Enzo Traverso. *Left-Wing Melancholia: Marxism, History, and Memory*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2016. Pp. 289 (cloth).

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How else to look back on the previous 150 years from the standpoint of the left than with a sense of melancholia? We have with us now, exactly one century after the Bolshevik Revolution, a well-formed constellation of persons and objects and ideas from which a melancholic structure of feeling emanates. Its brightest stars belong to the martyrs: Louis Auguste Blanqui (-1881), Rosa Luxemburg (-1919), Emiliano Zapata (also -1919), Leon Trotsky (-1940), Szmul Zygielbojm (-1943), Che Guevara (-1967), Ulrike Meinhof (-1976), and more. Its epic has been sung in the verse of Bertolt Brecht, Muriel Rukeyser, and César Vallejo, and told in the prose of Andrei Platonov, Roberto Bolaño, and David Peace. Its visualization begins with Gustave Courbet's *Burial at Ornans*, reaches through El Lissitzky's constructivist tribute to the murdered founder of the Spartakusbund, only to appear and reappear in the cinema of Luchino Visconti, Theo Angelopoulos, Aleksandr Sokurov, and Patricio Guzmán. And if, through all of this, left-wing melancholia has attained to a single totalizing form—if our melancholic constellation were to gravitate into the black hole that embodies this entire tradition at once and in itself—then that form would look something like the filmic elegies orchestrated by László Krasznahorkai and Béla Tarr—"films of maturity," writes Jacques Rancière,

> accompanying the collapse of the Soviet system and its disenchanting capitalist consequences, when the censure of the market has taken over for that of the State: darker and darker films, in which politics is reduced to manipulation, the social promise to a swindle, and the collective to the brutal horde.[1]

While left-wing melancholia has had its share of theorists in the recent past—any respectable list of whom would have to include Wendy Brown, T. J. Clark, Jodi Dean, and Mark Fisher—it will surely be a cautionary reminder against expressive indulgence to recapitulate a shared point of citation: the phrase's

[1] Jacques Rancière, *Béla Tarr: The Time After*, trans. Erik Beranek (Minneapolis: Univocal, 2013), 3.

origin, in Walter Benjamin's 1931 review of the poetry of Erich Kästner. For Benjamin, Kästner was an unforgivable hack because his poetry wholly embraced

> the fatalism of those who are most remote from the process of production and whose obscure courting of the state of the market is comparable to the attitude of a man who yields himself up entirely to the inscrutable accidents of his digestion.[2]

The poetry's melancholic pose placed Kästner squarely within—as Benjamin put it—"the decayed bourgeoisie's mimicry of the proletariat. Their function," claimed Benjamin, "is to give rise, politically speaking, not to parties but to cliques; literarily speaking, not to schools but to fashions; economically speaking, not to producers but to agents."[3] Kästner's social purpose, as the literary conveyer of left-wing melancholy, is to render the political reality of the working classes and of committed activists palatable for bourgeois consumption. An early manifestation of what we now call "virtue signalling," the opportunistic performance of a political subjectivity, left-wing melancholia is diagnosed here as the debilitating ideology of capitalist realism. It is profoundly and perniciously conservative.

It is from Benjamin that Enzo Traverso takes the title as well as the organizational method for his book, *Left-Wing Melancholia: Marxism, History, and Memory*, published by Columbia University press in 2016. The principal task of this book is to mediate between two separate though related entities, which Traverso nominates on the first page of the preface: "The memory of the left is a huge, prismatic continent made of conquests and defeats, while melancholy is a feeling, a state of the soul and a field of emotions" (xiii). Left memory and melancholic feeling: given the sheer size and multiform variability of these two things, Traverso does not confine himself to a straightforward genealogy of political thought and sentiment, and neither does he keep to a geographically or culturally specific tradition. Instead, the book comprises a

[2] Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, part 2, *1931–1934*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith, trans. Rodney Livingstone and others (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 426.

