

Gerard Richter. *Inheriting Walter Benjamin*. Bloomsbury 2016. 176 pp. \$112.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781474251242); \$29.95 USD (Paperback ISBN 9781474251235).

In a time when Walter Benjamin seems to be surrounded by an aura of contemporaneousness, to the degree that he is seen as a modern-day blogger or likened to a Wi-Fi using novel writer in the local Starbucks, it is of utmost pleasure to review Gerhard Richter's book *Inheriting Walter Benjamin*. It not only deals with the issues surrounding the repurposing of Benjamin for our current times, but does so in a rather distinct way. Richter focuses in great detail on original texts by Benjamin and provides what can only be described as an insightful, relevant, and thought-provoking series of essays. Instead of blindly placing Benjamin in our contemporary context, the author of *Inheriting Walter Benjamin* adeptly positions him in several traditions of thought, while cleverly problematizing the various ways one might approach *inheriting* Benjamin's own various thought projects. Overall, Gerhard Richter has truly written a must-read book for the Benjamin scholar.

The book begins with an essay titled 'Inheriting Benjamin Otherwise.' It asks the direct questions of how could one possibly inherit Benjamin, in what ways, is it even possible, have we actually ever, and will we ever cease to. Richter is at his most incisive when characterising Benjamin's writing as apodictic, melancholy, and refractory, in addition to being both poetic and allegorical. However, Richter is not daunted in the slightest and convincingly proceeds to actively inherit Benjamin's thought as a way of answering the posed questions. By focusing on knowledge as a matter of transmission [*Überlieferung*] and transmissibility [*Überlieferbarkeit*] (6), he provides an insightful framework of *inheriting* as interpretation. From such a perspective, the notorious eclecticism, impenetrability, and mysticism in Benjamin's writings are turned around completely, and therefore, transformed from an ostensible issue into a foundation for active engagement. However, this active engagement places the heir to this tradition in a complex position of both freedom and unfreedom; as Nietzsche, through Zarathustra, warns, inheritance always carries the danger of carrying over a certain madness (7). Similarly, Richter places Benjamin's work and its inheritance in a position where it is unclear whether tradition brings over weakness or strength into the new. Even further, to inherit, argues Richter, means to interpret, and thus inheriting Benjamin means dealing with his obscurities and secrets. It is in no way a 'stable appropriation but rather exposes us to the difficulty of showing ourselves as responsible heirs to something that both beckons and resists us' (9). Such an interpretation follows adeptly in the footsteps of Benjamin's works and winks sagely at the initiates who are aware of the various dangerous moments in the perpetual act of inheritance.

This issue of inheritance is continued even further in the second essay of the book; it deals with the paradoxical inheritance as seen in Benjamin's Kafka essay. It deals with a paragraph in which Benjamin outlines the relationship between father and son in Kafka's work, with particular reference to the notion of original sin [*Erbsünde*]. Again, the complexity of inheritance is portrayed in the fact that the sin being discussed is not necessarily the sin of the father, in other words, that which comes before, but a sin of the son, of that which comes after. This original sin is at the core of inheritance; the danger of 'having inherited a misinterpretation of one's own suffering and of having persisted in that misinterpretation' (24). Thus, Richter continues to problematize the relationship between interpretation, knowledge, and inheritance. This paradoxical inheritance is precisely the lack of stable ground and easy appropriation, but rather an engagement with the contingencies and resistances that a particular past brings us. Furthermore, it is about a responsibility to the futurity and potentiality of said past.

In several chapters (most prominently the second and third), Richter engages in a rather insightful etymological analysis (of ‘original sin’ [*Erbsünde*] and ‘blotting paper’ [*Löschblatt*] respectively) of Benjamin’s style of writing in German. Appropriately, such etymological analyses clearly demonstrate Benjamin’s justifiably notorious complexity, as well as Richter’s insight into Benjamin’s approach.

