

Lena Schmidt ~~Pouring Lead~~  
Melting Wax

Synopsis

~~Pouring Lead Melting Wax~~ is a critical introspection that seeks to approach the consoling effects of apocalyptic narratives through the reflection of melting. Melting and rigidity are not to be understood merely as poles between which this essay moves thematically, but rather as its own mode of movement: When the wings of Walter Benjamin's *Angel of History* are clotted with black oil, when he can't break out of doomscrolling, when Icarus and Daedalus fly in sweeping sinuosities over the debris and the wax begins to melt, when YouTube videos of glacial collapses and volcanic eruptions trigger a maelstrom and paralyze those staring at them, when Day X, the X at the top right of the video window, external hard drives, and *The Exform* of Nicolas Bourriaud intersect; when Anne Boyer's *Clickbait Thanatos* crosses paths with Althusser's theory of the teleological structure of every genesis. The essay seeks to wrest from its analysis the causal concatenation of temporality, temperature, and form a self-emptying narrative that remains pliable and mobile even as glaciers and the Svalbard seed archive melt, as magma leaks and hardens, as history proves eruptive, porous, and incomplete, and yet the future seems so determined, when the archive above and the future ahead seem to loom like dark clouds, when people choose to be frozen in death, longing for the eternal or for the end, and let themselves slide in morbid solemnity into the infinity pool of the apocalypse, and from there admire the dazzling aesthetics of the sunset.

**Pouring Lead  
Melting Wax**

Apocalyptica

No 2 / 2022

Schmidt: Pouring Lead

Melting Wax

*No the end is not near  
The end is not nearly what you think  
No the end is not near  
The end is not nearly were you think it is*  
— Benny Hester (2016), “No the end is not near”

*There is a painting by Klee called Angelus Novus. An angel is depicted there who looks as though he were about to distance himself from something which he is staring at. His eyes are opened wide, his mouth stands open and his wings are outstretched. The Angel of History must look just so. His face is turned towards the past. Where we see the appearance of a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe, which unceasingly piles rubble on top of rubble and hurls it before his feet. He would like to pause for a moment so fair [verweilen: a reference to Goethe's Faust], to awaken the dead and to piece together what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise, it has caught itself up in his wings and is so strong that the Angel can no longer close them. The storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the rubble-heap before him grows sky-high. That which we call progress, is this storm.*

— Walter Benjamin (1980), *Über den Begriff der Geschichte*

*Aufheben hat in der Sprache den gedoppelten Sinn, daß es soviel als aufbewahren, erhalten bedeutet und zugleich soviel als aufhören lassen, ein Ende machen.*

— Georg Willhelm Friedrich Hegel (1979), *Die Wissenschaft der Logik II*

*As much as capitalism's humans seem to generally suspect we should or will die off and take the world with us, many of us want to live, at least in a manner.*

— Anne Boyer (2017), *Clickbait Thanatos: On the Poetics of Post-Privacy*

With a bang, sparkling wine foams over the bottleneck and runs over the cool green glass in cascades of golden bubbles. The foam of this liquid that was once obtained from grapes—which were once plucked from curly vines, then alienated from its original forms in lengthy processes and stored in cold cellars, and which yet seemed to have anticipated its intoxicating future, being all bubbly as a fruit already—mounts up. A beautiful eruption! The crowd acknowledges the spectacle with murmuration. I am sitting in the middle of a cloud of smoke, in the middle of what would be called a *Menschentraube* in German; a raceme of people, translated into a cloud of people in a kitchen and we are talking about the climate crisis and the mood drops and we let our thoughts dwell on and glide into the apocalyptic as if it were a warm, sparkling bath. We get gloomy and, at some point, the conversation suffocates and everyone looks to their phone screens and sighs and pours another glass of that comforting, foamy champagne. All of a sudden, I think of Pompeii. Of the many people, locked in their poses, eternally holding the grapes above their gaping throats, stretched out on the carpets with their gracefully falling togas, leaning on their elbows, feasting sideways. Out of nowhere, people who had just planned to brush out their stomachs with the feather of a duck appear in my head; who had just bent over a huge vase to retch when death took hold of them and poured them into the mold of this undignified pose forever. The images that immediately pop up in my head are plucked from scenes of decadence: soft figs, clasped by stone, glowing feathers, cleavages, fingers, jars, jugs, mouths, fans clasped by fists, skin eaten by fire, melted glass.