[3] Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, 425.

wide-ranging essay in the more traditional sense of that term, as someone like Georg Lukács might have defined it. "The essay," Lukács once stipulated, "is a judgement, but the essential, the value-determining thing about it is not the verdict (as in the case with the system) but the process of judging"[4]—not the means to a conclusion but something peripatetic, inquisitive, and exploratory. Like Benjamin's incomplete work on the Parisian arcades or even the "melancholy science" of Theodor Adorno's self-reflexive and fragmentary *Minima Moralia*, Traverso's essay evolves its narrative as a concatenated reading in the hieroglyphs of the past and present: it collects ideas and images, it retells anecdotes and speculates on encounters, it maps political currents and tendencies—in short, it argues by way of constellation.

While—in good Benjaminian fashion—it would be difficult and maybe even counterproductive to attempt summary of that narrative, we can nevertheless group the content into three types of chapter, even if the grouping is primarily heuristic. The first group is the most straightforward, as it provides an overarching and historically embedded theory of melancholia (more on which below). This group would include the first two chapters, "The Culture of Defeat" and "Marxism and Memory," as well as the fifth chapter, "Marxism and the West." The high-water mark of these chapters is a brief and resolutely melancholic speculation into what Traverso calls "counterfactual intellectual history" (167), so as to invent the content and outcomes of a productive dialogue that never really took place, between Adorno and C. L. R. James. "What," asks Traverso,

> could have produced a fruitful, rather than a missed, encounter between Adorno and James or, putting the question in broader terms, between the first generation of critical theory and Black Marxism? It probably would have changed the culture of the New Left and that of Third Worldism. (176)

The second group comprises the two chapters that will undoubtedly appeal most to readers interested in modernism as a set of highly politicized and easily politicizable artistic practices. The first of these is called "Melancholy Images,"

[4] Georg Lukács, *Soul and Form* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1974), 18.

and it begins with filmic responses to the end of real socialism before looking backward to a long history of visual creation in the wake of left defeats. Theo Angelopoulos, Carmen Castillo, Patricio Guzmàn, Ken Loach, and Chris Marker are presented, through satisfyingly rich scenic description, as having revealed "the twentieth century as a tragic age of wrecked revolutions and defeated utopias, remembering the vanquished of its lost battles. Death," concludes Traverso, "floats over all of them as their fatal destiny" (117). The second chapter to deal with aesthetics is called "Bohemia: Between Melancholy and Revolution," and it provides some of the book's few moments of exuberant warmth. If the idea of bohemia seems out of place in an account of left-wing melancholia, just think of Trotsky's exile to Mexico, where he lived with Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo and wrote a manifesto co-signed by Rivera and André Breton. This chapter, which reimagines Marx himself as a bohemian fringe-dweller, emphasizes an effectively communist essence in bohemian culture. "It was a question of creating, on the fringes of capitalist society, a microcosmic community, able to foreshadow the universal human community of the future." (123) The final group of chapters might be classed as character studies or as vignettes of intellectual biography, in that they detail the transmission of memory and the transference of melancholia between figures on the left, or more accurately between Benjamin and his readers both contemporary and posthumous. While the material in "Adorno and Benjamin: Letters at Midnight in the Century" will be familiar to anyone that knows the history of the Frankfurt School and of Benjamin's death in Portbao, the book's final chapter, "Synchronic Times: Walter Benjamin and Daniel Bensaïd" offers a rewarding materialist recalibration of the former's mysticism as what the latter would term "messianic reason."

As a work of diagnostic criticism, Traverso's account of contemporary political culture is complex and compelling, and begins with the crucial differentiation between left-wing melancholia and a more widespread sense of bleeding-heart atrocity nostalgia. To put it a little too simply, the premise is that—beginning in the 1980s—the rise of memory and memorialization as a cultural fetish dovetailed with the defeat of state socialism to produce what Traverso calls a "mutilated dialectic," driving us into a present weighed down by memories of the past but completely unable to project a future. "The obsession with the past that is shaping our time results from this eclipse of utopias," we are told: "a

world without utopias inevitably looks back" (9). But—and here's the dialectical twist—because we entered the twenty-first century without revolutions, "without Bastilles or Winter Palace assaults," our memory is not filled with defeated glory but instead with the actuality of wars and genocide, of the camps and the gulags. "Mostly anonymous and silent, victims invade the podium and dominate our vision of history," and so it is that guilt-inducing pity has come to usurp political commitment as the dominant means of engaging a collective past:

