

Messianic Nihilism in Gothic Horror: Walter Benjamin with Mary Shelley and Edgar Allan Poe

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ABSTRACT: This essay considers Walter Benjamin's model of messianic time alongside the powers of horror in the Gothic tradition, here represented by Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and Edgar Allan Poe's "The Man of the Crowd" (1840). This configuration illustrates a messianic nihilism; a profane relation in which teleological meaning is eternally derailed. Benjamin's messianic time counters the notion of history-as-progress, instead proposing the perpetual destruction of present conditions in the pursuit of unknown possibilities. In the Gothic, the messianic takes form in the dialectical image of horror; an image that at once contains and subverts history, thus emerging as unnameable. In *Frankenstein*, the monster embodies and enacts a messianic rhythm as a symptom of his alienation. In "The Man of the Crowd," an unnameable figure disrupts the historical typology of the modern city, while simultaneously resurrecting the radical possibilities of the past. Ultimately, Gothic messianism evokes a profane illumination that promotes annihilation as a means to the infinite possibilities of the new.

KEYWORDS: Walter Benjamin, messianic time, gothic, nihilism, modernism, *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley, Edgar Allan Poe, abjection, death drive

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In speculative fiction, the contemplation of the future is a persistent spectre that raises various ethical questions. These ponderings often result in apothecic predictions, or the use of futurity as a diagnosis for contemporary issues. But what does it mean to deny the future altogether? To recoil from innovation in the face of its most horrific incarnations? This is a speculation that the Gothic embodies and to which the theories of Walter Benjamin testify. In this essay I will outline Benjamin's theory of messianic time, which is central to his critique of history-as-progress. I will then locate gothic fiction within this rhetoric, focusing on Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and Edgar Allan Poe's "The Man of the Crowd" (1840). Central to Benjamin's critique is his analysis of modernity and the transformation of history in the capitalist metropolis. Herein, the modern commodity transforms the way history operates; it is no longer teleologically perceived, but rather anachronistically experienced through cultural trends. Benjamin's theory of the messianic operates within the modern perception of time, while also divorcing it from its existence-as-commodity. The messianic relation is thus a perpetual rupturing of conditions in which all histories erupt in the now as *an eternity of unknown possibilities*. It is in the investigation of the unknown that Benjamin demonstrates his allegiance with Romantic and Gothic dialectics, while simultaneously comprehending the conditions of modernism. Therefore, gothic fiction provides fertile ground for an interpretation of Benjamin's messianic discourse. In the gothic narrative, the messianic image is one of horror. In the psychological rupture produced by the horrific confrontation, the possibility for new possibilities can be felt outside of the continuum of history. The only future that can be desired after witnessing the horrific is one of an infinite derailing—the messianic as a counter to civilisation itself. This is messianic nihilism; an approach in which teleological meaning is destroyed without lament in an eternally annihilating process. In order to fully comprehend the messianic, I will begin with an explanation of Benjamin's theoretical framework.

BENJAMIN'S MODERNITY AND THE MESSIANIC DEATH DRIVE

The theory of messianic time permeates the broader discourse of Benjamin's historical materialism. For Benjamin, the messianic is key to countering the capitalist, Social Democratic view of history-as-progress delineated in "Theses on the Philosophy of History":

Social Democratic theory, and even more its practice, have been formed by a conception of progress which did not adhere to reality but made dogmatic claims. Progress as pictured in the minds of Social Democrats was, first of all, 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. ... A critique of the concept of such a progression must be the basis of any criticism of the concept of progress itself.¹

To Benjamin, progress is an inherently problematic construct as it is measured by a teleological understanding of future achievement, rather than change in the immediate present. History is thus automatically understood as the progress of humanity due to its relation to linear time. In modernity, this understanding of history and time is transformed by the acceleration of commodity production which, in turn, increases cultural transitoriness. In the modern commodity form, newness is a mode of experience in the commodity: "Newness is a quality independent of the use value of the commodity. It is the origin of semblance that belongs inalienable to images produced by the collective unconscious. It is quintessence of that false consciousness whose indefatigable agent is fashion."² The old continuously re-emerges in the new as the tides of fashion ebb and flow, thereby perpetually transforming the landscape of the city.³ The status quo of the modernist cityscape is thus *change itself*. While, to Benjamin, modern consciousness allows for new ways of thinking outside of teleological history, it remains problematic due to its reliance on the market economy. Thus, Benjamin sought in messianic time a new relation with history that reaches beyond teleology and the commodified novelty of the new.