We want to pour lead. I don't want to read the future as a whole, only as much as I can carry with a spoon. However, I had completely forgotten that lead is a toxic heavy metal. Which means that the lead that we usually bought in shapes like four-leaf clover, gold bars or hearts, packed in a plastic kit together with the punily printed paper instructions and semiotic guidance to interpret the fresh shapes, has been replaced by less harmful matter. That's why we are now pouring wax. The round belly of the spoon over the flame darkens in sooty streaks: obscure, like a cave painting. Above, the wax melts in the heat. Like sugar, I think, or heroin. We melt down the future—or rather—we melt down what becomes the future.

What do I imagine my future to be made of?

- *lead*
- *ash*
- *sugar*

- *narcotics*
- *wax*

A German proverb that pictures dying suddenly comes to my mind:  
*Den Löffel weitergeben*. It literally means: to pass on the spoon.

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The melting wax and our fear of self-inflicted doom lead my thoughts to the story of Daedalus and Icarus: how all the techno-futuristic promise of nature's mastery clings to their self-made wings of feathers and wax. How Icarus first begins his flight in the more tempered sine curves of his father, and how hubris pushes his mechanical flight curves into amplitudes that go further and further to the extremes, and how the sun scorches his brain so that his whole construction of ever higher spiraling acceleration eventually falls from the sky like one of the countless, seemingly shock-poisoned birds from one of the YouTube videos<sup>1</sup> that the watchlist algorithm had suggested to me the night before, after the video of a gigantic glacier floe slipping into the water, with eery, agonized (or perhaps satisfied) sounding moans; accompanied by tense laughter and excited murmurs and the words OH MY GOD, repeatedly proclaimed by the doomsday voyeur behind the camera; he persistently holds the view on the chunk of ice that causes the Arctic Ocean to rear up under the pressure (or yet the pleasure) until the boat, and with it the enraptured people, shouting OH and AH and OH MY GOD and the camera filming the scene are tossed up and down by the enormous waves in a gentleness that could not do justice to the violence of that moment at all.

As I stared mesmerized at the screen of the laptop, the sudden fall of all these birds from the sky had seemed to me like an evil omen. I had to think immediately of the Old Testament plagues, of a divine punishment.

These are our amplitudes: record summer, century flood, heat wave, cold wave, melting of the polar ice caps, murderous drought, glacier collapse, blizzard, wildfire.

The wax on my spoon has now melted completely. I turn the spoon over abruptly and expect a hissing sound, the kind I knew from the way lead melts. It does not come. The wax also solidifies, almost as quickly as the lead, but without making any audible noise.

I hardly know anything about Pompeii, actually. I have only seen pictures. I do not know if the pictures I remember are actual photos of excavations, or if other, probably pop-culture representations of 'ancient Rome' have infiltrated my memory. I am not even sure whether or not these representations could be distinguished from representations of 'ancient Greece' or of diffusely confused memories of the extinct peoples mentioned in the history lessons (Trojans, Spartans, Etruscans; not to

<sup>1</sup> (Inside Edition 2022).

mention the innumerable peoples left unmentioned). Only later I find out that the majority of the population of Pompeii should have survived the eruption of Vesuvius. Unlike the inhabitants of Herculaneum, who were completely eradicated by the volcano. I had never heard the name of this other city, which is not called Pompeii. And the pictures of Pompeii, which I then find on the internet, have nothing in common with the opulent feasts of the rich Romans of my imagination. The plaster that was poured into the empty spaces enclosed by caked ashes, where the dying bodies decomposed almost two thousand years ago, shows only schemes. No revelry, no orgies, no vases, no togas artfully thrown over the shoulder, no feathers, or fruit bowls, or banquets.

I think: our flesh is no sweeter than that of figs. Our skin is no thicker than that of grapes. In skin as well as in stone, time engraves itself sooner or later.

In Pompeii, it is the cavities that make visible where slave women were corralled, where horses and dogs tried to break free from the pole. The gaps in the rock are filled in, forming a continuum that we can then use as material for our romantic visions of the approaching end of the world.

