in 1927:

“Electrocution”

He shudders... feeling on the shaven spot
 The probing wind, that stabs him to a thought
 Of storm-drenched fields in a white foam of light,
 And roads of his hill-town that leap to sight
 Like threads of tortured silver... while the guards—
 Monstrous deft dolls that move as on a string,
 In wonted haste to finish with this thing,
 Turn faces blanker than asphalted yards.

They heard the shriek that tore out of its sheath
 But as a feeble moan... yet dared not breathe,
 Who stared there at him, arching—like a tree
 When the winds wrench it and the earth holds tight—
 Whose soul, expanding in white agony,
 Had fused in flaming circuit with the night.⁵⁷

Here the guards are sinister puppets, both alive and dead, and the man executed is both human and inhuman, and also made gruesomely animate by electrical force. And although the word “feeling” turns up in the first line, this is perverse or perverted feeling; the dread barbarity of electrocution charges the text with errant connections and alternating currents. Bartolemeo Vanzetti’s father wrote to his son urging him to think of the fields of Italy as he died: perhaps Ridge knew of this text, publicized after the executions, or perhaps here too she wanted

⁵⁶ Champion, *American Women Writers 1900-1945*, 296.

⁵⁷ Ridge, *Light in Hand*, 94.

a pastoral or theological ideal inserted into the moment of atrocity as a token of lost humanity. Either way, this is an astonishing poem to be written by a woman in 1927; it has an audacity of purpose and a wish to make poetry activist, dynamic, and a form of historical witness. There is no futurity, no false gratification of redemption—there is only detriment and waste—but this is also a courageous biopolitics, a concern with the bare-life status of the executed and the necessary community of dissent.

Stylizing One-Self: “The Collective is Also a Body”

Walter Benjamin died, as is well known, with a self-administered overdose of morphine—Arthur Koestler attested he always carried with him 25 tablets.⁵⁸ His brother George died in 1942 at the Sonnenburg concentration camp; according to official records he committed suicide by touching an electric fence.⁵⁹ The ruination of Benjamin’s end has hidden in reception of his work, as though auto-annihilation is the always-already potential of melancholia, or as though there is a personal depredation in his philosophical model. Beginning with the dopey smile of hashish intoxication may seem a provocative, perhaps undignified, way to commence a series of brief reflections on revolutionary sentiment and its poeticized expression. Yet what is exhibited in the hashish protocols, and indeed in the personal archive, is the entertainment of certain sensuous qualities of knowledge, the “luminous presence of the seemingly invisible” as one writer put it,⁶⁰ and thereafter an attempt, a serious attempt, to make of this a metaphysic of collective and energized responsiveness.

Innervation was a term used in neuropsychology since the 1830s to denote a transfer of energy between mind and body, rather like an electrical current.⁶¹ Freud’s use of the term borrows on this history, and includes, influentially, the psychosomatic: somatic responses to trauma, for example. When, therefore, Benjamin extrapolates from his own psychic excitation to argue for the revolutionary potential of *collective* innervation, his model of the mind-body axis

⁵⁸ Broderson, *Walter Benjamin*, 259.

⁵⁹ Broderson, *Walter Benjamin*, 209.

⁶⁰ Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 205.

⁶¹ David S. Ferris, *The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 128.

is in some ways incalculable (certainly over-determined).⁶² Yet the poetics of his thinking—the preoccupation with metaphor and montage, with intensification, with imagistic haecceity and experiential atemporality—are all part of the modernist apparatus he constructs to forge these political connections. What is striking is the liveliness of Benjamin’s writing on these matters: he displays, to put it simply, poetic affirmation, even though his literary references are sometimes dubious. Benjamin’s model of revolutionary energy does not come from the proletariat, nor the soviet, nor from technology,⁶³ but from a mysterious sense of unleashing the disruptive energy from the past and from imagining the productive immanence and affective power of ordinary objects. Benjamin spent years cutting out newspaper articles on Walt Disney and Mickey Mouse because he saw in all levels of culture allegories of oppression and recuperation, of alienation and humanization. When, in a letter to Gershom Scholem, Benjamin describes the Arcades project as representing “both the philosophical utilization of surrealism and its sublation”⁶⁴ he is confirming the utility of art in the service of energetic political ends, and more generally engaging what Derrida called the “question of the future” or “the event promised,”⁶⁵ which is folded into the ontology—perhaps the obligation—of literature itself (to anticipate the justice that is to come). Surrealism is a scandalous possibility for politics; yet Benjamin employed it for its virtuosity, its heterodoxy, and its far-fetching ambition.

