



Narelle Jubelin: A 'Pure Language' of Heresy

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This essay is a product of coincidence and circumstance.

In a visit to bookshop in late 1992, my eyes passed randomly across shelves and tabletops and stopped at a title. I decided immediately to buy it. One of the worlds of the title was the same as one in a title of my own published only weeks before. First co-incidence. The purchase is an expensive book of criticism and theory in the field of Jewish literary studies, highly specialized and yet of increasing intellectual interest. Its title, *Fragment of Redemption, Jewish Thought & Literary Theory in Benjamin, Scholem and Levinas* by Susan A. Handelman.¹

Handelman's book pursues its subjects struggles for redemption, through language, in relation to theology and history. The subjects, Benjamin, Scholem and Levinas', 'making of texts' was one path of various tributaries to a view of what redemption might be. My own article titled 'Redemptive Motifs' ². was an attempt to say that what is represented as being potentially 'redemptive' in public culture and social use is often cynically exploited. Handelman vested the value of the redemptive in the private sphere of thought and imagination while I followed the public path of the 'redemptive' in the place of exchange and spectacle. Handelman located the 'redemptive' as an internal condition, I could only see it as an object of external manipulations.

Not long after, I had a meeting with Narelle Jubelin in Melbourne; she had returned from her visits to Glasgow and Rome and approached me about Binocular's 'Focusing Material Histories' edition. We discussed her international project of the last few years and following on our conversation about my own writing projects she showed me a review of her Glasgow exhibition by the English critic Andrew Renton. His summing of her work was written as
"Jubelin's primary activity is one of redemption."³

Second co-incidence

The third and most significant co-incidence was that in a previous exhibition essay for Jubelin ⁴. I had written that Walter Benjamin was very relevant for building links between object, image and interpretation in her work. It now appeared exceedingly to the point that Handelman's book dealing with 'fragments' and 'redemptions' was essentially a Benjamin historiography.

Benjamin's compressed, aphoristic multivalency with its eye fixed, begging, on history provides an ultimate treatise of speculations for the creation and display of Jubelin's wunderkammers. This connection, between a Jewish European intellectual, caught in the assimilation of his own cultural origins

to modernity and the beacon signals of historical colonial jetsam emanating from the Great South Land was so strong that it had to be more closely examined.

Infinitely expanding symbolic economies have become the common attributes of Benjamin the German writer and Jubelin the Australia artist, economies predicated on 'paths of transmission'. Andrew Renton writes that Jubelin's

'research and methodology as to provenance and context are meticulous and fully annotated as an essential part of the presentation. The objects she renders or finds become, or are allowed to become, the sum of their own travels and existence in time.'⁵

He adds, (and I think this is what will become contestable in an important sense),

'it is also certain that there can never be a fixed position from which to read the juxtaposition she has tentatively suggested.'⁶

Susan Handelman finds in Benjamin 'the obscured' dialectical images' of history buried in the ruins of time and traced obliquely in cultural objects, in the very detritus of industrial society.'⁷

Handelman of Benjamin, as Renton of Jubelin, pinpoints ceaseless shifting

"Benjamin's essays are filled with twists, turns, qualifications and ambiguous references that one can plausibly infer several differing positions from them. This is characteristic of his entire mode of juxtapositioning contradictory positions or fragments of positions and weaving them together - albeit with so many threads that the pattern or design of the argument appears, disappears and shifts from one reading to the next."⁸

A comparative analogy of redemption through retrievals appears so similar between them that at first it is difficult to observe what finally emerges as an ideological movement in opposite directions. A fork in the road between Benjamin's messianism and Jubelin's positivist historicism.

But the primary connections are maintained, in Benjamin historical methodology of collage, in the juxtaposition of disparate fragments, his attraction to the minute, to the compressed 'to create, or discover perfection on the small and very smallest scale was one of his strongest urges.'⁹

Benjamin's' rejection of 'totalities' meant that what was unavailable in the larger whole could become available in the compressed, in the miniature. Sholem writes of Benjamin 'he dragged me to the Musee Cluny in Paris, where in a collection of Jewish ritual objects, he showed with true rapture two grains of

what on which a kindred soul had inscribed the complete Shema Israel.' 10; and that 'it was his never-realized ambition to get a hundred lines onto an ordinary sheet of notepaper.'¹¹. In 1991 Jubelin gave me as a memento of her journey to Japan an old holed coin framing a minute grain of rice that she had embroidered and then inserted.

Compression is also the method by which Benjamin's 'dialectics at a standstill' wish to reveal knowledge, clashing images crystallized in moments of powerful shock and recognition and the 'instantaneous flash'. Jubelin's objects are just such flashes of recognizability even as they are "objects ... turned into dead things; they become commodities. Torn from their original context, manipulated, given alien meanings, they become the 'ruins' of the modern world."¹²

Benjamin's redemptive interpretive struggles toward the naming of the un-nameable and the obscured, are in themselves acts towards purification and the constructing of a metaphysics based on an objective world. That there was "something perceptively objective in history... the meaning which lay within objects included their history most decisively"¹³. Jubelin's cultural objects would agree on the theories of objectivity but they abandon the metaphysics.

