



BOOKS

MARCH 23, 2014

The Intellectual and Other Wanderings of Walter Benjamin

By [Peter E. Gordon](#)

Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life - [//www.amazon.com/gp/product/0674051866/ref=as_li_qf_sp_asin_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=0674051866&linkCode=as2&tag=thenewrep08-20](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0674051866/ref=as_li_qf_sp_asin_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=0674051866&linkCode=as2&tag=thenewrep08-20) Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life - by *Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Belknap Press)*

Walter Benjamin passed some of the happiest moments of his life wandering shirtless in the sun on the Spanish island of Ibiza. In a letter in 1932, he wrote that the little Mediterranean island lacked modern conveniences, such as “electric light and butter, liquor and running water, flirting and newspaper reading.” The nearest village boasted a mere seven hundred inhabitants, who got by

without modern farm equipment: the economy ran mostly on goats. During his two stays there, in 1932 and 1933, Benjamin strolled the beaches and explored the island's interior in the company of his friend Jean Selz, who would recall that "Benjamin's physical stoutness and the rather Germanic heaviness he presented were in strong contrast to the agility of his mind, which so often made his eyes sparkle behind his glasses." Together they took long walks through the countryside, but the walks were "made even longer by our conversations, which constantly forced him to stop. He admitted that walking kept him from thinking. Whenever something interested him he would say, 'Tiens, tiens!' This was the signal that he was about to think, and therefore stop." Among the German guests on the island this idiosyncrasy was well-known and they gave the strange apparition a nickname: "Tiens-tiens." The village locals called him *el miserable*. It is true that Benjamin was poor and prone to depression. But out of each day he crafted a scholar's idyll: he rose early and bathed in the ocean, then ascended the hills to his favorite spot, where he retrieved a hidden lounge chair from the bushes. He sat there among the fig trees for the full length of the morning, writing, or reading Lucretius.

We do not imagine Benjamin on the beach. He was a poet of the city, one of the most probing critics of the bourgeois experience. In manifold essays and books, some of them fragmentary and left unpublished until much later, he sought to portray modern life in all its richness and variety—its literature, its dreams, its cultural detritus. Like a ragpicker in the marketplace (this was his own comparison), nothing seemed to him without significance. He wrote brilliantly about the exalted poets and novelists (Goethe, Baudelaire, Proust), but he did not neglect the "phantasmagoria" of modern capitalism, the secret corners of everyday life (from detective novels to children's literature) in which the urban masses found both distraction and redemption. He read the major capitals of Europe—Berlin, Moscow, and Paris—the same way he read works of literature, as if they were texts, or grand tapestries woven from all the multi-colored threads of modern consciousness. He was especially susceptible to the charms of Paris. Like Baudelaire, he was a *flâneur* who wandered the French capital in a state of rhapsodic distraction. He devoted a massive study to the Parisian arcades, glass-roofed corridors flanked with shops, which he interpreted as allegories of capitalist illusion. He called the *Arcades Project* his "dialectical fairy tale."

A heretic to all orthodoxies, Benjamin never cleaved easily to the schools of Marxism that have claimed his name. He was a companion to Bertolt Brecht, but he lacked his friend's tough-minded militancy and the required disdain for bourgeois aesthetics. He was affiliated with the Institute for Social Research, the collective of Marxist philosophers and sociologists that published some of his best-known essays and supported him during the 1930s with a generous stipend, but his friendship with the Institute's leaders was troubled by disagreement: Max Horkheimer worried about his qualifications for a university career, and even his friend Theodor Adorno insinuated that Benjamin's theorizing lacked dialectical nuance. Others see in Benjamin a thinker attuned more to religion than to politics, and some have wished to make of him a kind of Jewish saint. But Benjamin could never muster the sort of ardent identification with Judaism that animated his friend Gershom Scholem, the great historian of Jewish mysticism, who tried unsuccessfully to bring Benjamin to Palestine. In 1929, Benjamin secured a grant from Rabbi Judah Magnes for instruction in Hebrew, but the lessons lasted less than a month: he was distracted by disputes over his divorce, and his teacher left Berlin for spa treatments.

