

ACTION OF THE ANGEL

There remains some ambiguity about the precise language and choreography of this attentional practice, which may involve an effort to “impersonate” or “embody” the condition of a projectile flying away from its point-of-launch (while looking back). Perhaps most striking, however, is the way that the language of the protocol hews close to the dramaturgy imputed by Walter Benjamin to the “Angel of History” (in section IX of his “Theses on the Philosophy of History”): wings caught open by a terrible gust, this “Angelus Novus” is propelled blindly (backwards) into the future, as he watches the catastrophe of the past pile up in a receding view. If the connection is rightly drawn, the sidelong regard with which the “Action of the Angel” ends should perhaps be understood as a pivot into the *time of now*.

Phase one begins before the work; the first three phases each end with a regression from the work (walking backwards away) of a distance to be determined in advance by whoever is leading the practice; at the start of the final phase this person whispers “turn left” or “turn right,” inviting a ninety-degree turn to one side or the other, where a new object or perspective presents itself as a coda to the action. Phase duration variable. Experimentation is encouraged.

I.
FACE THE PAST
Contemplate fixedly.

II.
BLOWN BACK
Recede from what was.

III.
BLINDSIGHT
Feel what’s behind you.

IV.
TURN
What’s left (or right)?

¹ The full text, in Zohn’s 1968 translation, reads: “A Klee painting named ‘Angelus Novus’ shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing in from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such a violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.” A lightly annotated copy of this text, reproduced from the 1968 edition of *Illuminations*, appears in the Sprague Sheaf, folded within a copy of Sprague’s *Electronic Flash Handbook* (1952).



THE SPRAGUE SHEAF

HISTORY, PROXIMITY, AND RETROSPECTION IN POSTWAR AMERICA

Readers of the PROCEEDINGS OF ESTAR(SER) will already be aware of the considerable efforts made by various scholars, collectors, bibliophiles, and editors to sift the historicity of that peculiar body known as THE ORDER OF THE THIRD BIRD. Despite the labors of ESTAR(SER) researchers, a great deal of uncertainty (and even some genuine confusion) persists concerning the nature and workings of THE BIRDS — a self-sequestering community that seems to function, at least in its modern incarnation, as a private association of adepts who convene to perform public and private rites of sustained attention to made things (often works of art). New documents bearing on the genesis, evolution, and practices of THE ORDER are continually coming to light, many of them sourced from the vast repository known as the “W-Cache.” We are pleased here to offer a sample from a new and interesting body of relevant materials. Details follow.

TEXT AND CONTEXT

Among the most puzzling documents to have surfaced in the W-Cache in recent years, the *Sprague Sheaf* is remarkable for being the source of a Protocol of Sustained Attention of considerable interest — a protocol not otherwise known within the annals of ESTAR(SER). Although significant problems of provenance require caution concerning the historical veracity of the Sheaf and its contents, the protocol in question — which we have dubbed the “Action of the Angel” — strikes us as being of genuine value. It is notable in two respects: it appears to involve a set of *retrogressions*, by which a practitioner, walking backwards, continually *recedes* from the attentional object; in addition, the final phase of the protocol evidently *redirects* the attention to a new object or view, situated at a right angle to the line of withdrawal. These features indicate a distinctive *trajectory* (both physical and visual) of the attentive subject in relation to the object(s) at issue. Our reconstruction of the protocol, reproduced on the back of this card, has been achieved through a culling of notes and clippings in the Sprague Sheaf itself, a body of memorabilia evidently associated with one “Lucinda Flug” (1922?-2002?; possibly a pseudonym). Preliminary research points to Flug likely having been employed at the Sprague Electric Company (North Adams, Massachusetts) in the 1940s. Be that as it may, a preponderance of Sprague-related material in the Sheaf evidences her ongoing preoccupation with that institution — particularly with its role in the making of capacitor components for the so-called “Proximity Fuze,” a radio-wave trigger used to important effect in ballistics during the Second World War (it permitted a projectile to “sense” when it was in range of its target). Might elements of the choreography of the “Action of the Angel” be traceable to *factory evacuation procedures* taught to employees of Sprague in the period? Perhaps. However, the presence, in the Sheaf, of a marked-up photocopy of a single page from the 1968 edition of Walter Benjamin’s *Illuminations* suggests an alternative interpretation. More work is needed.



FIGURE: One of the pamphlets from the Sprague Sheaf, a set of documents found in a box marked “W-Cache Materials” which came to light in the private papers of Hogfoot Milcom recently accessioned to the holdings of ESTAR(SER). Internal inconsistencies cast doubt on the authenticity of several of these sources, which Milcom labeled “Lucinda Flug.” Flug may have worked at the Sprague Electric Factory 1942-1947; evidence suggests that by the late 1970s she was serving as a volunteer docent at the Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Massachusetts. The core phases of the “Action of the Angel,” overleaf, were found inscribed in the back of this catalog for military capacitors. (Courtesy of the Trustees of the Milcom Memorial Reading Room).