> The memory of the Gulag erased that of revolution, the memory of the Holocaust replaced that of antifascism, and the memory of slavery eclipsed that of anticolonialism: the remembrance of the victims seems unable to coexist with the recollection of their hopes, of their struggles, of their conquests and their defeats. (10)

Liberal humanitarianism sacralises the victim but neglects the vanquished; it is the very opposite of left-wing commitment, a pre-emptive strike against political change, and that's before its inevitable co-option into imperialist ideology.[5]

Opposed to all of this and unlike the politically debilitating ideology Benjamin was sensing in Kästner, Traverso's version of left-wing melancholy is said to have an affirmative dimension, or what might be described as the minimal expression of revolutionary potential. "This melancholia," he says,

> does not mean a retreat into a closed universe of suffering and remembering; it is rather a constellation of emotions and feelings that envelop a historical transition, the only way in which the search for new ideas and projects can coexist with the sorrow and mourning for a lost realm of revolutionary experiences. (xiv)

This is not just affirmation in the rarefied sense of aristocratic contemplation; it is, rather, the experiential response to an objective crisis at the level of political history. Traverso's stated intention, then, is to distil something forward facing and catalytic from the left's apparent defeats and their remembrance. "It perceives the tragedies and the lost battles of the past," he says of a truly left-

[5] For an object lesson in right-wing humanitarianism, see the career trajectory of Samantha Power.

wing melancholia, "as a burden and a debt, which are also a promise of redemption" (xv). On this, he finds a powerful and potentially unexpected counterpart in how gay activists internalized the disruptive consequence of the AIDS epidemic in the late 1980s and thereafter. With the introductory chapter, he describes Douglas Crimp as an activist for whom this irreducible trauma, far from spreading passivity and favouring a retreat into a private sphere of suffering, engendered a new kind of militancy, "a militancy coming from mourning, which drew its strength from *within* melancholy and bereavement" (20). Most importantly of all, this melancholy acquired a practical dimension in order to rebuild communities, to reinvent love and pleasure, and to overcome social stigma; melancholia, in this instance, was channelled into the work of reconstruction, assuring new kinds of medical and psychological treatment whilst rejuvenating old relationships. Traverso quotes Crimp as mirror to his own project: "Militancy, of course, but mourning too: mourning *and* militancy" (21).

This is not to say Traverso's détournement of left-wing melancholia belongs exclusively to queer politics; it's just that, in gay activism, he finds an exceptionally and affirmatively materialist response to a state of being and feeling, a way of not just drawing strength but also of using that strength for material good. And this particular counterpart will return, hauntingly, in the final chapter, on Daniel Bensaïd, who died of AIDS in 2010. "Used to meeting specters and ghosts," Traverso quotes from Bensaïd's autobiography, "I had been pushed on their side by the ordeal of sickness" (213). Indeed, and fittingly enough, this book recalibrates the twinned experience of mourning and militancy in relation to the dying words of numerous historical revolutionaries, delivered precisely at the reckoning of their defeat. Most poignant of these is Rosa Luxemburg. At the end of the Spartakusaufstand in Berlin in 1919, Luxemburg confronted defeat with words directed toward future triumph:

> The whole road of socialism—so far as revolutionary struggles are concerned—is paved with nothing but thunderous defeats. Yet, at the same time, history marches inexorably, step by step, toward final victory! (31)

So it is that Luxemburg approached the conclusion of an article that gazes backward through socialism's "chain of historic defeats" to project a home in time, however elusive, for her future comrades.