In a continuing paradox Jubelin appears to manufacture a hermeneutics which in the Benjaminian context could almost be Talmudic. Handelman describes the methods of the classical rabbinic textual commentary and teaching which atomistically take a text work by word and expand the immediate context by reference to large wholes. These dialogic features, "this intentional juxtaposition of modern and ancient draws attention to their disjunction and connection to the very process of interpretation itself."¹⁴ Again the language of Jubelin's methods.

Benjamin's politics of fragmentation and interpretation continuously return to theories of language and translation in which a "purification of epistemology" makes his metaphysics logically possible. Not as information but as a superior mode of knowledge, a 'pure language' of ultimate meaning which is ultimately uncommunicable; where all particular meaning is extinguished, a realm which is less content than a pure form. The function of translation and interpretation here is understood as transmission of tradition.

Jubelin's fragments also exist as pure translations of tradition and beg the question of knowledge "does it give of itself alone, or of something hidden within its depths, of something entirely other as transcendental and redemptive or inhuman and monstrous - or all at once?"¹⁵. Once again, I would remove the transcendental and leave the rest.

But in removing the transcendent and metaphysical what then does the 'purity of language' in her work and in the interpretation of her work signify?

For Benjamin, it would be speculated that once the shock of juxtaposition between things and images was perceived and

"The rescue that is thus - an only thus - achieved... in the next moment, is already irretrievably lost."

The loss, transcended into subjectivity, into interpretation. There is no doubt Jubelin's material dialectics elicit temporal dissolutions between a material content and a truth content, but the relationship to the historical 'afterlife' of the work is different. For Benjamin, the dissolution occurs in the decomposition of the work or image, the rebirth of the truth content and the work was possibly only through (or as) its fragmentation and ruin. 17.

In Jubelin we have a cultural hermeneutics where the move into the expanding subjectivity of interpretation of her object relations occurs not through that which is 'irretrievably lost', not from dialectical decomposition, but from a perpetual reconstitution of the absolute object. Bleak news for the ideological subject in history.

In Benjamin the heart of meaning is occlusion, for Jubelin juxtaposition suggests that 'everything' is revealed in the signifying prominence of (the) absolute material facts. Although it is the practice of citation that links them, his is purgative and a way of calling the word back to origin and to justice. 18. Jubelin returns us to the positivism of a culture that sees materiality as primary - not in what might first appear (and has been interpreted) as historical and therefore 'political evidence', but instead as a practice of historically sanctioned, controlling yet discrete, anarchy.

There are here no moves toward purification in the Benjaminian understanding and the theological and therefore moral understanding of the redemptive is displaced.

It is Benjamin's and Jubelin's methodologies in common, the historicist method, a detached distrust of processes of immediacy, the rigor of detachment and impersonality that keep the aesthetic of 'pure language' in the foreground. The locking onto 'process' purifies perceptions of the practice and then ultimately its interpretation.

What can be made of the 'pure' space of reception around Jubelin's objects? What is the link between her offering of culture as a flat materiality to a receptive space that accepts and is 'purified' by her objects capacities to keep the interpretive as the fecund condition of their existence?

If it is only the aesthetic process of historicism and interpretive methodologies that link Benjamin and Jubelin, while vast cultural difference divide them, we need to account for the accumulated reception to her work. In this way perhaps her 'pure language', particular to itself and to its audience, can be placed into the void of its separate origin, its heresy.

If one were to compile a list of descriptors, strung together like a Bloomian passage from Joyce they might run like this. The appearance of the framed petit-point narratives, seductive curio objects redolent with nationalist and colonial historical allusions, tempered by private and public voyeurism as a "brown study" and scopophilia as a discipline; arranged on walls as simulations of philological ellipsis, pictographic displacements, allegorical constellations of related multiples, ambivalent fetish objects, cartographic guides to globalized colonialisms, political and gender inversions, geometries of post and neo-deconstruction, genealogical and archeological puzzles, formalized tokens of consumption and commodification - an ideological and irrational empirical joke in the museum of material scholarship?

The purity of diffusion that this inventory represents is a dissemblance. Jubelin's Benjaminian tasks as a collector and 'translator' like that of her culture's interpretive critics, lead not to his territorialised 'ruins' of history, where if not redemption, then hope, hovers. Jubelin's material redemptions are a 'pure language' of fatality, they are a view of history without hope, history as a 'return', not of the repressed, but to a point of cultural origin in and a fixation with the enlightenment that especially matters to her specific culture.

It can be said that Jubelin's 'history' and that of her culture has never lived in the mind of any God, or in any languages that derive their morality or symbolic allegories from metaphysical or spiritual traditions. The relationship between this work and the ambivalences of western philosophy are represented in symbolic and imagistic juxtapositions that appeal instead to the 'masters' of Hegelian history as well as to the justifying 'slaves' who can read the political ironies.