To Benjamin, the messianic is neither a purely theological or metaphorical concept. Rather, it is the displacement of the Judeo-Christian “messianic” into the profane.⁴ Herein, the Messiah can only be defined in relation to its absence. The lack of the final Utopia, the Messiah, the Kingdom of Heaven, creates an antithetical tension with the belief in history-as-progress and its reliance on teleology. The messianic in the profane *is* the tension between the teleological claim on the present and the chaotic perception of history in the modern metropolis.⁵ The messianic thus recognises the belief in teleology as a false truth—a realisation mediated by modern consciousness but not restricted by its economies. What, then, is the dialectical substance of the messianic, and how does it attempt to move outside pre-established systems of thought? This is understood through the definition of three key factors: *happiness as messianic rhythm*, *the weak messianic power*, and finally its *nihilistic method*.

In “Theses,” Benjamin outlines the complex order of happiness, redemption, and the messianic within the profane:

Our image of happiness is indissolubly bound up with the image of redemption. ... The past carries with it a temporal index by which it is referred to redemption. There is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one. Our coming was expected on earth. 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.⁶

Happiness is related to persistent redemption; a process invoked by the modern culture of history in which the past never dies but is persistently present.⁷ The redemptive impulses of the past simply amount to the profane existence of the present which, by pointing back, expose history in its a-teleological incompleteness.⁸ This is humanity’s *weak* messianic power that is so because history has a claim on it, yet nonetheless promotes messianic redemption. In redemption, the modern revolutionary acknowledges messianic time as not in the presence of the Messiah, but

in the profane work of humanity as they respond to the past in the present.⁹ The historical materialist understands that the state of messianic perfection can spontaneously manifest at any moment through profane redemption.¹⁰ Thus, true happiness-through-redemption is the revolutionary's thirst for the truly new, the unknown, in its past and present possibilities.¹¹ It is "the awareness that they [the revolutionaries] are about to make the continuum of history explode."¹² Yet there is an intrinsic aspect of happiness as the messianic rhythm that needs to be addressed—that of its *nihilistic method*. Benjamin addresses this in the final passage of the "Theologico-Political Fragment":

For in happiness all that is earthly seeks its downfall, and only in good fortune is its downfall destined to find it. ...To the spiritual *restitutio in integrum*, which introduces immortality, corresponds a worldly restitution that leads to the eternity of downfall, and the rhythm of this eternal transient worldly existence, transient in its totality, in its spatial but also in its temporal totality, the rhythm of Messianic nature, is happiness. For nature is Messianic by reason of its eternal and total passing away. To strive after such passing, even for those stages of man that are nature, is the task of world politics, whose method must be called nihilism.¹³

Benjamin's messianic perspective is nihilistic as it acknowledges, and celebrates, the lack of meaning in a culture of transitoriness. In this way, the messianic seeks to be like nature in its unrelenting process of destruction and rebirth. Therefore, true messianic happiness comes from a "total passing away" of historical economies, an eternal downfall or ruination of them.¹⁴ To elaborate, in "Theses" Benjamin emphasises the importance of classless society as a model for looking beyond capitalism and its grasp on history. Herein, the messianic desire for classlessness is not an end goal but rather a "frequently miscarried, ultimately achieved interruption."¹⁵ The messianic is not progression *or* regression—such measurements only concede to the judgement of teleology. Rather, the messianic is a "standstill" of historical time through constant rupture. The messianic seeks the discovery of histories that cannot

be measured, for such scales have not been invented yet. Through an immortal process of interruption, the modern revolutionary continuously destructs and reforms in search of the new outside novelty. This nihilistic method could be promoted as a companion to Freud's death drive—an infinite derailing that reaches beyond the pleasure principle. In the death drive it is the repetition toward satisfaction that, when obstructed by the inevitable repressions, chooses to take the “backward path” and “advance in the direction in which growth is still free—though with no prospect of bringing the processes to a conclusion or of being able to reach the goal.”¹⁶ It is a constant striving against progress towards nothing or, as Benjamin describes elsewhere, “the fulfillment of an unimproved humanity.”¹⁷

