

APPROACHING WALTER BENJAMIN: RETRIEVAL, TRANSLATION AND RECONSTRUCTION

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I

The work of Walter Benjamin has been discussed many times, but infrequently taken as the basis for conducting social theory or as the point of departure for social analysis. There are a few examples of work which might be said to derive from Benjamin's influence: John Berger's TV documentary on Art, "Ways of Seeing," which is an elaboration on Benjamin's "The Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction," as is Hans Magnus Enzensberger's "Towards a Democratic Theory of the Media"; Tim Clarke's two-volume study of Art in mid nineteenth-century France, which derives its interpretation from Benjamin's "Arcades" project; Eric Hobsbawm's study *The Jazz Scene* (written under the alias "Francis Newton") which operates on the dialectical tension between Benjamin's positive response to jazz and Adorno's negative one; Herbert Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man*, which in part takes its cues from Benjamin's concept of the flaneur; and several of George Steiner's books but most notably *The Death of Tragedy* (apparently influenced by *The Origins of German Tragic Drama*), *After Babel* (influenced by several works of Benjamin, including the essay on Karl Kraus and "The Task of the Translator") and *In Bluebeard's Castle* (owing more, perhaps to Benjamin's Judaic sensibilities than his Marxist ones).¹ Each of these is an impressive testimony to the influence of Benjamin, as is Adorno's later work, notably *Minima Moralia* and *Negative Dialectics* — but the impact is either oblique, or in the cases of Berger and Hobsbawm, perhaps too specific. The reasons for this curious influence are not far to seek.

Among critical theorists, Benjamin is marginal man *in extremis*. His work appears to reflect no total certainties, there is no major work on aesthetics or philosophy (if we except *The Origins of German Tragic Drama* as an early work written to expose the fraudulence of German scholarship), and the various audiences to whom he addressed his work seem extremely contradictory at first viewing yet, on reflection, all of them are marginal to their professional colleagues. Gershom Scholem has noted, in a fine essay on the changing meanings read by Benjamin into Klee's *Angelus Novus*, that his sensibility required a fixed centre which would always be re-worked into another totality.²

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It acts both as a metaphor of his life — the need for an essential pivot — and as the interpretation of the apparent discrepancies.

From the *Angelus Novus* we derive a picture of Benjamin's own *persona*, but also one which is transmitted to the transience of the present. Benjamin is not only a transient person, but in addition a metaphor of our own transience. As Brecht noted in his obituary of Benjamin —

I am told you raised your hand against yourself
anticipating the butcher.

After eight years in exile, observing the rise of the enemy
Then at last, brought up against an impassable frontier
You passed, they say, a passable one.

Empires collapse. Gang leaders
Are strutting like statesmen. The people
Can no longer be seen under all those armaments.

So the future lies in darkness and the forces of light
Are weak. All this was plain to you
When you destroyed a torturable body.³

But if Benjamin is for himself and others a symbol of transition, it is important to understand his sense of the vantage points by which that change might be read. The conflicting influences on Benjamin are relevant here, because they plot both his debt to others and his sense of alternatives. There were three distinctive mentors in his life — Gershom Scholem, Theodor Adorno and Bertolt Brecht. Both Adorno and Scholem feared for Brecht's influence ("I am inclined," wrote Scholem, "to consider Brecht's influence on Benjamin's output in the thirties as baleful, and in some respects disastrous"⁴), while Brecht saw the Judaic influence on Benjamin as being fascistic ("The night before last a long and heated debate about my Kafka," wrote Benjamin. "Its foundation: the charge that it promotes Jewish fascism. It increases and spreads the darkness surrounding Kafka instead of dispersing it."⁵) In his essay on Benjamin,⁶ Adorno managed to omit any reference to Brecht, while in his published letters his stand is not dissimilar to Scholem's.⁷