Benjamin's temperament—original, unclassifiable—helps to account for the fact that he continues to inspire a bewildering welter of theories.

“Benjamin studies” today is a thriving but ill-defined trade. This is unsurprising when we recall that Benjamin thought in “constellations” rather than doctrines. His preferred method was to compress an overabundance of signification into a single vision—a *Denkbild*, or “thought-image”—as if he could convey his ideas in lightning-flashes of insight rather than philosophical argument. This technique of “literary montage” drew inspiration from the avant-garde, including the Surrealists and Dada: look at the *Merzbilder* by Kurt Schwitters or the collage-constructs by Hannah Höch and you will see in painting the stylistic cousins of Benjamin's essays, especially the kaleidoscopic displays of city life in his book *One-Way Street*.

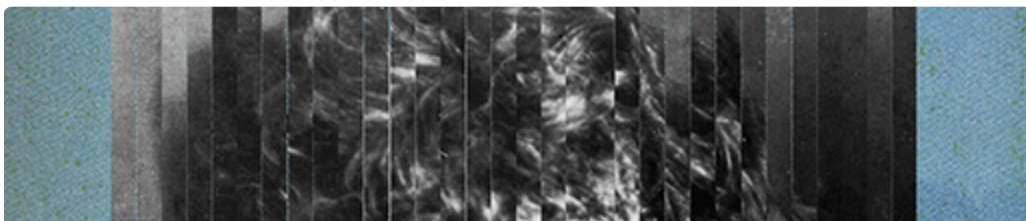




Illustration by Anthony Gerace

In his brief life, Benjamin developed many of the themes that now serve as an indispensable foundation for literary and cultural criticism. Yet there is also the fascination of the man himself: Benjamin remains an object of enduring interest not least because he seems to embody the modern condition. His dislocation, his not-at-homeness and willful alienation, mark him as a kindred spirit to Kafka and Baudelaire. Like Kafka, Benjamin seems to have been waiting for a messiah in whose arrival he could not quite believe. He spent long days in destitute wandering, unable to finish essays that were long overdue or waiting in desperation for financial compensation from journals and newspapers who had published his latest exercise. He did not just write about Paris as a capitalist dreamscape: he also experienced it that way.

This helps to account for the fact that on every page of Benjamin's writing one senses the force of his personality. It is partly a matter of genre: like the Viennese

satirist Karl Kraus, Benjamin lived in the golden age of the *feuilleton*, and he excelled at the small-scale essay that permits the author's voice to reverberate. But something more was in play. When one reads Montaigne's essays, one feels a sense of intimate and edifying communion with the writer; but when one reads Benjamin's essays one feels almost haunted. Depressive by temperament and acutely sensitive to noise, Benjamin was better at longing than at fulfillment. His first marriage, to Dora Kellner, disintegrated, and his later romances, notably with the Latvian Asja Lacis, were no less troubled. He was tempted more than once, especially during periods of penury, by thoughts of suicide. Already in the early 1930s, when he was gazing upon the Mediterranean from his hilltop chair in Ibiza, he seems to have intuited that he was living on the precipice of civilization, and that the coming political catastrophe would claim him among its victims.

In their superb new biography, Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings have given us a portrait of this elusive but paradigmatic thinker that deserves to be ranked among the few truly indispensable intellectual biographies of the modern era. I am tempted to call it a masterpiece. Nearly seven hundred pages in length, this is not only a study of Benjamin's life, it is also a guide to the bewildering mix of themes and preoccupations that populated this most prolific and unfamiliar of minds. Eiland and Jennings are accomplished scholars who share many years of experience in the world of Benjamin. Jennings is the lead editor for the definitive four-volume collection of Benjamin's selected writings in English published by Harvard University Press; Eiland served as co-editor for three of those volumes, as editor for Benjamin's long essay *On Hashish*, and as translator for some of Benjamin's signature works, including *Berlin Childhood around 1900* and the *Arcades Project*. To write the biography of an intellectual is difficult business, since so much of what passes for an event is taking place only in the mind or on the page—but those are the events that really matter. Eiland and Jennings move with deliberation through Benjamin's major works, expounding and explaining with uncommon lucidity even when the text in question is one of notorious difficulty. The result is not a mere chronicle of a life but also a reliable map into Benjamin's intellectual labyrinth.