Throughout the book, Richter continuously acknowledges and reiterates the complexity of thought in Benjamin’s work, its contradictory conditions that make its critical nature possible, as well as the difficulties inherent in reading Benjamin. A particularly deep exploration of this is evident in the third chapter, where Richter spends a whole essay analysing Benjamin’s use of the metaphor of blotting paper [*Löschblatt*] (42), in which Benjamin makes the point that his thinking is related to theology as ink is to blotting paper. Richter ingeniously unveils the dialectic at play of active and continuous fighting for clarity of thought, ‘a thinking that must also take account of the very conditions that first make thinking possible’ (57).

Interestingly, in the fourth chapter, Richter draws several parallels between Walter Benjamin and Martin Heidegger. Besides the geographical one of their both having attended Freiburg University, there are also the parallels of Heidegger’s facility in acquiring an academic position and Benjamin’s contrasting and consistent difficulty in doing so throughout his life. Furthermore, there is the parallel of Heidegger’s support of the Nazi regime, and Benjamin’s exile and refuge away from Germany because of it. However, in addition to the biographical curiosities, both thinkers, according to Richter, share an interest in critique in the Kantian tradition, as well as conceptualisations of the ‘thing’; even more so, both were interested in issues of translation, the image, historicity, and the poetry of Hölderlin. Most importantly, Richter does well to situate both Heidegger’s and Benjamin’s project into a tradition of Kantian critique. Furthermore, both thinkers are explored through their inheritance of other major thinkers, such as Hegel’s notion of the thing [*Das Ding*]. As in the two preceding chapters, Richter also goes into the etymological roots of ‘thing,’ subsequently relating it to the Roman *res* and *causa* (93). Thus, Richter illustrates both Heidegger’s and Benjamin’s work on demonstrating ‘the thing’ as a complex notion worthy of inspection.

Throughout, Richter continuously deals with the complexity of inheriting Benjamin, while simultaneously placing Benjamin in a complex and refractory relationship to his own inheritance. Dialectical thinking seems to come easy for Richter and the book is full of uninterrupted narrative of inheritance, while also unceasingly providing interruptions, irruptions, and interweavings. An interesting example of this is the fifth chapter, where Benjamin is once again placed between Kant and Nietzsche, or, between formalism and genealogy. As Richter says, ‘concepts are *inherited* [*sic*]’ (106), but this inheritance in Benjamin’s work is not as simple as one might imagine. By terming it his ‘methodological bifurcation’, Benjamin’s work, particularly in relation to the work of art, is problematized into a conjuncture of a formalist Kantian approach to art and an exploration of radical irruptive singularities. This way, Richter brilliantly connects Benjamin’s inheritance to his most notorious claims—namely, Benjamin’s unceasing insistence on progress belonging to the interferences, the radically new and unexpected.

In the final chapter, the reader is presented with a short, albeit fascinating, essay on Benjamin and photography. By taking its starting point in photography’s relation to time, whether it goes with time, or whether it has gone with time, Richter brings up the photograph of the young Franz Kafka, of which Benjamin has also written. Considering that throughout the book the reader is constantly invited to engage and interpret, both with Benjamin, and with Benjamin being inherited through

Richter, in the last chapter it appears that the author has taken it a step further. Richter doubles Benjamin's thought and inherits it in real time, but *with time* as well, much like a photograph. Interestingly, the photograph of the young Kafka is matched with a photograph of a young boy from 1937 from the author's own archive. The inheritance, both of Kafka and Benjamin one might say, and the personal and familiar, to Richter and his writing, are matched and interwoven. It is a brilliant demonstration of actively inheriting Walter Benjamin; not only that, but providing an insightful and pertinent reflection on photography that remains true to the spirit of Benjamin.

Overall, Richter has written a book that both beckons and resists us. It uncovers depths and unveils obscurities. Constantly he draws on Benjamin's writings and their spirit, both in minute explorations of phrasing and in awareness of Benjamin's varied oeuvre. In the end, the reader is given a brilliant demonstration of an insightful interpretation of Benjamin. Even more so, one can imagine the book's perceptiveness contributing to newer and subsequent interpretations, inheritings, and insights.

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