The three authors might be seen as reflections of the three inclinations of Benjamin — the Judaic, the Marxist and the aesthetic — but they should also be seen as wholly marginal to the conventional wisdoms of their trade. Scholem was as far from Herzl or Ben Gurion as might be imagined: a man who recreated the golden days of Jewish-Muslim-Christian scholarship and who accepted the qabbalah as more than necromancy and less than absolute wisdom. Adorno's sense of philosophy and Marxism was at least that of creative intelligence, but he did not accept the Kantian sense of total form that he saw in Lukács nor the Proletcult of Lunarsharski. And Brecht, the Author as

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Producer, seized each moment as it came but had a single-minded devotion to the ambiguities of Marxist ethics. Scholem neatly summarizes Benjamin's own ambivalence toward these tendencies: "He said in a letter [in 1925] that two crucial experiences lay still ahead of him: contact with Marxist politics [he still thought little of the theory of Marxism at that time] and with Hebrew. This statement provides a key to the understanding of Benjamin, for they are precisely the two experiences that never came his way."⁸

There is also one further element in Benjamin which expresses even more deeply the nature of the task with which he was engaged. This is the attempt to uncover the historical roots of Nazism in Germany by exploring both the literature and the social nexus out of which it emerged. It is in connection with this task that the apparently discrepant influences of Adorno, Brecht and Scholem might be understood, because each in his own way was concerned with precisely the same task. Benjamin was clearly dissatisfied with the interpretation of the rise of Hitler offered both by conventional Marxists and orthodox Jews, and even less was he convinced by the assimilationist strategies of nonorthodox Jews. Both Adorno and Scholem were assimilationist Jews who attempted to rethink the cause of the Holocaust and the rise of the Nazis in terms that were out of line with the received wisdoms of other Jews: Adorno did it by rethinking the origins of German and Western culture, Scholem by rethinking the origins of Jewish culture. Brecht, the non-Jew, saw that the rethinking involved acting out the moral paradoxes of all ethics, and that, in taking Marxism as dramaturgy, he might contribute to the rethinking of the Marxist dichotomy between theory and action. Understanding Benjamin's choice of correspondents is at least in part a recognition of his sensitivity to this dilemma — as was their recognition of his singular contributions towards attempting to solve it.

Having said this, which does little more than establish the immediate parameters of Benjamin's conversation, we must consider the ways that Benjamin's work might provide a clue towards creating a new aesthetic. The task is not easy, partly because of the transient and aphoristic nature of much of Benjamin's work, but also because "reading" Benjamin is as much an exercise in understanding the audiences he was addressing as it is in making sense of whom he was reading or whether the audiences and the readings were central to something else — the essential Benjamin which existed independent of the parameters.

II

Walter Benjamin's work is an attempt to deal with the minutiae of everyday life in order to make sense of the universal. "Now stamp the Lord's Prayer on a grain of rice," as Dylan Thomas wrote in an early poem.⁹ In the particularity of

the everyday artefacts are our universals. The problem so expressed in its quasi-qabbalahistic form becomes either a recondite subterfuge for destroying our confidence in things-in-themselves (by making them metaphysical), or else a device for reducing issues of great importance to the mundane and commonsensical. It is of course a problem related to Naming the Un-Namable, but to leave the issue there is to place it in that limbo of mysticism, where we can wander without reaching conclusions and/or merely genuflect in impotence.

It seems to me that Benjamin attempted to avoid this mystical cul-de-sac (or else he would have retreated like Scholem to empirical Israel in order to reclaim mysticism) and at the same time could not wholly accept Brecht's act of Naming in order to reveal that empiricism behind the Names. These antinomies are surely related. In an interview, Scholem has argued that "I considered myself a person who had come here to do something about implementing Zionism as I innocently understood it. But I saw that it was all really a very complex matter."¹⁰ Then Scholem proceeds to account for the problems of coming to terms with the qabbalahism of the Israelis. For Scholem, Naming is the act of situating oneself in a real place: only after does one come to terms with the problems of un-naming/naming. With Brecht the Naming (*e.g.*, Galileo, Saint Joan, Lucullus) constitutes occasions for theorizing about something else. The place is irrelevant, the individuals are moralistic myths. The central act is the uncovering of universals. Thus Scholem's sense of the Name is predicated on place and placelessness (he starts his career with the sense of nowhere to go and therefore confronts Namelessness through the qabbalah and ultimately locates it); Brecht's places are timeless and without geography: he treats people as Names who have to be Un-Named in order to reveal the moral and structural empiricisms behind them.