Given Traverso's altogether accurate premise that Marxism "was the dominant expression of most revolutionary movements in the twentieth century" (xiii) it stands to reason that the origins of left-wing melancholia—in its affirmative as opposed to opportunistic or fatalistic character—are with Karl Marx. The book's first chapter after the introduction distils a theory of defeat from the writings of Marx and the inheritors of his legacy. In *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, written in 1952, Marx was emphatic that leftist revolutionaries must avoid falling captive to melancholic rumination, which would render passivity. The famous passage, from which Traverso quotes, is this one:

> The social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot take its poetry from the past but only from the future. It cannot begin with itself before it has stripped away all superstition about the past. The former revolutions required recollections of past world history in order to smother their own content. The revolution of the nineteenth century must let the dead bury their dead in order to arrive at its own content.[6]

Two decades later, however, in his writings on the Paris Commune of 1871—published that year as *The Civil War in France*—Marx supplies the other side of this dialectic, an affirmative lesson to match the note of caution. Traverso quotes Marx's statement in full:

> Working men's Paris, with its Commune, will be forever celebrated as the glorious harbinger of a new society. Its martyrs are enshrined in the great heart of the working class. Its exterminators history has already nailed to that eternal pillory from which all the prayers of their priest will not avail to redeem them. (33)

While there is no means of showing cause and effect as material reality, or at least not one easily committed to critical prose, Traverso is perfectly right to

[6] Karl Marx, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: Norton), 439.

contextualize the state's bloody extirpation of the communards within a broader historical chronology. "The dimension of such a defeat was overwhelming, but did not shake the faith of Marx in the historical growth of socialism. Three decades later," he confirms, "mass socialist parties existed in all European countries" (34). The point of all this is to suggest that—even in a time when, to borrow Chris Marker's beloved metaphor, revolutionary thought only exists as a grin without a cat—it somehow remains a possibility that, given the right circumstances, might erupt into revolution proper.

But this might be the book's central, unresolved problem, and one that is almost definitely a symptom of its content. As a work of partisan literature—whose welcome use of the plural pronoun "we" reads as comradely instead of royal[7]—Traverso's narrative zeroes in on the psychical being of the left, that vast superstructure haunted by the spectres of our defeated ancestors, in such a way that its material base sometimes disappears from view. In other words, this book tends more toward sympathetic description than strategic prescription, and because of that some of the descriptions remain underdeveloped, or at least they want for more political and economic context. To be perfectly clear, it would be unfair to expect this or any other book to provide a complete roadmap to the "concrete (and possible) utopia" (234) with which it concludes; but, in assessing the challenges we face between here and there, wherever or whatever there may be, a keener eye for strategy might help us better apprehend the present situation. "Twenty-five years ago," we read, "the fall of real socialism paralyzed and prohibited the utopian imagination, generating for a while new eschatological visions of capitalism as the 'insuperable horizon' of human societies." According to Traverso, we are already halfway to crossing that horizon. "This time is over," he adds, "but no new utopias have yet appeared" (8). And precisely that is the problem: capitalism is broken and yet it persists, not because we fail to conceive of a new utopia but because our means of conception are just as broken as the system that articulates each and every one of us. While much of this book's political drive is wagered on hopeful desire—the term "hope" is a keyword, Ernst Bloch a key citation—without indexing that desire to concrete actuality, even as a force of opposition, we come very close to lapsing into

[7] Disha Karnad Jani also remarks on this rhetorical tendency, here: https://jhiblog.org/2017/04/12/revolutions-are-never-on-time/.

wishful idealism. Counterpoised to any such hope, capitalism's mutation into its neoliberal phase is evoked several times, and is described accurately in the introduction, with a passage that knowingly echoes Benjamin's ninth thesis on the concept of history:

> The fall of communism coincided with the end of Fordism, that is, the model of industrial capitalism that had dominated the twentieth century. The introduction of flexible, mobile, and precarious work as well as the penetration of individualist models of competition among salary men eroded traditional forms of sociability and solidarity. The advent of new forms of production and the dislocation of the old system of big factories with enormous concentration of labor forces had many consequences: on the one hand, it deeply affected the traditional left, putting into question its social and political identity; on the other hand, it disarticulated the social frameworks of the left's memory, whose continuity was irremediably broken. (9)

While the enemy is certainly named, this reader cannot help but wonder how the potentially inspiring side of melancholia can survive in the age of collective atomization and total subsumption. Maybe that final adverb says it all. But, like Traverso, we should hope not.