To be sure, not everything by Benjamin is holy writ. After more than half a century,

some scholars have erected a shrine to his memory that too often obstructs critical assessment. Those of us who do not worship at this altar occasionally feel that healthy skepticism about Benjamin is taken for sacrilege, as if his memory were wrapped in an aura. But the best way to pay homage to an intellectual is to tear off the holy vestments that inhibit his mobility. This is especially so in the case of Benjamin, who felt that we could find our way to modern freedom only if the aura were dissolved.

Benjamin was born on July 15, 1892, into a wealthy and well-aculturated family of German Jews in Berlin, the capital of Imperial Germany. The eldest of three children, Benjamin felt himself to be an only child. Already as a boy he was drawn chiefly to book-reading and solitary pursuits such as collecting. He kept a small butterfly collection in the cabinet of his bedroom — “cabbage butterflies with ruffled edging, brimstone butterflies with super-bright wings” — and until the end of his life he kept a careful list of every book he ever read. As an adult he would amass a private collection of more than two hundred children’s books. His beautiful memoir, *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, which appeared in 1938, contains a loving homage to the collection of animals in the *Zoologischer Garten*. It is somehow fitting that of all the zoo’s inhabitants Benjamin felt greatest affinity with the otter, which he christened “the sacred animal of the rainwater.” Gazing into its watery cage with his forehead pressed against the iron bars, Benjamin recalls feeling “as though the rain poured down into all the street drains of the city only to end up in this one basin.” In a good rain Benjamin, too, felt “securely hidden away.” He would wait for a long while before “the glistening black body darted up to the surface, only to hurry back almost immediately to urgent affairs below.”

Benjamin would spend most of his own life burrowed among his books. He began his university studies in 1912 at the Albert Ludwig University in Freiburg, where he attached himself to the department of philology and pursued courses in literature and philosophy, attending lectures in neo-Kantianism by Heinrich Rickert. (Among the students in the lecture hall was the young Martin Heidegger, who would emerge by the mid-1920s as a philosophical revolutionary, and, in the early 1930s, would dedicate himself to the Third Reich.) The young Benjamin was swept up in the

enthusiasm of the youth movements, the *Wandervögel* (“wandering birds”) who preached an intoxicating brew of nature-mysticism, pacifism, and cultural renewal. He became an ardent participant in the Freiburg School Reform Unit, which followed the teachings of the educational reformer Gustav Wyneken. In early essays such as “Metaphysics of Youth” and “The Life of Students,” Benjamin calls for an “unceasing spiritual revolution.”

The youth movements also coursed with homoeroticism: Wyneken famously theorized about the need for “pedagogical eros.” On this point Eiland and Jennings write with some discretion. They mention the “peculiar nature” of Benjamin’s friendship with the poet Fritz Heinle, “an unusually beautiful young man” with whom Benjamin would take walks in the forest, returning well past midnight. In August 1914, when Heinle’s body was discovered alongside a female companion, some took their suicide as the last act of a doomed love affair; but friends interpreted it as a protest against the coming war. For Benjamin, the death of his friend was a trauma from which he would never fully recover. That autumn, when Wyneken enjoined his followers to embrace the cause of war, Benjamin broke with the movement and publicly denounced its leader, whom he accused of sacrificing youth on the altar of the state.