One of the first suggestions Google gives me for my search of the Pompeii excavations is “Pompeii lovers.”

And indeed, there is something undeniably romantic about the idea of being preserved at the instance of the most intimate embrace, of being embraced together with one’s lover or lovers by the glowing molten, erratically emerged core of the earth, crumbling together into dust and forming a single, fused void, cast into a single plaster structure that would still touch many hundreds of generations to come. How nice to be remembered in such a way. As a sculpture of something as fleeting as love. I look at the two central figures in the video HUGE LAVA FLOWS LEAVE PEOPLE IN AWE-MOST AWESOME VIEW ON EARTH-Iceland Volcano Throwback-May31 2021.<sup>2</sup> Their tiny silhouettes stand out dark against the growing lava flows. As they get closer, I find myself speculating about whether they are about to kiss. How cheesy, I think to myself, and then I’m a little disappointed when I realize that the two have only moved closer to take a selfie. Which is similarly predictable, and somehow makes me sad.

I think of the poison and ashes as I scribble away with my pencil later:

*Daedalus and iCarus flying in gentle up-and-down motions  
over the sea, admiring the view. The sun is blazing.*

When I write, I pour lead onto the mould-made paper. The lead then scrapes across the guiltless white paper like a sickle, reaping what is meant:

<sup>2</sup> (Traveller In The Whole World 2021).

tireless, selfish, and destructive. I enclose the ideas in the crouched arcs of the letters, expressing them the way one would put out a cigarette. Burn holes into what I mean. I write: crooked black letters, porous as volcanic rock, growing continuously, line by line, break by break, into a surface. What exactly it is that douses and ignites and hisses and consumes the silent scenery inside me, I don't know. Only when everything—hardened into a text in motionless chains of words—lies there and cools down, can I see something. I stare into the letters, the small, brittle rows; epitaphs of my once fluid squadron of feelings. The meant has survived before (or behind) the self death: he has baked it into a form.

Trying to remember the exact story of Daedalus and Icarus, I had searched the internet and stumbled across one sentence. It said: *Ikarus symbolisiert unsere eigene Sehnsucht zu streben*. (Ikarus symbolizes our own desire to quest)

Instead of *streben* (to quest, or to strive for), I read *sterben* (to die). It seemed to me as if the anonymous author of this text had intentionally set a trap to make us fall, and by us I mean everyone who reads too fast, whose reckless or restless eyes are running over pages relentlessly. At least—I thought—I guess I am not the only one who misread this sentence.

I think of the internet as an abidingly reformatting constellation of clouds, running across the skies like a glitch, a programmed piled cloud, looming above our horizons, invisible yet intransparent. I picture the clouds as infinite heaps of data whose voluminous cumulus-bellies contain lost password keys, discarded algorithms, deleted memories, closed tabs, saved links, all of them floating in the guts of the atmosphere: eternally *aufgehoben*, set aside; saved and suspended at once. QR Codes appear to me as encrypted cowslips, because they use the same codes that were once ascribed to death: cryptic, impenetrable, black and white. Their checked pattern curates the following questions: When will our grave-stones be digital? Will remembrance soon take place on screens only? Who will take care of my profiles when I am dead? Who will fill my moulds and who will fill my cavities and who will excavate them?

In his book *The Exform*, the Philosopher Nicolas Bourriaud writes (2016, 11):

Things and phenomena used to surround us. Today it seems they threaten us in ghostly form, as unruly scraps that refuse to go away or persist even after vanishing into the air. Some maintain that the solution would be to forge a new contract with the planet, inaugurating an era in which things, animals and human beings stand on an equal

footing. Until then, we inhabit an overfull world, living in archives ready to burst, among more and more perishable products, junk food and bottlenecks.

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Bourriaud's observation of the bursting archives, of a world that is sated with itself and its ghostly forms, conjures in me the images of an eerie ark, chasing the visually distorted waves on the screens of an endlessly flooded world, chasing continuously and without control, chased in reciprocity by the anxious anticipation of its end; and yet, no matter how fast it gets in its mad rush, due to the lack of birds, the lack of olive branches, the lack of a prospect of an end to the flood, the view on the waves never changes and thus it appears as though the ark doesn't move at all. While in its belly, a proliferating freight of pictures, comments, probes, threads, logos, and photos are being set aside to grow their own forms of life.