Both of these concerns are found in Benjamin, but sharpened in a deliberate way. Brecht's placelessness is denied by Benjamin's locating his endeavours in "real" places — the Paris of the nineteenth century, the Germany of Goethe and of the seventeenth century, Berlin, Naples, Moscow or Marseilles. His study of Baudelaire is not of an "ideal type" but of the Baudelaire of *Les Fleurs du Mal*, the Art Critic, the Dandy and sometime revolutionary. On the other hand Scholem's qabbalahism is turned outwards to Surrealism where the Naming of the Un-Namable is making sense of the numerous juxtapositions of paintings, architecture, social classes, songs, books, or technology which are at once universal and historically specific. They are all artefacts — even Baudelaire and the activists of the Paris Commune — but they come alive because of their surrealist relationships. Baudelaire becomes at once both an ideal type and the living breath of nineteenth-century Paris. Against Scholem's reading of the purely symbolic, Benjamin's surrealism incorporates symbolism as part of its ongoing process.¹¹ Place is not simply an occasion for coming to terms with the past: it reveals our breach with the past and our transition to the Modern.

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by direct theoretical encounter but by continual reformations of the evidence by re-presenting it in a new shape as the audience comes back with its own criticisms. This apparent relativity reveals the essence of Benjamin's methodology. If the polarities of retrieval involve a reconstruction in order to discover universal laws on the one hand and uncover the ghosts in the machine on the other, the task of the translator is that of constantly juxtaposing the one with the other, because only in this way will we be able to maintain our critical sensibilities and involve ourselves in honest retrieval.

In Marxist aesthetics, Benjamin stands at that remarkable intersection between idealism and realism, materialism and modernism.¹⁶ By situating his work in the realm of the modern, he deflects both the Kantian formalists and the Hegelian idealists by inviting them into the translator's room to share the act of reformulation and retrieval. Where we start from is the act of naming the artefacts that we inherit from our past, and Benjamin was shrewd enough to recognize that the present is always past: the modern is our assembly-room of those dead objects between whose interstices we move. We live but in *their* silences; *they* live but through our translations.

The act of Naming is an act of choosing *what* to Name, but it is also an act of Naming what we have chosen. In *The Hidden God*,¹⁷ Lucien Goldmann chose to discuss Pascal and Racine because they were important writers. His task was to explore the social and literary significance behind their (acknowledged) importance. In doing so, he hoped to reveal, in a classical Kantian (though neo-Marxist) sense why their particular social contexts displayed universal truths. Benjamin's task is more complex: it is to show why the truth eludes us, in spite of our sense of the eternal verities. Thus the task of retrieval is also bound up with reversal: in order to reclaim the images and names from the past we have to see them not only as they appear, but, as it were, in a mirror. Then we shatter the mirror and try to put it together with all the other pieces of broken glass. What we see in this act of recomposition is, of course, not the original faces but ourselves, distorted both by the fragmentary chips of glass and by the certain knowledge that other faces were there before.

This is similar to the imagery of re-clamation that we find in the Romantics, but has a dramatically different impact. Take, for example, Shelley's almost Hegelian act of re-clamation in *Adonais*:

The One remains, the many change and pass:
Heaven's light forever shines, Earth's shadows fly;
Life, like a dome of many-coloured glass,
Stains the white radiance of Eternity,
Until Death tramples it to fragments — Die,
If thou wouldst be with that which thou doth seek!
Follow where all is fled! — Rome's azure sky,

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Flowers, ruins, statues, music, words are weak
The glory they transfuse with fitting truth to speak.¹⁸

In this poem we have almost all the ingredients of a Benjamin essay. Take, for example, the comments on Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus*.