THE MESSIANIC IN GOTHIC FICTION AND THE DIALECTICAL IMAGE OF HORROR

If Benjamin's messianic rhythm is happiness, then gothic literature's happiness is horror. By nature of an alienated and repressed existence, the only way one can meet with the new is in the rupture of the psyche as it's confronted by the horrific. Like the historical materialist, the gothic hero understands the death of teleological time in the realm of profane annihilation. But what might a messianic figure look like? Here it is useful to explain yet another element of Benjamin's messianic discourse—that of the dialectical image: “It isn't that the past casts its light on what is present or that what is present casts its light on what is past; rather, an image is that in which the Then and Now come together into a constellation like a flash of lightening.”¹⁸ Understanding history as a spectre that persistently haunts the collective unconscious, the Gothic meets historical time with the dialectical image of horror. The image of horror does not commodify or inform the old and the new, but forces their collision. It is “like a flash of lightening” striking through the continuum of history. In its chaotic interruption, the dialectical image of horror is thus messianic. It is in this way that the image of horror is feared; for it is the unknown Other that collapses the foundations of pre-established knowledge and ethics. Frankenstein's monster and Poe's man of the

crowd are key instantiations of the dialectical image of horror, an analysis of which will further illuminate the messianic capabilities of the Gothic.

FRANKENSTEIN AND THE MESSIANIC DEMON

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is frequently considered the height of Gothic Romanticism—a period in which romantic nihilists discarded reason for a fascination with irrationality, chaos, and the death of God.¹⁹ From this perspective, the hero is one who challenges hegemonic authority not through ascension, but through a meteoric descension. They travel through *Weltschmerz* (alienation, suffering, misanthropy) towards the violation of the most sacred natural laws, emerging as beyond both God and man.²⁰ No hero better embodies this archetype like Frankenstein's monster; he is at once a life that defies all life and the ultimate destroyer. However, before analysing the monster's journey we must first understand his genesis.

Victor Frankenstein endeavours to play God. To him life and death appear as “mere ideal bounds.” They are limits that he endeavours to break through and “pour a torrent of light into our dark world.”²¹ He wishes to “explore unknown powers and unfold the world to the deepest mysteries of creation.”²² As a “student of unhallowed arts” (or what may be interpreted today as a scientist), Victor can only satiate this desire for the unknown by committing the ultimate crime against nature.²³ Shelley's initial description of the monster emphasises the horrific results of this abhorred transgression:

His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of a lustrous black and flowing; his teeth of a pearly whiteness; but these luxuriances only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes, that seemed almost of the same colour as the sun-white sockets in which they were set, his shrivelled complexion and straight black lips.²⁴

The monster's flesh barely covers the body's inner workings; the beauty of his hair and teeth only intensifying the horror of his deathly features. He is a walking cadaver, a mobile form of what psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva calls the abject. As an abject figure, the monster “disturbs identity, system, order ... does not respect borders, positions,

rules.”²⁵ His very presence “shatters the wall of repression” the ego has built to operate within civilised life.²⁶ The mere sight of the monster is already messianic as it disrupts the repressions that make existence within teleological economies of knowledge liveable. Furthermore, he is the quintessential dialectical image of horror; at once the impossibility of scientific creation and the sheer mortality of man—the past and present colliding in the now as horrific rupture. This is made even more complex as the monster’s intellectual development transgresses his abject appearance.²⁷

Once exposed to world, the monster learns with the mind of an infant. He experiences the natural world with a feeling of wonder and joy. Yet this joy quickly turns into suffering as he learns of his perceived monstrousness. This becomes clear as he learns of language and custom, principally achieved through the observation of a French family and the acquisition of three key texts in the Western canon; Goethe’s *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, Plutarch’s *Lives* and Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. On *Werther* he states: “The disquisitions upon death and suicide were calculated to fill me with wonder. ... I inclined towards the opinions of the hero, whose extinction I wept.”²⁸ In Plutarch he “read of men concerned in public affairs, governing or massacring their species.”²⁹ Finally, in *Paradise Lost* he learns of utopia and its downfall, hereby disassociating from the divine relationship between creator and created—“I considered Satan as the fitter emblem of my condition.”³⁰ In these fictions of Western civilisation, heartbreak, and downfall, the monster becomes aware of his alienated position. This is heightened as he is rejected by the French family who can only perceive horror in the presence of his longing. Here the monster illustrates an important aspect of Benjamin’s happiness: that the redemptive desire for new possibilities, in fact, often “passes through misfortune, as suffering.”³¹ Happiness as the messianic rhythm is thus principally desired from the position of alterity. Thus, from the monster’s perspective, it is history itself that is monstrous and incomplete; it does not allow for realisations of the profane order to which he belongs. In this messianic realisation, the monster’s redemptive trajectory towards happiness takes the form of destruction. With the knowledge of history haunting him as he haunts others, he does not seek to improve but to destroy, not to get out but to dig deeper into the