Lola Ridge’s death was a quiet subsidence, unremarked. As one writer observed: “When Marianne Moore, Aaron Copeland and Paul Strand attended Ridge’s funeral to pay their last respects, none of these artists would have predicted that Ridge’s work would be buried with her.”⁶⁶ William Carlos Williams remembers hearing Mayakovsky read in Lola Ridge’s small second-floor apartment on East

⁶² Hansen also points out that innervation is a significant term in the first three versions of the famous “Artwork” essay, but is missing from the fourth, dubiously canonical, version. She insists that innervation is not uni-directional, but imagined as a two way process; see “Benjamin and Cinema,” 47.

⁶³ This point is made by Cohen, *Profane Illumination*, 190.

⁶⁴ Cohen, *Profane Illumination*, 8.

⁶⁵ See Sean Gaston, *The Impossible Mourning of Jacques Derrida* (London: Continuum Press, 2006), 70-75.

⁶⁶ Berke, *Women Poets on the Left*, 33.

14th Street, where, he wrote, “anyone might turn up.”⁶⁷ Kay Boyle was given her first job, as an office assistant, working with Ridge on the magazine *Broom*;⁶⁸ Marianne Moore got her publishing break at a party at Ridge’s apartment;⁶⁹ Jean Toomer, Mina Loy, and many other luminaries of American modernism, read and supported each other at Ridge’s gatherings. This is the intimate constellation of literary friendships that we know to be part of the constitution of the modernist ethos: it is these poetical encounters, this generous hospitality, that form a remnant trace of Ridge’s life in the works of others, even though few read her poetry today.

So what might one conclude of this odd coalition of Benjamin and Ridge? I’m not claiming a similarity, or even a connection; simply expressing a modernist juxtaposition, one within which two radical thinkers sought and practiced their poetics. There’s a sense in which Deleuze’s description of Spinoza has relevance here: “our being consists *in our capacity to be affected*”;⁷⁰ and this is the necessary basis for our sociality, our communality, and ultimately our shared interests. When Benjamin smiles and imagines the absurdity of “growing small wings,” he is recording his own contradictions and his own irremissible good humour. When he feels “boundless goodwill” he is assuming, as part of his revolutionary politics, the possibility of affective extension to a whole community. So notwithstanding the solipsism of getting stoned, the self-pleasuring *ataraxia*, Benjamin’s instinct is to extend from personal phenomenology to a larger historical and dialectical purpose. “The collective is a body, too,” Benjamin writes in his essay on surrealism.⁷¹

⁶⁷ William Carlos Williams, *The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams* (New York: New Directions, 1967), 163.

⁶⁸ William Drake, *The First Wave: Women Poets in America 1915-45* (London: Macmillan, 1987).

⁶⁹ Cristianne Miller, *Marianne Moore: Questions of Authority* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1995), 193. See also Robin G. Schulze, ed., *Becoming Marianne Moore: the Early Poems 1907-1924* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 425.

⁷⁰ See Moira Gatens, *Imaginary Bodies: Ethics, Power and Corporeality* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 131.

⁷¹ Benjamin, “Surrealism,” 239.

But I want to conclude on a more specifically modernist note. Here are two more entries from Benjamin's very first experience with hashish:

10. There arises, quite fleetingly, in a moment of introversion, something like an inclination [*words illegible*] to stylize oneself, to stylize one's body.

11. Aversion to information. Rudiments of a state of rapture.⁷²

Both these statements interest me. For just as poetry is deliberate stylization, of oneself as well as the world, so capacity for joy, fascination, and existential rapture ultimately contests the forms of knowledge that are mere information. Stylization is the power to remake the world's meanings, to reconfigure through art, abstraction, and the poetic dimension of being. It is our fanciful other-self, of which art is the extroversion. In Benjamin's lines we have, bizarrely, modernist mini-manifestos, and in their contextual politics the robust assertion of an affective community.

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⁷² Benjamin, *On Hashish*, 20.