Countless people in academia and in the arts are dealing with archives at the moment. One archive, that is repeatedly being referenced, is the global seed vault in Spitsbergen. It emerges in articles, novels, artworks and poems. A cousin to Noah's Ark, just that it isn't in the sea, but in the ice. Which, after all, *has* begun to melt. Seeds of all kinds of plants are kept there frozen to revive in case of a global catastrophe. This idea has sprouted amidst the cold war, the first samples were frozen in 1984—of all years—in a deserted coal mine in Longyearbyen.<sup>3</sup> However, the website of Global Seed Vault Svalbard emphasizes, that the actual repository is, of course, not in an abandoned coal mine, but in a compound carved into the rock of a mountain in the permafrost.

But the archive also includes periodic melting on various scales: the carcasses exposed by the thawed permafrost and the bacteria revived by thawing on bones frozen for millennia, as well as all the smells and odors of growth and of decay that scintillate and flutter and eventually fuse in the pollen-heavy spring air every year. It embraces our fist-sized hearts that cramp as the contradiction that spans between the longing for and the fear of melting nearly bursts their chambers.

The archive is also about cryonics: the science (or economics) that was built around the belief that one can simply be frozen shortly before or while dying and revived in a later century. The U.S. company Alcor advertises their service with a vague promise of immortality: "*A fulfilling life doesn't have to end. When today's medicine gives up, cryonics takes over.*" And under the title *Pausing the Dying Process* it states: "The definitions of death changes over time as medical understanding and technology improve. A patient who is declared medically dead today could be revived in the future" (Alcor 2020). For an attempt at immortality, one would

<sup>3</sup> The town of Longyearbyen was founded in 1906 by an American entrepreneur named Longyear as a mining town and bombed by German Wehrmacht soldiers during World War II.

have to pay at least 180,000 Euros to Alcor, plus ongoing costs of 170 Euros a year for the storage of ones' body in life-size, metal shock-freeze containers mysteriously shrouded in ice fog. The company is located in Scottsdale, Phoenix. Why Scottsdale? Alcor anticipates the question for browsing future customers and immediately answers with a "Natural Disaster Risk Map" on which Scottsdale is marked as a small red dot in a region that is marked as the least disaster-prone place of the world. The urge to conserve—naturally—goes hand in hand with a keen awareness of disasters:

The freezing of a body occurs through vitrification. This is a very rapid cooling process that prevents crystallization. Slow freezing of water in the body would produce ice crystals. The sharp edges of these would damage or destroy individual cells. This is why vitrification is chosen for cryonics. The method results in vitrification of the body (Alcor 2020).

Music seeps through the open door from the other room. One of the rappers, Chynna or Oklou says something in the intro to xternal locus in a cool and bored voice that burns into my mind:

2018 everybody needs a fucking external harddrive (Chynna and Oklou 2018).

When I'm not writing on my laptop, I prefer to write with a pencil. It allows me to erase anything that has become *überflüssig*, superfluous, literally *too liquid*. Later, when I want to give my search for the connections—between disappearance and liquefaction or retention or solidification, the relationship between archiving, flooding, and spilling—the lofty title *Dialectic of the Archive in Times of Digitization*; I immediately notice the hubris of this title and let it disappear through the friction of my eraser in streaks of lead mist.

*With their waxy, flexible shoulder blades moving glued-on wings, Daedalus and iCarus fly over the sea of images, plastics, trash, debris: something Angelus Novus would never have done. Angelus Novus is doom scrolling on and on. He stares, as if his view is adhered at the screen which is moved on and on by his buckled finger and his eyes race and his tired gaze digs, screws almost mechanically into the endless deep layers of the timeline. He is exhausted and wants to return; wants to go and return to the unfragmented world when it was analog and a vessel: full of senses and things, with an unimaginable capacity to grasp. The present has run*

out. Sense is melting away, foaming over the rim or seeping through the osmotic walls of the now digital world. And yet Angelus Novus cannot look away. He sighs: Angelus Niveaulos is once again taking a thousand photos. But father and son up there just plow through the clouds, up and beyond, they don't scroll backwards. They don't care about the debris, nor about clay jars or vessels—they leave the mother unmentioned—they care about the higher, the further, the flight forward. Not too high! calls Daedalus, because he knows: iCarus may overdo it in the end.

