WALTER BENJAMIN
WALTER BENJAMIN

An Introduction to His Work and Thought

UWE STEINER

Translated by Michael Winkler

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UWE STEINER is professor in and chair of the Department of German Studies at Rice University and the author or editor of numerous books in German.

MICHAEL WINKLER is professor emeritus of German studies at Rice University.

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The present volume is an introduction to the writings of Walter Benjamin. It traces the intellectual momentum that finds expression in the internal tensions of his thought and is revealed in the controversial discussions that have accompanied his work to this day. This book is not, however, a report on the current status of Benjamin scholarship. The primary aim of my text is to let Benjamin speak for himself and to place his various writings in the context of his entire oeuvre and of his time. To accomplish this, I have largely refrained from an extensive discussion of scholarly research. The critical studies I consulted and other helpful literature are listed in the bibliography.

I would like to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to individual colleagues who, in their own way, have contributed to making this book possible.

I owe thanks, first of all, to Jane O. Newman and John Smith, who invited me to teach and pursue research in the Department of German at the University of California, Irvine. As the Max Kade Distinguished Visiting Professor, I enjoyed the hospitality of the Department of German Studies at Indiana University in Bloomington, for which I am especially grateful to William W. Rasch. In the same capacity I was a guest of the Department of Germanics at the University of Washington (Seattle), thanks especially to Richard Gray’s and Sabine Wilke’s support. My guest professorships in the United States would not have been possible without the good offices and patience of the two directors of the Forschungszentrum Europäische Aufklärung in Potsdam, Günther Lottes and Eberhardt Lämmert. They have repeatedly relieved me of the obligations demanded by my fellowship at this research center. I am grateful to Michael W. Jennings of Princeton
University, who has been a great help at all times since my first sojourn in the New World.

Finally, I owe a special debt of gratitude to Gary Wihl, dean of the School of Humanities at Rice University, whose award of a stipend enabled me to complete this book, and who contributed a generous subsidy to facilitate its translation.

Uwe Steiner
For all quotations, I have adopted, faithfully and with gratitude, the English-language versions established by Benjamin’s (and others’) original translators. Only in a very few instances have I made slight changes, both for technical reasons and to make sure that certain nuances in Steiner’s analysis do not conflict with the text that is quoted to support them. I have resisted the temptation, however, to make Benjamin’s at times opaque and idiosyncratic style more easily accessible to readers whose native language does not favor an equal degree of abstraction and density.

Obviously, different translators have approached their task differently. Hence, there is no uniformity in the way that some of his key concepts have been rendered—a fact that is not recognizable in this book. In deciding from which of the existing versions to borrow, I have tried to avoid diversity and be as consistent as possible instead. Therefore, I have throughout used “primal history” for Benjamin’s term “Urgeschichte,” a utopian concept denoting a “mythic” image of history and central to his idea of “Ursprung” (origin). By contrast, “Vorgeschichte” (prehistory) is concerned with persons, events, or objects as precursors of things to come. Likewise, “die Moderne” as the time in which, for example, Baudelaire lived and which he tried to give the Gestalt of an experience, is “modernity” (in analogy to “antiquity”). When “die Moderne” identifies an artistic style, for example, that of Kafka, it is “modernism.”

“Das Epische,” in the context of its “restitution” or “reinstatement,” refers not to the ancient genre (das Epos) of Homer or Virgil. Rather, Benjamin uses this abstract noun to advocate an application to prose fiction of structuring principles that correspond to Brecht’s technique of the “epic theater.” Hence, I prefer “epic narration” over “the epic,” knowing full well that this locution also requires commentary. For the Nietzschean neologism
“der Übermensch,” when it is part of a direct quotation from Walter Kaufmann’s reading of Nietzsche, I have kept “the overman”; elsewhere I have opted for “the superhuman.” And finally, Benjamin’s use of “profan” reflects the original meaning of “profane” more closely than does “secular.”

Steiner’s book, originally written for German, primarily academic, readers, presupposes greater familiarity with historical and cultural contexts than its non-German audience may bring to it. In instances where it was easily possible, I have, with the author’s consent, added very brief comments that may help to uncomplicate what are for the most part rather demanding arguments. But it was not possible to expand such commentary into what would have amounted to the addition of separate annotations. A case in point is Rang’s memorandum of 1924 titled Deutsche Bauhütte [German Masons’s Guild]. It is an anti-idealistic plea for a philosophical politics that calls for groups of volunteers to provide practical help in the rebuilding of war-ravaged towns, which act of conscience would contribute to alleviating ideological antagonisms.

I thank my wife, Mary Grace Winkler, for her frequent reminders that “English does not accommodate itself to the Russian nested-doll-construction of some of your German sentences.”