profane. His destruction is directed towards the “eternal passing away” or undoing of humankind as a locus for the conditions of suffering. Murder and vengeance punctuate the monster’s messianic path. This begs the question—what is the relationship between the desire for new possibilities and the prevalence of evil in the monster’s messianic character? This is illuminated by Benjamin’s discussion of moral idealism in his essay on Surrealism.

In “Surrealism,” Benjamin expresses a desire to overcome political moralism through art. This desire was matched in the work of the Surrealists, in which the sacred, moral order was eclipsed by a profane illumination. Explorations of the unconscious and the destitute separated the Surrealists from political idealism, toward a new beyond novelty; the new of the unknown.³² Benjamin further elaborates on the ethics of profane illumination by delineating a “cult of evil” to which the Surrealists and other important creators belong:

One finds the cult of evil as a political device, however romantic, to disinfect and isolate against all moralizing dilettantism ... how naive is the view of the Philistines that goodness, for all the manly virtue of those who practice it, is God-inspired; whereas evil stems entirely from our spontaneity, and in it we are independent and self-sufficient beings. ... Dostoyevsky’s God created not only heaven and earth and man and beast, but also baseness, vengeance, cruelty. ... That is why all these vices have a pristine vitality in his work; they are perhaps not “splendid,” but eternally new, “as on the first day,” separated by an infinity from the clichés through which sin is perceived by the Philistine.³³

In the cult of evil there is no humanist binary binding virtue and sin to pre-ordained value systems. In the reality of Dostoevsky’s work there is a different ruling order at play; not a dichotomy which pits God against Satan, but an altogether different relation in which vices and virtues appear as eternally new. It is in this way that images of the repressed unconscious erupt in a “revolutionary nihilism”; a celebration of the unknown chasm cast open by the death of meaning.³⁴ The resemblance to Friedrich

Nietzsche's death of God cannot be ignored here, as to kill God is to reject the ruling moral order and think anew.³⁵ The death of God is what relates profane illumination (and the messianic eternity of possibilities herein) to the demonic. This is paramount to understanding the monster's rejection of ethical frameworks as a messianic act of profane illumination, utilised by Shelley as an anarchistic literary device. Shelley's God is man—the scientist Victor Frankenstein. In this reality, the chaos of the profane runs free—the monster acting as a perverted prophet in his rampage of annihilation. In his first act of destruction, the monster no longer laments his rejection from the taxonomy of the good. Instead, he seeks to kill God; his creator. While acting as a messianic object of horror, his messianic turn as a subject sets his nihilism “on fire” as he declares “everlasting war against the species, and, more than all, against him who had formed me, and sent me forth to this insupportable misery.”³⁶ He turns to evil in a declaration against the laws of God that, in their social iterations, condemn the Other to sorrow. His actions are monstrous for, in the cult of evil, there are no moral acts, but only horrors that are seen with eternally new eyes at the point of messianic rupture.

Shelley's *Frankenstein* illuminates Benjamin's messianic time in ways that can only be imagined by fiction. The monster is a messianic object; the horror of his physicality disrupts historical time and brings the possibility for new possibilities into the Now. But what makes the monster truly unnameable is that he is not just an object, but a subject with desires and motivations. The monster thinks with a human mind but sees with inhuman eyes the horrors of human history. In the messianic rhythm of destruction, the monster rejects the improvement of humanity, instead desiring a world that is profoundly post-human. While *Frankenstein* is exemplary of destruction and the demonic in the messianic, Poe's “The Man of the Crowd” illustrates a messianic distortion of the commodified conditions of modernity.