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 upon 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 from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. That storm is what we call Progress.¹⁹

The similarity of the imagery is striking, but Shelley's *Adonais* welcomes us above the rubble to join the Great Majority. The Romantic Agony propels us towards Death. Benjamin's Angel propels us, against his better judgement, towards the Future. If Shelley wants to reclaim by rejoining the dead artefacts, Benjamin (equally a romantic) knows how impossible that is. We can only reclaim parts of the past as we are projected into an uncertain future. As much as we would like to rebuild the past, all we can do is to become curators and translate the past into the language of the Future. If both Shelley and Benjamin see the present as a hiatus, for Shelley it is a gap that can only be resolved by returning (through Death) to that past: "Oh hasten thither/No more let life divide what Death can join together."²⁰ For Benjamin the hiatus is between the past (artefacts) and the future (the propelling wind). The present is not so much a void but the intersection of past and future.

Thus what I choose to Name and the Name that I give to my choice are two sides of the same coin. In Shelley's case I choose the images of the Dead in order to re-Name them as Dead: I want to re-join them in all their Deadness (but I call it Eternity). In Benjamin's case I collect the Names, put them on my shelves, re-Name them because I know that what will survive will be my re-Naming, if I have any meaning. As translator I am also a Creator. It is the Sense that I make of it all that counts because as collector, translator and interpreter I

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am the focal point of creativity. (Of course, Shelley unconsciously did this as well, but the rift between his theory and practice is perhaps inevitable. Here we refer only to theory as presentation of self.) It is the way that I re-assemble the broken glass that reveals my creative sense.²¹ The central problem is how do I do it. To this we now turn.

III

Benjamin's creative sense is to portray the critic as artist, the writer as producer, the story-teller as translator and even the architect as unconscious revolutionary. The central aesthetic is to show art in motion, and to indicate how the forms of art both constrain and liberate us. If the central feature of Benjamin's work relates to the mutual interaction between technology and painting, story-telling and the novel, architecture and crowds, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat and so on, our central problem as social theorists and social aestheticians is to establish how his work provides a theory and a methodological practice which adds more to our knowledge than existing sociologies of art and literature.

If the task of translating is also an exercise in Naming, the extent to which the original work re-Names itself through the mode of translation is a vital ingredient in appreciating the translated product, and the translator-creator's radiance of vision. But, of course, as Benjamin also noted, the work of the author is a production, and production necessarily involves several layers of operation and mediation. These interconnected processes call into question both the authenticity of the translation and its intended impact. The introduction to this essay listed some of the apparent influences of Benjamin on subsequent authors. All the writers mentioned with the exception of Clark had access to Benjamin in German either as his contemporaries or after the publication in 1955 of Adorno's two-volume selection of Benjamin's work. The idiosyncracies of their interpretation must be related to factors other than those of translation, and need not concern us here. Of more concern for the English-speaking reader is the presentation of Benjamin in translated form. "Translation" should take into account the selection of work for translation, the works themselves, the productive and distributive process, and interpretations of Benjamin in essay or book form.

The collected works of Benjamin have been in process of publication by Suhrkamp Verlag in Frankfurt since 1972. The complete edition (edited by Rolf Tiedermann and Herman Schweppenhäuser) will include nine volumes of book-length studies, essays, journalism, autobiography, letters, satires and notes. Until this task is completed it will be difficult for anyone to provide a comprehensive account of Benjamin's work (even then, there will still be a large amount of unpublished work in the Potsdam archives of the GDR). In