When his ardor for the youth movement was extinguished, its place in his heart was filled by other passions that were no less tinged with utopianism and no better suited to his bookish temperament. It is a striking feature of this biography that the major political events of the early twentieth century seem to pass by like scenery glimpsed from a passing train: the First World War remains elsewhere, a storm in the distance. In October 1915, Benjamin managed to secure a deferment from military service by flunking his medical exam: great volumes of black coffee the night before did the trick. Throughout his life he remained a stranger to politics in the conventional sense. He was prone to theorizing in the most abstract way about the political convulsions of the modern age, and drew back instinctively from this-worldly political commitments. His beloved friend Scholem, whom he first met in the summer of 1915 (and who conspired in the coffee-drinking scheme), was a dedicated Zionist who would emigrate to Palestine in the early 1920s. Their bond was sustained through faithful correspondence, and long after Benjamin’s death, Scholem published an affecting testament to their friendship. But Scholem could never hide

his feelings of disappointment at Benjamin's reluctance to make Jewishness the cornerstone of his political being. As the situation in Europe deteriorated, Benjamin would entertain Scholem's repeated overtures to come to Jerusalem, only to defer them again and again with the explanation that present circumstances were inopportune.

That Benjamin borrowed with some frequency from Jewish sources is clear. He read modern philosophers of Judaism such as Hermann Cohen and Franz Rosenzweig, and with Scholem's aid he enlisted kabbalistic themes for his own highly idiosyncratic philosophy of history. Around 1921, he wrote a brief commentary known as the "Theological-Political Fragment" that speaks of a "messianic kingdom." Yet the compass points by which Benjamin found his intellectual orientation were inconstant. His notions of revolution drew freely from the heterodox Marxist theorizing of Ernst Bloch's *The Spirit of Utopia*, the Hegelian Marxism of Georg Lukács, and the voluntarist strains of Rosa Luxembour— but he also found inspiration in the dialectical theology of Karl Barth, whose Protestant vision of a chasm separating history from eternity confirmed Benjamin's own postwar sense that profane history lay in ruins.

This vision of apocalyptic history held Benjamin captive as he set about writing his study of German baroque drama in the mid-1920s. *The Origin of the German Trauerspiel* was, according to his biographers, in many respects the pivot of his entire career, as it united his earlier studies of literature with a theory of language and a nascent philosophy of history. Although it was outwardly an inquiry into a rather rarefied theatrical genre from the seventeenth century, the *Trauerspiel* or "play of mourning," it was also a commentary on the aesthetic and historical conditions of the present day. It drew an explicit comparison to the contemporary vogue in expressionist art. "For like Expressionism," Benjamin wrote, "the Baroque is not so much an age of genuine artistic practice as an age possessed of an unremitting will to art. This is true of all the so-called periods of decadence.... In its brokenness, the present age reflects certain aspects of the spiritual constitution of the Baroque."

In Benjamin's eyes, the mourning-play illustrated a distinctively Lutheran evacuation

of meaning from everyday experience. Its method, allegorical rather than symbolic, revealed the merely conventional status of the religious image: it abandoned the melancholy hero to a ruinous landscape from which the promise of redemption had drained away. History stood disenchanting as “natural history.” In the end, Benjamin also came to see in this baroque form an anticipation of his own interpretative practice: “Allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things.” Like the method of baroque allegory, the effect of philosophical criticism was to strip away all the sacraments of aesthetic illusion until the work of art stood exposed as a ruin. “Criticism,” he explained, “means the mortification of works.” It dismantles the illusion of “timeless” beauty only to set free the truth of the artwork for the critic’s own time.

In the spring of 1925, Benjamin submitted his study of the mourning-play to the university in Frankfurt for consideration as his habilitation (the second thesis required of German doctorates as the license for obtaining a full-fledged professorship). The verdict was damning: the thesis exhibited a “lack of scholarly clarity” and was completely disabled by its “incomprehensible mode of expression.” For Jennings and Eiland, this judgment is monumentally unfair. The *Trauerspiel* book is admittedly difficult, but in their view it now stands as “one of the signal achievements of twentieth-century literary criticism.” With the rejection of Benjamin’s thesis, they write, “the philosophic faculty of the University of Frankfurt brought down on itself a scandal that continues to cast its shadow today.”