Michael Winkler
Benjamin’s Works Cited in This Study

German-Language Editions


English-Language Editions


CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

1. A Contemporary of Modernity

A generation that had gone to school in horse-drawn streetcars now stood in the open air amid a landscape in which nothing was the same except the clouds, and, at its center, exposed to a force field of destructive torrents and explosions, the tiny, fragile human body.”1 Walter Benjamin, describing in 1933 the experience of his own generation, dated his childhood to the period around 1900. Although he was in fact born a few years earlier, in 1892, the turn of the century became for him the privileged span of time in which things familiar and long-established collided with new and strange phenomena. This experience is illustrated nowhere more vividly than in the development of technology, evoked here in the shape of a dramatic arc. And it is only as a technological event that the First World War, to which the quotation alludes, became the fiery signal for his generation.

When the writer and literary historian Samuel Lublinski (1868–1910) drew up the balance sheet of Modernity in his book Die Bilanz der Moderne (1904), the year 1890, in which Bismarck submitted his resignation, served as the decisive juncture: “The fall of Bismarck also marked the end of the major achievement that defined his statecraft during his final years in office: the emergency law against Social Democracy of 1878. This law signified a complete turning point in Germany’s political life; it was without a doubt the most significant event since the founding of the Reich.” Lublinski argued that the rise of Social Democracy had given the masses a clear political profile, and that, for the first time in world history, a mass of millions of citizens had turned into a political entity whose organizational shrewdness and unified drive for power could stand up to the Prussian conservatives. But it was technology no less than the masses that had shaped
the true face of modernity: “It is our charging locomotives, our incessantly hammering machines, our science and technology” that assign the modern poets their material, and they must prove themselves worthy of it.2

In one of his first published texts, the short essay “Das Dornröschen” (Sleeping Beauty) of 1911, Benjamin announced that he considers himself a contemporary of this type of Modernity, which he sees as “the age of socialism, of the women’s movement, of traffic, of individualism.”3 Barely twenty years later, Berlin Childhood around 1900 (which we, knowing of its author’s demurral, should be rather hesitant to read as an autobiography) captures, in its own way, an image of this time. An image not only of the time but even more of the place, that is, of locales indissolubly bound up with memory. In other words, Benjamin’s carefully chosen title denotes a “time-space” (Zeit­Raum); and his childhood memories focus on a life lived not in but “with Berlin.”4 It is a life that continued there through the time when Berlin Childhood was being written, a life lived with the city of Berlin that, at the beginning of the 1930s, is no longer the same place it had once been. The child’s gaze, conjuring up the text’s memory images from the perspective of the second half of the nineteenth century, is directed at the city, at “matter-of-fact and noisy Berlin, the city of labor and the metropolis of business.”5 In these images, however, the child’s gaze meets the countering look of the adult, who recognizes in them the prehistory of his own present.

In the sequence of Benjamin’s works, Berlin Childhood belongs to a series of significant studies and essays, some of them extensive, that are associated with the Arcades Project. These works occupied his attention almost exclusively until his death in 1940, their importance to him being equal to that of the opus maximum he was not able to complete. What unifies these studies thematically—studies ranging from “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility” through the “exposé” of the Arcades Project to the essays on Baudelaire—is Benjamin’s attempt, grounded in a philosophy of history, to render the nineteenth century as the a priori for all critical insights into the present era, and thus to make this era intellectually perceptible as the prehistory of his own time.

The Paris on which the “exposé” programmatically bestows the honorary title of “Capital City of the Nineteenth Century” is also the Paris of Charles Baudelaire (1821–1867), whom Benjamin, in the title of a projected book, calls a “Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism.” Baudelaire, who decisively shaped the concept of modernity, personified for Benjamin two essential aspects: he is the poet whose poetry strove unsuccessfully
to endow the consciously experienced, though quickly forgotten, facts (Erlebnis) of modernité with “the weight of insights that are based on long experience,”6 which have become part of memory (Erfahrung). He is also the contemporary of the workers’ movement that was taking shape during the Second Empire. More specifically, he witnesses those class struggles in France whose history and political theory Karl Marx wrote. Toward the end of his first essay on Baudelaire, Benjamin states that Blanqui’s doctrine of action had been “the sister of Baudelaire’s dream.”7 Benjamin’s capital city of the nineteenth century, however, is also the Paris of the industrial revolution then spreading through all of Europe, a revolution symbolized by the railroad. Locomotives were the harbingers of a rapidly expanding transit system. They were also the first beneficiaries of an industrially produced construction material—iron—which, when combined with glass, revolutionized architecture. Early examples of this phenomenon are the halls of railroad stations that were being built in the heart of Europe’s cities, and, no less importantly, the Parisian arcades.

Paris, finally, is also the site of the world’s fairs, of those “pilgrimage sites that display the fetish called commodities.”8 For the first time in 1855, at one of these expositions, a special exhibit had been devoted to photography. And for the visual arts, it is photography that inaugurates the age of their technological reproducibility. Going back to the middle of the nineteenth century, Benjamin traces the development of photography and, as a parallel process, the revolutionary transformation of both art and human perception—a process that culminates in the art of film. The latest productions of the studios in Berlin-Babelsberg, Hollywood, and Moscow are, in the mid-1930s, the subject of those theses in which he seeks to decode, by way of a prognosis, the then current trends in the development of art and to clarify their political implications.