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general, the German discussion of Benjamin, as with the English, revolves round certain selections from this material edited by Adorno, Rolf Tiedermann and Hannah Arendt. In the English versions the selections themselves are mediated by interpretations of the work of Benjamin by several authors — most notably Adorno, Arendt, Scholem, George Steiner, Stanley Mitchell, Shierry Weber, Ben Brewster, Susan Buck-Morss, Peter Demetz, Jürgen Habermas and, more recently, Susan Sontag.²² The availability of these interpretations as well as the translations themselves varies from Britain to the United States. In Britain the task of compiling and issuing translations has been largely in the hands of the *New Left Review*, and, to a lesser extent, *Screen*; in the United States the works have been published by Helen Wolff at Harcourt Brace Javonovich and occasionally by the *New German Critique*. The approach to publication has displayed dramatic differences. New Left Books has issued collections of Benjamin's work which explore themes of his own which appear to be part of a wider Marxist debate: *Understanding Brecht*, *Charles Baudelaire*, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, *One-Way Street*, and *Aesthetics and Politics* (debates between Bloch, Lukács, Brecht, Benjamin and Adorno). Helen Wolff has published collections of a random nature, *Illuminations* (issued in Britain by Jonathan Cape) and *Reflections*, which emphasise the eclecticism of Benjamin's imagination. Thus, while New Left Books has attempted to put Benjamin in the context of a European political-aesthetic debate, Harcourt Brace has delivered the provocative (Jewish) essayist. The fact that they have, in general, used the same translators and that certain works overlap between publishers makes the differences more dramatic. The mediator becomes crucial to our interpretation.²³ In one sense Benjamin invites this kind of misreading, as the first part of this essay has indicated. An author who moves from *belles-lettres* to detailed analysis of Baudelaire, from crypto-qabbalahism to erudite travelogues, from precise observations of technology to imprecise Marxism, is surely everybody's favourite text. He is the surrealistic sea that it is only too easy to wallow in. Because the mind is fluid, our instincts are either to tame it or to reify its fluidity. We wonder at its cosmic span, we genuflect before its attention to minutiae, and yet we want to mould it closer to our heart's desire. Although his theme is similar to that of *Writing Degree Zero* by Roland Barthes²⁴ he does not descend into the scientology of structuralism in order to analyse it; instead he suspends us between the diachronic and synchronic versions of time. Benjamin's theme is both the far limits of theology (hence his relations with Scholem's qabbalah) and Marxism (hence his empathy with Brecht's alienation effect or his distance from Adorno's prismatic dialectics). Thus the appropriation by American intellectual Jewry of Benjamin the infant prodigy, the man who never grew up — as well as the sheer arrogance of German immigrants to the United States who would only deliver to the world what they felt it could handle. Before she died Hannah Arendt

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explained to me the omission of Benjamin's essay on Karl Kraus from the *Illuminations* volume. "Kraus is untranslatable," she said, "and therefore Benjamin's essay would make little sense to those who could not read German."²⁵ But Erich Heller's essay on Kraus appeared in *The Disinherited Mind* eighteen years before, and it is arguable that Kraus is no more untranslatable than Wittgenstein. The secret of the translator is not what he reveals but what he conceals.

Benjamin, perhaps more than any other writer, has acted as the treasure-trove for the *cogniscenti*. Long before any of his work was available in English, he was adopted by other writers who had incorporated elements of his work into their own. And yet when *Illuminations*, *Understanding Brecht* and *Charles Baudelaire* finally reached us we felt that we had been cheated. Benjamin was a richer mine than those gold-diggers suggested. Not only were there precious metals, but dross too. Obviously the sifting was the problem, and the availability of Benjamin in English revealed not so much *him* but the ideological proclivities of those writers who adopted him.

The introductions to Benjamin display something of this propensity to read him in terms of the authors' animadversions. The essay, "The Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction," became something of a lodestone — John Berger's essay in *The Look of Things*, Enzensberger's essay on the *Media*, Steiner's *After Babel*, Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man*, Adorno's obituary in *Prisms*, and of course Malraux's *Magnum Opus* or Sontag's *On Photography*, all plumb this one slender essay to the depths. Benjamin almost reads like early McLuhan; technology transforms our ways of seeing; we can speak only in quotations; the visible becomes the reproducible; ineffable artefact; man becomes the one-dimensional cypher.

That all of this can be read into Benjamin, is, of course evident. But isn't there more? Such a reading reduces Benjamin to a methodologist or structuralist, where the signifier becomes the signified. If only we could turn Benjamin into a structuralist, or a Jew or a Marxist, life would be so much simpler. We could avoid all the questions he asks by translating him into the obvious.