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When I write archive, I also mean my need to capture, to document this evening. Our need to take photos of each other and of ourselves and the things around us, of the beautifully set table, of the crystalline glow of the champagne flutes that we want to preserve in their filled state for all times, of the sky cracking open in a manifolded multi chromatic supernova as oo o'clock strikes and a feverish noise breaks out, as if the city—soaked in humid air, as though in cold sweat—were rebelling against its mortality, as if it had something to prove, as if it wanted to show us, howling and thundering: Look, I'm still here. I mean our fear of disappearing.

I try to imagine the inhabitants of Herculaneum: the shaped gaps in the rock where no plaster was poured. I don't succeed. My imagination of them always falls back into the two-dimensional, like the negative of a photograph: the air around the empty, absent bodies is filled, lead heavy and made of stone

Das Aufbewahren selbst schließt schon das Negative in sich, dass etwas seiner Unmittelbarkeit und damit einem den äußerlichen Einwirkungen offenen Dasein entnommen wird, um es zu erhalten. So ist das Aufgehobene ein zugleich Aufbewahrtes, das nur seine Unmittelbarkeit verloren hat, aber darum nicht vernichtet ist (Hegel 1979,113).<sup>4</sup>

Writes Hegel, and I think blasphemously: Maybe there is something to the cult of Hegel after all, if he understood the internet long before it even existed.

We live in a gigantic archive. We cower there, barricading ourselves behind a weightless overload of images. Evidence of our smooth faces, the world is a stage, our myriad frozen mines circulate on the net. And as time melts, the need to archive, to save, becomes increasingly urgent. If you live in an archive, you naturally think you have to permanently produce archival material to preserve your habitat.

In the *Theses on the Concept of History*, Walter Benjamin (1980, 694) writes:

<sup>4</sup> The preservation itself already includes the negative, that something is taken from its immediacy and thus from an existence open to external influences, in order to preserve it. Thus, what is kept is at the same time what is preserved, which has only lost its immediacy, but is therefore not destroyed (author's translation).

The chronicler, who recounts events without distinguishing between the great and small, thereby accounts for the truth, that nothing which has ever happened is to be given as lost to history. Indeed, the past would fully befall only a resurrected humanity. Said another way: only for a resurrected humanity would its past, in each of its moments, be citable. Each of its lived moments becomes a citation a *l'ordre du jour* [order of the day] [sic]—whose day is precisely that of the Last Judgment.

And I almost despair of this and think: But we actually have the internet now. What have we done wrong?

The constellation of the satellites, which drift apart continuously, changes constantly, and who has even set out for the tiger jump under the open sky of history, who has even already stretched all fibers almost to the breaking point, stops in the freeze; because, for the jump, suddenly every direction is possible and the sky or the view is suddenly fogged or pixelated.

My hand, or its digital extension on the screen rests on the X at the top right of the video's window frame. The X is a letter that promises resolution: two strokes striving in opposite directions, cancelling each other out:  $1 - 1 = 0$ . Bourriaud writes about the ex-form, Chynna and Oklou rap about x-ternal harddrives, the so-called Day X is feared and summoned by preppers and social Darwinists as they sit on cold cans of ravioli in bunkers, eagerly sharpening their hunting knives. The ex-paradise is where we sit (a little cross on the map) and sweat in the extreme heat even after the sun has set. Deus X Machina flexing. In German, to ex a drink means to chug down a drink, for example, if you want to get intoxicated quickly or just want to get it over with: *Ex* the schnaps. *Ex* the medicine on the spoon or dissolve sugar in it, because a spoonful of sugar makes the medicine go down. Isn't X also the variable of exchangeability? The cursor on the small checkbox with the X, directed by my hand, wants to put an end to the video, I want to click on it right away, but in the video, people scream and run towards the camera and the sight of their gaping mouths makes me think of craters, of the earth breaking open and of the mouth and the earth in the mouth once it is under the earth, eventually; and then I see the volcano. The expression of the people running forward is as if blinded, although the lava rolls up from behind them.

Bourriaud names the capitalist longing for a smooth exchange of everything that is commodity-shaped, that is: everything; everything circulates. Everything used to seem like it had a linear current, now everything can barely even be captured in a circuit. Now everything dissolves.