Still, we might ask whether their advocacy covers up a genuine problem. For Benjamin’s gift for metaphorical expression sometimes overwhelmed the ideas that he wished to convey. His writing exemplifies not just the advantages but also the disadvantages of what one might call para-philosophy, a genre in which ideas are evoked rather than developed through the laborious exigencies of linear argument. The anxiety about metaphor and its demagogic appeal runs through the philosophical tradition from Plato to the present day, and in many precincts of the philosophical profession it has hardened into a serious prejudice. But this does not mean that Benjamin’s mannered and richly metaphorical prose deserves to stand unchallenged as a model for criticism.

Benjamin's true strengths came most to the fore when he dedicated himself to the literary and aesthetic themes that remained his major preoccupation, from the early essays on Goethe's *Elective Affinities* and Hölderlin's poetry to the mature essays on Proust and Kafka. Nor can one deny his contribution to *Kulturkritik*, or cultural criticism, a genre of which the German-Jewish sociologist Georg Simmel was a pioneer. Alongside his friend Siegfried Kracauer, Benjamin committed countless essays to the *feuilleton* section of newspapers, such as the left-liberal *Frankfurter Zeitung*, which devoted the bottom portion of its front page to cultural themes. It was here, and in similar periodicals and literary magazines, that Benjamin published excerpts from *One-Way Street*, his brilliant experiment in cultural montage that takes the reader on a tour of Europe's major cities (chiefly Berlin but also Paris, Moscow, and Marseilles) with section titles erected in the text like street signs: it begins with "Filling Station" and ends "To the Planetarium."

In a certain light, *One-Way Street* reflects the playful habit of childhood collecting that Benjamin never abandoned. In a section on the "Untidy Child," we read that "each stone he finds, each flower he picks, and each butterfly he catches is already the start of a collection, and every single thing he owns makes up one great collection. In him this passion shows its true face, the stern Indian expression that lingers on, but with a dimmed and manic glow, in antiquarians, researchers, bibliomaniacs." This was Benjamin's natural impulse of bringing into one frame "materials of widely different kinds in a new, intuitive relationship." Benjamin honed this impulse for juxtaposition into a sophisticated modernist technique that allowed him to capture the state of distraction in the capitalist marketplace.

With the rise of fascism and the onset of economic crisis in 1929, Benjamin's writings on modern culture took on a new urgency. That same year also brought a new friendship with Brecht and deepening relations with Adorno, both of whom would remain intellectual companions to Benjamin throughout the 1930s. Here we come to the chapter of Benjamin's life that is perhaps most riven with controversy. Benjamin's friends saw that Adorno and Brecht tugged him in different directions. Brecht drew him toward a style of Marxist militancy that proudly disdained the inherited categories of traditional aesthetics (Brecht himself

spoke of his *plumpes Denken*, or “crude thought”), and Adorno tried to draw Benjamin away from Brecht for the sake of a philosophically rarefied or more “dialectical” perspective on modern culture. Gretel Karplus, later Adorno’s wife, warned her friend Benjamin that Brecht represented a “great danger.” Benjamin responded by reminding Karplus of his own creative strength. He refused to be cast as a victim since he was gifted most of all with “the freedom to juxtapose things and ideas that are supposed to be incompatible.”

In this Faustian struggle for Benjamin’s soul, Eiland and Jennings do their best to remain neutral. But one can sense that their sympathies, though not exactly for the cigar-chomping Brecht, incline them away from the dialectician Adorno, whose influence in Benjamin’s life they document with notable coolness. The controversy comes most dramatically to the fore surrounding the question of mass culture—or what Adorno and his colleague Horkheimer preferred to call the “culture industry.” In 1936, Benjamin published his celebrated essay “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility” in the official journal of the Institute for Social Research, where Horkheimer served as director. The essay, a brilliant contribution to the history of aesthetics, traces the gradual dissolution of the sacred halo, or “aura,” that once surrounded the traditional artwork when it was understood as a unique object of passive veneration. With the advent of modern techniques of reproduction—realized first in photography, then in film—the aura began to give way. It is technological reproducibility, writes Benjamin, that first “emancipates the work of art from its parasitic subservience to ritual.” When the aura dissolves, the very notion of the “authentic” work of art cedes its authority and the social function of art is revolutionized. Shedding its bourgeois status as an object of secular worship, the artwork is volatilized and finds a new life—in politics.