If translating Benjamin reveals the bewilderment of the translators, it is one which was anticipated by Benjamin himself. He quotes from Rudolf Pannwitz: "The basic error of the translator is that he preserves the state in which his own language happens to be instead of allowing his language to be affected by the foreign tongue He must expand and deepen his language by means of the foreign language." And Benjamin adds: "Just as, in the original, language and revelation are one without any tension, so the translation must be one with the original in the form of interlinear version, in which literalness and freedom are united. For to some degree all great texts contain their potential translation between the lines"²⁶

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My argument is not that the actual translations from German have not, to a great extent, achieved this task, but that the significance of Benjamin's ideas as well as his contextual metaphors have been read in quite discrepant ways, that the task of translating has been bounded not so much by the perspectives of interpretation, but by the frameworks of ideology. The interpreter-translators have based their writings on fragments of Benjamin's work, rather than its totality, and these fragments have been read according to ideological relevance for their own work (e.g., Adorno, Scholem, Mitchell) or because of some *ad-hoc* revelation out of one piece (e.g., Berger on Art and Technology or Steiner on Translation and Language). But how can we commence a reading of Benjamin which is "one with the original in the form of interlinear version, in which literalness and freedom are united?"

The problem might be approached if we distinguish between the origins and context of Benjamin's work (which was discussed in the first part of this article) and the presence and development of specific motifs throughout his writing. In this sense the partiality of the interpreters might be used to advantage, while the correspondences²⁷ in his approach to criticism and commentary examined in their entirety. Fortunately that task has now commenced. A recent issue of the *New German Critique*, devoted largely to the work of Benjamin, and a thoughtful article in *Glyph* by Irving Wohlforth²⁸ suggest directions for the critical re-evaluation of Benjamin's work. If this act of reinterpretation runs the risk of burying Benjamin under scholastic debris, it does offer equally the promise of releasing his work from ideological appropriation. This can be demonstrated by two illustrations.

When New Left Books issued *Understanding Brecht* in 1973 it was to reveal a Benjamin who, in Stanley Mitchell's words, "joins ranks with Gramsci and the Lukacs of *History and Class Consciousness*."²⁹ That is certainly one interpretation of Benjamin, but his assessment of epic Theatre does, for example, include the following quotation: "The damming of the stream of real life, the moment when its flow comes to a standstill, makes itself felt as reflux: this reflux is astonishment. The dialectic at a standstill is its real object. It is the rock from which we gaze down into that stream of things ... in the city of Jehoo 'that's always full and where nobody stays.'"³⁰ If this is a metaphor for Brecht's alienation effect, it is an oblique one, and probably more, evokes Benjamin's own account of time: "A historical materialist cannot do without the notion of a present which is not a transition, but in which time stands still and has come to a stop."³¹ Although Benjamin is clearly influenced by Brecht in his conception of time there is little to be learned about Benjamin by labouring the point. It's much more useful to examine the degree to which similar motifs in Benjamin's own work take on different dimensions according to his own sense of their corresponding bases. Thus if we wish to understand something of Benjamin's Marxism we will learn more by examining the transmutations of his

own motifs, than by concentrating on the Brecht dialogues. In one sense, *Understanding Brecht* indicates the context of a transmutation, but which, without a wider reading of Benjamin, tells us little of the grounds of his own philosophy. I should hasten to add that this exercise is not intended to denigrate Benjamin's importance as a Marxist theorist but to establish grounds on which we determine his Marxism in its own terms.

But a contrary point ought also to be made. In his "Introduction" to *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, George Steiner concludes "The publication of this monograph in English, in 1977, under this imprint [New Left Books], is pregnant with ironies Had he lived, Walter Benjamin would doubtless have been sceptical of any 'New Left.' Like every man committed to abstruse thought and scholarship, he knew that not only the humanities, but humane and critical intelligence itself, resides in the always-threatened keeping of the very few."³² And thus Benjamin, who chose the stance of the man of engagement, is appropriated into the world of the beleaguered elite intelligentsia. It is difficult to imagine Benjamin as a fellow of Churchill College, Cambridge. Steiner sets the scene for reabsorbing Benjamin into the world of the scholastics. But this same Benjamin wrote: "The mind which believes only in its own magic strength *will* disappear. For the revolutionary struggle is not fought between capitalism and mind. It is fought between capitalism and the proletariat."³³ *The New Left Review*, because of its awareness of *that* issue, might be a more appropriate preserver of a "humane and critical intelligence" than the neutral scholastic.