Panta Rei is now flowing in all directions. It deliquesces. When you flow in all directions at the same time, you don't move physically. Instead, you melt away.

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All the while, capitalism boldly dreams its dream of ‚frictionless‘ exchange: a universe where commodities—beings and objects alike—circulate without encountering the slightest obstacle. Yet ours is also an epoch of squandered energy: nuclear waste that won't go away, hulking stockpiles of unused goods, and domino effects triggered by industrial emissions polluting the atmosphere and oceans (2016, 12).

In 1985, a year after the first plant seeds were frozen in Spitsbergen, Althusser wrote that the structure of any genesis is necessarily teleological. One could, therefore, find in the presumed origin (according to Althusser, according to Bourriaud, according to what also becomes more and more clear to me) only what one is looking for in the present. Every process is determined from its end. Thus, it is the present that modifies the past, not the other way around. Instead of speaking of births, Althusser, according to Bourriaud, looks for surprising and paralyzing “eruptions” (2016, 50).

Something about this makes sense to me, but I'm still not quite sure I get it. In an attempt to find out more, I stumble upon a web page titled: *Thinking the process from the end*. It's about digitization offerings. Something about thinking digitization from the end sounds exciting, I think. Also, the author calls himself “the simplifier.” He writes:

What is the end? You may be asking yourself: if I am to think of the process from the end, what end should I define as the starting point? The end of a transaction? The end of the customer relationship? A legitimate question (Authors translation, Schmidt 2023).

What I was looking for—from the viewpoint of my present—was actually something else. And doesn't that mean that my present represents an end?

*What do you think Icarus is thinking as he stands at the boiling point of his invention? Not true father, we have not built ourselves wings because the sea bubbles below and because the sky glows above us, no, only because we like the view from above. It foams so beautifully; it glows so worthily and woefully. The golden section I apply to the view from above is the color of sunset. Beautiful, melting world. iCarus already feels the dripping of wax on the quills of the artificial wing tips. The magma fingers down*

*there scroll on endlessly, across the surface and solidify in their writhing, steered by the glare emanating from the glistening bad visions, they congeal and yet they scroll on. Time drips and drips.*

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I want to get to the point. But then I do: one more point. And one more.

*And drips ...*

Period. Dot. Dot.

*uh...and then?*

There is no more pompous punctuation mark than this ellipsis: ‘...’ Even an exclamation mark is more modest! Nothing is more pretentious than to lay out its dots so enigmatically, big gestures of throwing dots like bread-crumbs to lure the gullible reading eyes conditioned to linearity into the trap of an inflated suggestion, its little dots lying on the floor like three dead black birds, feigning fixed laws where, arranged in juxtaposition, individual decisions lie...

How do we imagine the future: aleatory or determinate? As Pompeii, a death from nowhere that lifts one up forever, or as a tragic fall into a seething sea? But conservation turns out to be a trap, and the falling figures—dips and drops—are also dance poses. It seems as if the apocalypse is a wishful thinking of dissolution and annulment, longing for an end that is on the one hand predetermined, and on the other eruptive. As if the sudden fall were a long-anticipated fiction that could thus be avoided. Of course, it is more glamorous to be cast into a mold and preserved for all eternity, or to drop into the waiting arms of doom with the grace of a dying swan, than to decay slowly and gradually and unseen. Of course, it is obvious to indulge in the frothing acids of irony; the garish bile and the treacly morbid metabolism of melancholy. Of course, it’s tempting to drift in the Infinity pool of the present until your fingertips have shriveled into raisins, just to admire the view of the sloping landscape. Of course, it’s more convenient to resign—to mutter something apologetic and to lapse into corruption and individual-prepping—than to search for allies in the chaos of drifting language and melting vision.

When we land, will we run over blazing ground, save ourselves on smoldering tree stumps, or simply rush on forever? Or is there perhaps even the possibility of an abrupt reversal with a decisive turning point, a rising of the two following points—which until now have been pointing into the future—to a colon, which looks out at what is happening right now and not at what is happening in the threatening future?

As I take the wax out of the water with pointed fingers, it already has a shape, but it still seems malleable. I blow gently and can’t fight the temptation to want to interpret the softly curved lines.

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