Elsewhere Benjamin mourned the aura’s disappearance, but not here: the age of infinitely reproducible art, he argued, opened up bold new prospects for human experience. It dissolved the wall between author and audience, transforming the masses into potential participants. But this was participation without contemplation: the masses did not behold the work of art in a state of piety, they absorbed it in a state of distraction. The new partnership between aesthetics and mass technology left the twentieth century with a political decision: either welcome the transformation in human perception to embrace a massified art in the

communist mode, or reject this transformation and make the overpowering violence of mass technology into a cult. The first option led to communism and a politicized aesthetics, the second led to fascism and what Benjamin called “the aestheticization of politics.”

The essay contains a good dose of technological utopianism, as the biographers admit. A paean to the communist ideal of a truly proletarian aesthetics, it can also be read as a document of Benjamin’s intellectual proximity to Brecht at a moment in the mid-1930s when Europe was faced with a stark choice between fascism and communism (though “communism” at the time meant Stalinist dictatorship). For Adorno, however, this was a false alternative. In a letter in March 1936, he chastised his friend for celebrating a crude aesthetics of mass-mobilization and dismissing the redemptive power of art when left to obey its own internal laws: “Dialectical though your essay is, it is less than this in the case of the autonomous work of art itself; for it neglects a fundamental experience ... that precisely the uttermost consistency in the pursuit of the technical laws of autonomous art actually transforms this art itself, and ... brings it that much closer to a state of freedom.” Like Gretel Karplus, Adorno detected the influence of Brecht. “My own task,” he wrote, “is to hold your arm steady until the Brechtian sun has finally sunk beneath its exotic waters.”

The story of Benjamin’s efforts to get his essay published in the Institute’s journal leaves a bad taste in part because Benjamin, now living in exile in Paris and shifting frequently from one apartment to another, was in desperate straits, and the Institute remained one of his few reliable sources of income. Eventually the essay appeared in the journal, but in a somewhat shortened form in French translation and with changes dictated by the Institute’s heads. Benjamin acquiesced, and by the end of March he wrote to Horkheimer that he would do “everything in my power to restore the Institute’s former confidence in me.” Among the intellectuals in Paris the essay made a strong impression; it received an especially warm reception among the German-speaking émigrés, who organized an evening discussion for the Paris chapter of the “Defense League of German Authors Abroad.” Benjamin saw it as a major statement of his “uncompromising” views on modern art.

But Adorno remained unconvinced, and long after his friend's death he continued to brood over their disagreement. In his *Aesthetic Theory*, he wrote that the sacred penumbra of the artwork did not mean merely the immobility of tradition; it also bore within itself the critical power without which art simply dissolved into ideology: "Aura is not only—as Benjamin claimed—the here and now of the artwork, it is whatever points beyond its givenness, its content; one cannot abolish it and still want art." Adorno could not share his friend's technological optimism. What he feared most was the degeneration of the culture industry into a medium that lacked this critical dimension, something merely "affirmative" of the present world. Technology only hastened the stereotyping and commodification of artistic forms; it tightened the cage of modern consciousness to such a degree that the mere thought of freedom was a virtual impossibility. In his introduction to Benjamin's collected correspondence, Adorno wrote that the essay represented a tragic betrayal of Benjamin's true instincts and an "identification with the aggressor."

Adorno's judgment in this quarrel does not have many defenders. A purely critical stance toward mass culture is difficult to sustain now, not least because the attitude immediately invites charges of traditionalism or snobbery. This is especially so in the United States, where culture is supposed to be "popular" if it is democratic. Yet it is important to insist that the alternative is hardly more appealing. Since his death, Benjamin's name has been invoked with some frequency to justify what really amounts to the liquidation of culture in culture's name. Academics who turn to Benjamin as a talisman for the study of mass culture in the marketplace forget that he believed in an unbreakable alliance between mass culture and revolution. Students of popular culture today have broken that link, and not just because communism has lost all legitimacy. They have surrendered it willfully and in a spirit of celebratory belonging, because it is far easier for intellectuals to swim with the tide and to identify with the relentless pull of their media-saturated surroundings.