The overall assessment of the direction of Benjamin's work has barely been addressed, except in raids on the seemingly inarticulate articulateness. There are signs, however, that, even here, the situation is changing in 1972 Jürgen Habermas published an evaluation of the entire output of Benjamin which has only recently been made available in English.³⁴ In this article, for the first time, the central question about Benjamin's work is asked: To what extent, grafting Marx onto an already established corpus of non-revolutionary Talmudic writing, is it possible to speak of Benjamin's later work as revolutionary at all? Habermas' answer is clear: "My thesis is that Benjamin did not realize his intention to bring together enlightenment and mysticism, because the theologian in him could not accept the idea of making his messianic theory of experience serviceable to historical materialism."³⁵ Habermas' conclusions are supported by a thorough reading of Benjamin's published work and exploration of the development of his imagery, his aphorisms, his case studies, his attempts at philosophy and historical interpretation both before and after his acceptance of historical materialism. Yet at the same time he concedes that Benjamin's "conservative revolutionary hermeneutics, which deciphers the history of culture with a view to rescuing it and redeeming it for the overthrow," may provide a path towards "a differentiated concept of progress."

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If there are problems in Habermas' critique, they can be confronted both by the internal evidence of Benjamin's work as well as by the uses to which Habermas puts the material. Essentially, however, the question raised is the most pertinent one. It forces us to consider Benjamin's own claim that his writing was political and Marxist, that his aim was to politicize art, and that all appearances to the contrary, the "age of the now" contained in its own technology the vehicles for human liberation. But it also forces us to confront the methods, the allusions, the observations, the parables that informed the theory that led him to such a conclusion. In spite of himself and his translator-interpreters, we are now in a position to consider these questions and to appraise Benjamin's relevance to our present. And that task is neither more nor less than to ask what in our sacred pasts corresponds to our profane presents, or what in our profane presents corresponds to our sacred futures.

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Notes

1. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, London: BBC Publications, 1967; Eric Newton, *The Jazz Scene*, London: Penguin Books, 1959; T. Clark, *The Absolute Bourgeois and Image of the People*, London: Thames & Hudson, 1973; Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1966; George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy*, London: Faber and Faber, 1961, *After Babel*, London: Faber, 1970, and *In Bluebeard's Castle*, London: Faber, 1971; Hans Magnus Enzensberger, *Raids and Reconstructions*, London: Pluto Press, 1975.
2. Gershom Scholem, *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis*, New York: Schocken Books, 1976, pp. 198-236. "If one may speak of Walter Benjamin's genius, then it was concentrated in this angel. In the latter's saturnine light Benjamin's life itself ran its course, also consisting only of 'small victories' and 'great defeats.'"
3. In Bertolt Brecht, *Poems*, Part 3, 1938-1956, London: Methuen, 1976, p. 363.
4. Scholem, p. 189.
5. Walter Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*, London: New Left Books, 1973, p. 110.
6. "A Portrait of Walter Benjamin," in T.W. Adorno, *Prisms*, London: Neville Spearman, 1967, pp. 229-241.
7. "Letters to Walter Benjamin," *New Left Review*, reprinted in Ernst Bloch *et. al.*, *Aesthetics and Politics*, London: New Left Books, 1977. pp. 110-133.
8. Scholem, p. 191.
9. "Altarwise by owl-light-VII," in Dylan Thomas, *Collected Poems 1934-52*, London: J.M. Dent, 1952, p. 74.
10. Scholem p. 36.