POE, MODERNISM, AND THE MESSIANISM OF THE *FLÂNEUR*

In Poe's “The Man of the Crowd,” the modern cityscape is profoundly perverted through the profane illuminations of the Gothic. This is principally achieved through

the perspective of the *flâneur*. Benjamin's discourse on the *flâneur* is thus useful here in understanding Poe's story as exemplary of the messianic in the modern metropolis. As Benjamin describes, the qualities of the *flâneur* were both dissolved and popularised with the expansion of the market economy. Once a marginalised figure (Benjamin has described the gaze of the *flâneur* as it falls on the city the "gaze of the alienated man"), the rise of consumerism imbued all city dwellers with the characteristics of the *flâneur*.³⁷ Herein, the dreamlike observation of boulevards and arcades was standard practise for the modern consumer in the experience of commodity fetishism. The practise of *flânerie* was transformed into a fundamental experience of modern life—its representation in art and literature now produced with an illusory imagination disconnected from alterity. As summarised by Susan Buck-Morss in "The Flaneur, the Sandwichman and the Whore: The Politics of Loitering": "If at the beginning, the flaneur as private subject dreamed himself out into the world, at the end, flânerie was an ideological attempt to reprivatize social space, and to give assurance that the individual's passive observation was adequate for knowledge of social reality."³⁸ Thus the perception of the *flâneur* comes to categorise the city into a stable typology, ignoring the chaotic intensities of the urban landscape with its all its gaps and slippages.³⁹ In the gothic landscape of Poe, the "tale of the *flâneur*" (as reiterated many times in modern novels of the crowd) is corrupted. Through the introduction of a dialectical image of horror, the psyche of the *flâneur* is cracked open upon confronting the unnameable.

The story begins with a foreshadowing of the horrors to be divulged, the narrative's central phrase: "*er lasst sich nicht lessen*," "it does not permit itself to be read."⁴⁰ In anticipating the tale, Poe states:

Men die nightly in their beds, wringing the hands of ghostly confessors, and looking them piteously in the eyes—die with despair of heart and convulsion of throat, on account of the hideousness of mysteries which will not suffer themselves to be revealed. Now and then, alas, the conscience of man takes up a burden so heavy in horror that it can be thrown down only into the grave.⁴¹

The truth of the unnameable is so horrific it cannot be ignored. Its grotesque mysteries ooze through the boundaries of repression, eternally returning through dreams that irredeemably corrupt the psyche. Only in death can this burden be relieved. Already the messianic-as-destruction can be understood as central to Poe's story.

The tale itself begins with an unnamed protagonist observing the crowded cityscape from a London coffee-house window. From this vantage point, they "easily identify" individuals in each social class. The narrator takes pride in reading this urban social configuration from nobles to beggars, criminals to lepers: "the tribe of clerks was an obvious one," "the gamblers, of whom I descried not a few, were still more easily recognizable."⁴² In their self-assurance the protagonist proclaims: "Although the rapidity with which the world of light flitted before the window prevented me from casting more than a glance upon each visage, still it seemed that, in my peculiar mental state, I could frequently read, in even that brief interval of a glance, the history of long years."⁴³ In the urban crowd, it is as though the entire history of western civilisation is passing before their very eyes. Here we are reminded of Benjamin's idea of the modern landscape wherein the past and present can be perceived at once. However, the *flâneur's* ease of observation is jeopardised when one figure particularly arrests their attention:

With my brow to the glass, I was thus occupied in scrutinizing the mob, when suddenly there came into view a countenance (that of a decrepit old man, some sixty-five or seventy years of age)—a countenance which at once arrested and absorbed my whole attention, on account of the absolute idiosyncrasy of its expression. Anything even remotely resembling that expression I had never seen before. I well remember that my first thought, upon beholding it, was that Retszch, had he viewed it, would have greatly preferred it to his own pictural incarnations of the fiend. As I endeavoured, during the brief minute of my original survey, to form some analysis of the meaning conveyed, there arose confusedly and paradoxically within my mind, the ideas of vast mental power, of caution, of penuriousness, of avarice, of

coolness, of malice, of blood-thirstiness, of triumph, of merriment, of excessive terror, of intense—of supreme despair. I felt singularly aroused, startled, fascinated. “How wild a history,” I said to myself, “is written within that bosom!”⁴⁴

The observer cannot place the man into any social categories foundational to their world view. They are thus struck with wonder, confusion, and terror at the apprehension of such a character. This uncanny confrontation is likened to the terror produced in the fiendish creations of German artist Moritz Retszch; the illustrator of the devil in Goethe’s *Faust*.⁴⁵ As in *Frankenstein*, Poe’s man of the crowd is linked to the demonic as he eclipses the dominant (religious) order with a profane illumination. Instead of seeing the “history of long years” in the visage of the man, the observer can only grasp at a “wild history.”