It is not difficult to show the cross-connections that tie the memory images of Berlin Childhood to the various sections of the Arcades Project and to other writings that revolve around it.

During my childhood I was a prisoner of both the old and new western suburbs of Berlin. In those days, my clan lived in these two neighborhoods with an attitude compounded of doggedness and self-esteem, a frame of mind that turned their world into a ghetto they considered their fiefdom. I remained confined within this prosperous district without any knowledge of a different world outside. Poor people—as far as rich children my age were concerned—existed only as beggars.
In the imagination of a child brought up in a wealthy middle-class family, poverty is only a shameful humiliation, unconnected to its economic and social causes. In this way of seeing, the person humiliated has no other recourse but to revolt. In retrospect, the lure of an “escape into sabotage and anarchism,” which for a long time cast a spell on Benjamin’s nascent political awareness, is a limitation he held responsible for all the difficulty faced by an intellectual from this milieu trying to “see things as they really are.” It is hardly fortuitous that he sees Baudelaire’s political insights, in principle, as not extending beyond the rebellious pathos of a revolt such as characterizes the posture of the bohémien. The radical questioning of the intellectual’s role in society, which for the Benjamin of the 1920s turns out to be a one-way street into politics, is prefigured ex negativo in the apolitical attitudes with which the fin-de-siècle bourgeoisie took over the heritage of a century that was coming to its end. Political insight, however, was for him most closely connected to an understanding of the technological status of things, a fact registered subliminally but precisely in his book of memories.

According to a passage in Berlin Chronicle, the posthumously published first version of Berlin Childhood, the latter book was written at a time “when the railroads were beginning to become obsolete.” One consequence of this, he says, is the fact that the train stations, generally speaking, were “no longer the true ‘gateways’ through which the city unrolls its outskirts, as it does nowadays along the approach roads built for the Automobilist, the driver of a car.”

In 1921, a good ten years before Benjamin jotted down this observation, the Avus (Auto-Versuchs- und Übungsstraße), the so-called Auto Test and Practice Road in Berlin, had been officially opened after a long period of construction that had been interrupted by the war. It is a road of nearly ten kilometers, perfectly straight and without intersections, whose two separate lanes were reserved exclusively for automobiles. It led from the southwestern suburbs directly into the western center of the city. This first autobahn in the world was open to all motorists for a small fee, day and night. It was also less than a year before the publication of Benjamin’s One-Way Street (1928) that one-way streets and the appropriate traffic signs (which Sasha Stone used in the photo montage he designed for the book’s dust cover) had been officially introduced in Germany. The first filling stations—“Tankstelle” is the title of the book’s first piece—appeared in 1924.

It is not known whether Benjamin shared Brecht’s appreciation for the products of the Steyr Company. But as a front-seat passenger in the car of a
friend, the writer Wilhelm Speyer (1887–1952), he gathered relevant experiences during various vacation trips. In a letter he reports, for example, that after several starts they had succeeded in crossing the Gotthard Pass, though not without incurring some damage to the car. In September 1932, during another trip to Italy with Speyer, he used the unpleasant delay caused by a flat tire to start writing the first draft of *Berlin Childhood.* In the summer of 1927—the same year in which, on May 21, Charles Lindbergh had safely landed his plane, the *Spirit of St. Louis,* at Le Bourget Airport near Paris, thereby bringing the first airborne nonstop crossing of the Atlantic to a triumphant conclusion—Benjamin announced on a postcard mailed from Corsica that he is about to “drive” (fahren) in an airplane from there to Antibes on the Côte d’Azur.

Technological progress is a fact of life that Benjamin faced with an open mind and as an observer who is given to ambitious theorizing. He perceived that the new means of transportation also bring about a no less fundamental change of perception that in turn accompanies the fundamental transformation of the technological media. The railroad station, he continues his note in *Berlin Chronicle,* issues, as it were,

> the instructions for a surprise attack, but it is an outdated maneuver, one that strikes at nothing but things of the past. And this is very much true of photography, even including the snapshot. Only the cinema opens up optical access roads into the center of the urban environment, the same way these new roads guide the motorist into the new City.

Around 1900, however, it was still the *Kaiserpanorama* (Imperial Panorama) in Berlin, a late successor of the panorama Daguerre had set up in Paris in 1822, that marks the state of affairs with respect to media technology. But Daguerre’s name is associated more closely with photography, an invention that Benjamin, child of a bourgeois family, experienced as a veritable sacrificial victim when he was taken to a photographer’s studio. This child was still able to watch the horse-drawn streetcar from his parents’ apartment, and it was a “rattling hackney” that took him to Berlin’s railroad stations, to those departure points and final destinations for summer journeys that were inevitably taken by train. The one technological innovation of the nineteenth century, however, that was especially close to Benjamin’s heart was the telephone, an invention Alexander Graham Bell had patented in 1876. The telephone, he remembers, made its entry into the apartments of Berlin’s prosperous bourgeoisie at precisely the same