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11. It is perhaps worth reading Scholem's account of Benjamin's relationship with the *Angelus Novus* of Klee. Scholem's sole concern is to establish the extent to which Jewish symbolism remained part of Benjamin's concerns. In the light of Benjamin's own work, this is a curiously scholastic position to take. See Scholem, pp. 198-236.
12. Bertolt Brecht, *The Messinkauf Dialogues*, tr. John Willet, London: Methuen, 1965, p. 101.
13. See "Introduction" to Paul Connerton, ed., *Critical Sociology*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1976, pp. 11-39, elaborating on a point made by Jürgen Habermas in "A Postscript to Knowledge and Human Interests," *Philosophy of Social Sciences*, 1973, No. 3, pp. 157-89.
14. In *Man in An Age of Social Reconstruction*, London: Routledge, 1944.
15. Hannah Arendt, "Introduction" to Walter Benjamin *Illuminations*, London: Cape, 1970, especially pp. 38-51. The quote is from *The Tempest* 1, 2.
16. See Terry Eagleton, "Aesthetics and Politics," *New Left Review*, 1978, Vol. 107, pp. 21-34, for an elaboration of these terms.
17. Lucien Goldmann, *The Hidden God*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964.
18. Shelley, *Adonais*, Stanza III.
19. *Illuminations*, pp. 259-260.
20. *Adonais*, Stanza LIII.
21. See Arthur Koestler, *The Act of Creation*, London: Hutchinson, 1969.
22. For specific references to these see bibliography at conclusion or notes.
23. *Reflections* includes a few essays that were published earlier by New Left Books, but not all of them, plus excerpts from *One-Way Street* and essays on places, language and Karl Kraus. *One-Way Street* includes the entire work of that name, plus the place pieces, plus the linguistic ones, the essay on Eduard Fuchs, and one on photography.
24. Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1968. This short collection of essays, published in France in 1953, may be summarized in Barthes' own words: "Writing therefore is a blind alley, and it is because society itself is a blind alley ... there can be no universal language outside a concrete, and no longer a mystical or merely nominal, universality of society."
25. Hannah Arendt, personal communication.
26. From "The Task of the Translator," in *Illuminations*, pp. 81-2.
27. Correspondences: derived in part from Benjamin's reading of the quabbalah and the Renaissance alchemists who attempted to locate God's substance in natural elements. A variation of this is found in Swedenborg, and Bacon in the *Advanced Learning* argued that "light ... hath a relation and correspondence in ... corporal things to knowledge in incorporeal things" (Book I, vi, para 4). Benjamin's position is well summarized by Anson Rabinbach: "The alchemist is motivated by a conservative ideal of redemption and a utopian image of the future. This Messianic ideal, which is always present in Benjamin's image of interpretation, is characterized by him as 'a world of all-sided and integral actuality' and presupposes a universal nature and a universal language that not only contains the secret of the correspondences, but renders them transparent." "Critique and Commentary / Alchemy and Chemistry: Some Remarks on Walter Benjamin," in *New German Critique*, No. 17, Spring 1979, p. 6.

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28. *The New German Critique*, *ibid*, and Irving Wohlforth "On the Messianic Structure of Walter Benjamin's Last Reflections," *Glyph* 3, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978, pp. 148-212.
29. S. Mitchell, "Introduction" to *Understanding Brecht*, p. xviii.
30. *Ibid*, p 13.
31. *Illuminations*, p. 264. For an elaboration on this theme see the present author's "Time, Aesthetics and Critical Theory" in John O'Neill, ed., *On Critical Theory*, New York: Seabury Press, 1976, pp. 58-77.
32. George Steiner, "Introduction" to W. Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, London: New Left Books, 1977, p. 24.
33. *Understanding Brecht*, p. 103.
34. "Bewusstmachende oder rettende Kritik-Kie Aktualitat Walter Benjamins," in *Zur Aktualitat Walter Benjamins*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1972. Translated by Philip Brewster and Carl Howard Buchner as "Consciousness-Raising or Redemptive Criticism — the Contemporaneity of Walter Benjamin," in *New German Critique*, *op. cit.*, pp. 30-59.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 51.

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