As the narrator follows the man into the night, they find no answers to their questions—only the conclusion that to pursue him further would be futile. For he is the very book that “does not permit itself to be read.” He cannot be placed in the language of existing monolithic structures.⁴⁶ He is the unknown that has not yet been written into history. And yet, as a man of the crowd, he depends on the urban sprawl. As Poe’s narrator describes: “The old man ... is the type and the genius of deep crime. He refuses to be alone. He is the man of the crowd.”⁴⁷ Thus it can be said that the man of the crowd is *also* a figure of *flâneurie*: the *flâneur* of the past who operated from a position of alterity. This is inherent to his presence as a dialectical image of horror as, through psychological rupture, he conflates the characteristics of the *flâneur* in its past and present possibilities. To return to Buck-Morss:

The flaneur thus becomes extinct only by exploding into a myriad of forms, the phenomenological characteristics of which, no matter how new they may appear, continue to bear his traces, as *Urform*. This is the “truth” of the flaneur, more visible in his afterlife than in his flourishing.⁴⁸

It is in this way that the messianic recalls the revolutionary possibilities of the past and creates them anew in the eternal corruption of the present. In the same way that the

alterity of Frankenstein's monster was only further immortalised in his extinction, so the radical possibilities of the *flâneur* can be resurrected to rupture its commodified existence in the present. This is what makes the man of the crowd unnameable, for he messianically transforms the "history of long years" into a "wild history" before the narrator's very eyes. And yet, while dangerously threatening the stability of the narrator's ego, the man of the crowd induces profound fascination. As cultural theorist Mark Fisher suggests in *The Weird and the Eerie*:

The allure that the weird and the eerie possess is not captured by the idea that we "enjoy what scares us." It has, rather, to do with a fascination for the outside, for that which lies beyond standard perception, cognition and experience.⁴⁹

In the narrator's pursuit of the man of the crowd they affirm the genius of his existence. It is terrifying, but they move toward it. They long to know the unknown, and in turn expose the limitations of their understanding.

While in *Frankenstein* the messianic moves through pain and suffering, in Poe it also traverses plains of wonder and intrigue that communicate the desire for something beyond meaning. Here the messianic power of horror is both *weak* and unknown. It uses the repressed images of the past to motivate redemption in the present, but also emerges with an unnameable face unknown to historical categories. It is in this way that the Gothic provides a solution to Benjamin's problem with the messianic in the commodified conditions of modernity. For established ontological conditions must be destroyed to allow for the radically new. This is a horrific sacrifice that the historical materialist must be willing to make.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In both texts we find a messianic trajectory catalysed by the dialectical image of horror, the locus in which the possibilities of the past and present collide in the Now. The profanity of the Gothic makes ruins of historical progress, digging deep within the excremental excess of humanity to produce the messianic-as-horror. It is in the psychology of the Gothic that eternal rupture can be found, thus incarnating

Benjamin's *happiness as messianic rhythm* in the gothic figure's redemption-as-destruction. In its profanity, the dialectical image of horror is also linked to the demonic. It proclaims the death of God, thereby engaging with a profane illumination beyond the meaning of the sacred. Thus, terror is also a sublime terror; it shakes one's civil subjectivity to the core, but also makes one wonder at the gaps within their knowledge.⁵⁰ The basis of this rhetoric lies in nihilism, but a nihilism that liberates; a messianic nihilism. In its eternal interruption of history-as-progress, the presence of the unnameable exposes the limits of humanity and rejoices. For we have not yet learned of the unknown, and thus we submit ourselves to its future.

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NOTES

¹ Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 260–261.

² Walter Benjamin, "Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century," in *The Writer of Modern Life*, ed. Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2006), 41.

³ Benjamin, "Paris," 41.

⁴ However, it is worth noting that Benjamin was not anti-theological. After all, he ends the last passage of his theses with a note on Judaism: "We know that the Jews were prohibited from investigating the future. ... This does not imply, however, that for the Jews the future turned into homogenous, empty time. For every second of time was the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter." It is not to say that the conceptual value of the messianic in Judaism does not hold resonance with the messianic in the profane. Rather, Benjamin relies on a reconsideration of the messianic within modern consciousness, a realm of the profane in which humankind takes it upon themselves to "investigate the future," rather than devoting it to the foretelling of scripture. Benjamin, "Theses," 264.