Jubelin's 'history' though camouflaged by the scaffolding of modernism (the arch avant-garde context of dissemination), is bound and chained to the material determinations of the taxonomical traditions and genealogizing of dominant race.

As a 'collector' of this tradition, what values does it hold against Benjamin's views that it was "to renew the old world - that is the collector's deepest desire when he is driven to acquire new things" 19, and "the most distinguished trait of a collection will be its transmissibility"20.

The 'collector' of Jubelin's origins, his 'deepest desires' when 'driven to acquire new things' (and in the best 'pure language of detachment and interpretation) remain unspeakable. The contents of history's museums and the 'extirminated' cultures are not profound examples of the collector's deepest desire to

'renew the old world'. As for 'distinction' derived by 'transmissability' - isn't it the case that freedom is allowed to exist only in the hands of ownership?

If Benjamin and others, 21. , correctly found that the possibilities for redemption ended with the rationalism of the eighteenth century they also considered that the philosophy it sustained was allied with egoism and violence. Eighteenth and nineteenth century theories of language linked in with evolutionary theory

"One need only observe, describe and classify; speculation was unnecessary. In other words, the final cause is found in the structure of each part ..."22

"...the proper methods for a science of language were description, classification and arrangements of facts which led back to its roots, which were names of concepts..."23

In this context of culture and ideas, Renton's view of Jubelin's unceasing semiotic shifts must be re-figured, not in terms of the redemptive function as retrieval but as meaning.

For there is in fact a fixed position and it is determinative, the interpretive culture around Jubelin certainly perceives and names it but does not distinguish from it.

The problematic is that Jubelin's juxtapositions in evolutionary terms re-produce the 'final cause...found in the structure of each part'. In this sense, it is only the parts that participate in redemption, they redeem themselves through her intervention. Jubelin's materialism keep qualifying the imaginative dominance of scientific belief and keeps returning it to evolutionism's moment, retelling its futurism.

If there is the overwhelming sense that Benjamin and Jubelin's theses are a response to catastrophe, one has to consider in which historical direction their catastrophies are facing. The Jewish Benjamin represents race as expenditure, archetypal subject of the horrific balance that evolutionist eugenics realized in the 'master race' during his time, though triggered earlier in the extrapolations of Darwinian time; Jubelin's 'Time'.

Both cultural producers have a troubled relation to the historical past. For Benjamin there was the question of what remains when the authority of tradition has broken down, how does one live among the ruins? If we identify with Benjamin that catastrophe is "That things' just keep on going' " we also have to accept that 'tradition' for others still remains triumphal and that the 'ruins' in dominant hands are indeed a nice place in which to live.

Walter Benjamin is an important reference for a reading of Jubelin's work, his pursuit of 'pure language' contesting with a materialist view of history; his emphasis on the 'naming of things, the shaping of taxonomies, provides textual paradigms for Jubelin's juxtapositions of fragments and histories.

If silence is the outcome of knowledge as language, in cultures both with and without theology, then blindness (which clearly remains beyond and outside of political consideration) is the ultimate outcome of history as collection. What then is the heresy? In this context Jubelin's needle belongs to the brooch with which Oedipus blinds himself so that he would not have to see the truth.

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June 1993

Notes.

1. Handelman, S Fragments of Redemption. Jewish Thought Literary Theory in Benjamin, Scholem & Levinas. 1991 Indiana Univ. Press
2. Gertsakis, E 'Redemptive Motifs' Australian Cultural Policy and Practice Agenda 1992
3. Renton, A Narelle Jubelin Centre for Contemporary Art, Glasgow. Flash Art Vol xxv no. 166 October 1992
4. Gertsakis, E Narelle Jubelin. Second Glance (At 'The Coming Man') essay Mori Gallery Sydney 1988, Centre for the Arts, Hobart 1989, George Paton Gallery, 1989
5. Renton op cit 102
6. ibid. Paul DeMan writes of Benjamin "Whenever I go back to this text, I think I have it more or less, than I read it again, and again I don't understand it" Handelman p 30
7. Handelman op cit 13
8. ibid 22
9. ibid 24
10. ibid 25
11. ibid 25
12. ibid 141
13. Buck-Morss, Susan The Dialectics of Seeing. Walter Benjamin and The Arcades Project MIT 1991
pg 13
14. Handelman op cit 314
15. ibid 22
16. ibid 125
17. ibid 127
18. ibid 151
19. ibid 142 Benjamin, Walter 'Unpacking My Library' in Illuminations Ed. Hannah Arendt Schocken 1968
20. ibid 142
21. Handelman op cit preface
22. ibid 72 Even though these examples from 1800 which became models for language study and anthropology are actually presented by Handelman as examples of arguments against Darwinian developmental evolutionary theory, they are so in tune with the imaginative power of the 'scientific-critical' method they absurdly come to share the ethos.
23. ibid 72