Yet intellectuals should value criticism even at the cost of identification. In his strongest essays Benjamin himself obeyed this truth: he called it "brushing history against the grain." The roots of the idea go all the way back to an encounter with a watercolor by the German-Swiss modernist Paul Klee, titled "Angelus Novus," that Benjamin bought during a short visit to Munich in the spring of 1921. It depicts a man

in crude outline, his eyes opened wide with astonishment, his claw-like feet pointing downward, his arms raised like wings on either side of his oversized head. This peculiar image would remain a prized possession and a link between Benjamin and Scholem, who kept the painting on his own apartment wall in Munich (and later in Jerusalem). Scholem even wrote a little poem called “Greetings from the Angelus” in which the angel announces that “I have been sent from heaven,” but concludes, “I am an unsymbolic thing / and signify what I am / you turn the magic ring in vain / for I have no meaning.”

For Benjamin, this figure held enormous power. In one of his final essays, a set of theses titled “On the Concept of History,” it serves as a witness to the “storm” of historical progress, which blows from paradise and propels the angel helplessly into the future. For the angel, history itself seems to be little more than a single catastrophe whose wreckage accumulates at his feet. Benjamin’s unsettling depiction of this divine creature has provoked countless interpretations, in part because Scholem was clearly wrong: the problem is not that it has no meaning but that it is overstocked with signification for which no single reading seems adequate. Is paradise to be found only in the past? Is history merely a theater for the destruction of utopian energies? Is all historical action therefore a vain attempt to realize what is irretrievably lost? But then why does Benjamin spend the rest of the essay in a Marxist mood, polemicizing against reformist social democracy and urging us to adopt the historical materialist view of revolution?

Somehow Benjamin was driven to the extravagant conclusion that the only way to build a better world was to break free of profane history altogether. At the moment when fascism was overtaking Europe, he perhaps felt that this was the only viable stance for the revolutionary left. The Non-Aggression Pact between the Soviets and Nazi Germany, signed on August 23, 1939, left him with little confidence in the ordinary progress of things. Nor could he sustain his earlier confidence in the redemptive power of modern culture. “There is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.” This was a grim verdict—and it may signal Benjamin’s last about-face against the technological optimism of his earlier essay.

The darker tone of these “theses” on the concept of history also reflects Benjamin’s growing knowledge that the chances for survival in Europe were slim. His ex-wife Dora had already escaped—first to San Remo on the Italian coast, where she ran a small hotel, and then to London, where she joined their son Stefan. (Stefan became a rare-books dealer in London; his mother Dora lived the rest of her life as a manager of boarding houses in Notting Hill and died in 1964.) His sister, also named Dora, was frequently ill: she survived the end of the war but died from arteriosclerosis in Switzerland the following year. His brother Georg, a committed communist, was arrested by the Nazis in 1933 and died in the Sachsenhausen concentration camp in 1942. Benjamin himself fled Paris soon after the Nazis began their assault on France in May 1940. By late summer he made his way to the American consulate in Marseilles in order to acquire a visa that the Institute had secured to permit his entry to the United States.

He also acquired transit visas to traverse Spain and Portugal. But as legal passage from France proved impossible, the only recourse was a rugged trail through the Pyrenees and from there to Port Bou, a fishing village on the border between France and Spain. By this point Benjamin’s heart was strained to the limit. In the Spanish customs office, there was some confusion: he and his refugee companions were notified that they were to be returned to France—which meant deportation to the camps. That night, disconsolate and exhausted, Benjamin took morphine. He died on the morning of September 27, 1940. The villagers provided a funeral. A priest and monks said a requiem and the body was buried in the cemetery’s Catholic sector, probably because the registry had reversed his name, identifying the deceased as Benjamin Walter. What followed the next day was like a page from Kafka: the border was opened, and the other refugees were permitted to pass through. “There is hope,” Kafka wrote, “but not for us.”

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