⁵ Sami Khatib, "The Messianic Without Messianism: Walter Benjamin's Materialist Theology," *Anthropology and Materialism* 1 (2013): 7, DOI: 10.4000/am.159.

⁶ Benjamin, "Theses," 254.

⁷ Alfredo Lucero-Montano, "Walter Benjamin's Historical Materialism," *Palinurus* 11 (2007): <http://anselmocarranco.tripod.com/id56.html>.

⁸ Khatib, "The Messianic Without Messianism," 10.

⁹ Khatib, "The Messianic Without Messianism," 3.

¹⁰ Benjamin sees The French Revolution as emblematic of the modern, profane messianic drive: "History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogenous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now... The French Revolution viewed itself as Rome reincarnate." This realisation of non-linear time, the "tiger's leap into the past" in the act of redemption is the messianic in motion, however must be divorced from the "arena where the ruling class gives the commands." Rather, "the same leap into the open air of history is the dialectical one, which is how Marx understood the revolution." Benjamin, "Theses," 261.

¹¹ Jonathan Lear, *Happiness, Death, and the Remainder of Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 129.

¹² Benjamin, "Theses," 261.

¹³ Walter Benjamin, "Theologico-Political Fragment," in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Peter Demetz (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 312–313.

¹⁴ Benjamin, "Theologico-Political Fragment," 313.

¹⁵ Walter Benjamin, "Paralipomena to 'On the Concept of History,'" in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, vol. 4, 1938–1940, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2006), 402.

¹⁶ Sigmund Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," in *On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis*, ed. James Strachey (London: Penguin Books, 1984), 315.

¹⁷ Walter Benjamin, "World and Time," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, vol. 1, 1913–1926, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2004), 226.

¹⁸ Walter Benjamin, "The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, vol. 1, 1913–1926, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2004), 142.

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- ²⁰ Gillespie, "Nihilism in the Nineteenth Century."
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- ²² Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 49.
- ²³ Mary Shelley, "Author's Introduction to the Standard Novels Edition (1831)," in *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (London: Penguin, 1992), 9.
- ²⁴ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 56.
- ²⁵ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 13.
- ²⁶ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 15.
- ²⁷ Andrew Smith, "Frankenstein: Sublimity Reconsidered, Foucault and Kristeva" in *Gothic Radicalism* (New York: Macmillan, 2000), 46.
- ²⁸ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 130.
- ²⁹ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 131.
- ³⁰ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 131.
- ³¹ Benjamin, "Fragment," 313.
- ³² Walter Benjamin, "Surrealism," in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Peter Demetz (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 180.
- ³³ Benjamin, "Surrealism," 187.
- ³⁴ Benjamin, "Surrealism," 182.
- ³⁵ The similarity of these two theories of revolutionary nihilism has been discussed in scholarship, such as: James McFarland, *Constellation: Friedrich Nietzsche and Walter Benjamin in the Now-Time of History* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012).
- ³⁶ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 138.
- ³⁷ Benjamin, "Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century," 40.
- ³⁸ Susan Buck-Morss, "The Flaneur, the Sandwichman and the Whore: The Politics of Loitering," *New German Critique*, no. 39 (1986): 103.
- ³⁹ Tom Gunning, "From the Kaleidoscope to the X-Ray: Urban Spectatorship, Poe, Benjamin, and *Traffic in Souls* (1913)," *Wide Angle* 14, no. 4 (1997): 28.
- ⁴⁰ Edgar Allan Poe, "The Man of the Crowd" (Adelaide: ebooks@Adelaide, 2014).

https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/p/poe/edgar_allan/man-of-the-crowd/.

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⁴² Poe, "The Man of the Crowd."

⁴³ Poe, "The Man of the Crowd."

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⁴⁵ Genevieve Amaral, "Edgar Allan Poe's Fear of Texts: 'The Man of the Crowd' as Literary Monster," *The Comparatist*, vol. 35 (2011): 235.

⁴⁶ Amaral, "Edgar Allan Poe's Fear of Texts."

⁴⁷ Poe, "The Man of the Crowd."

⁴⁸ Buck-Morss, "The Flaneur," 105.

⁴⁹ Mark Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie* (London: Repeater Books, 2016), 8.

⁵⁰ For an investigation into terror and the sublime influential to the 19th century gothic, see: Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (London: Routledge, 1958).