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Benjamin's Early Reception in the United States A Report

Benjamin's early reception in the United States can be broken into eight phases: 1) a few notices of his work in the 1930s; 2) the appearance of two major works, without translation, in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, when it was published in New York and mimeographed in Los Angeles; 3) several reports of his suicide along with the death of other Jewish and left-wing writers who fell victim to Nazi terror; 4) scattered use of his work in the late 1940s and 1950s; 5) a growing realization in the early 1960s that American literary and cultural criticism was missing something of significance by neglecting Benjamin's work; 6) the appearance in the 1960s of competing portraits of Benjamin by four of his surviving friends, including Hannah Arendt, who edited and introduced the first collection of his writings in English; 7) an uncanny repetition of the earlier neglect, as a significant number of Benjamin's texts are published in Great Britain during the 1970s and early 1980s but remain unavailable in the States; 8) the beginning of a sustained critical engagement with Benjamin in the late 1970s.

1) *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* was reviewed in the spring 1930 issue of the journal *Modern Language Review*. Placed under the rubric of »Short Notices« and signed by the initials »R. P.,« the review is brief but generally positive. Given that it is the first appearance of Benjamin's name and the only contemporaneous review of his work in an American journal, it is worth quoting at length:

Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspieles [sic], by Dr Walter Benjamin (Berlin: E. Rowohlt. 257 pp. 8 M.), is concerned with the idea of baroque tragedy. The first necessity, Dr Benjamin holds, is to free the mind of the tendency to confuse this specific form of tragedy – in spite of the baroque author's devotion to Aristotle – with Greek tragedy. Aristotle's terror and pity were misunderstood, and the aim of baroque tragedy was to show the transitoriness of all earthly things, to appal by letting us see destruction and death lurking round even the mighty. There is usually no attempt, as one may see in *Leo Arminius* of Gryphius, to enlist our sympathies with tyrant or rebel; it is enough to represent the insecurity of kingly might. Thus baroque »Trauerspiel« is more closely allied to mediaeval drama than to Greek tragedy; its subject is »Trauer.« The theme is conceived as allegory, and when transfiguration comes, it comes not from within, but as a light from above. Dr Benjamin's book is perhaps a little too full of polemic, but it gives an excellent idea of what baroque literature stands for. When, however, he claims

Shakespeare as an »allegorical« poet, he is being carried away by his theme; and his theory of the origin of Greek tragedy, the form of which, he says, is that of the primitive law-court, is not in agreement with the best authorities. But these are minor blemishes in a vigorous and comprehensive study.¹

In same year Gilbert Waterhouse briefly mentions the *Trauerspiel* book in his survey of secondary literature on the Baroque era, which he discusses under the rubric of »decadence«: »Benjamin finds the tragedies as essentially allegorical. They insist on the transitory nature of this world.«² A similarly brief notice of Benjamin's *Einbahnstraße* appeared in a footnote to Félix Bertaux's *Panorama de la littérature allemande contemporaine*, the English translation of which was published in 1935.³ And in their survey of the discipline the noted sociologists Louis Wirth and Edward Shils mention Benjamin's essay »Zum gegenwärtigen gesellschaftlichen Standort des französischen Schriftstellers« without further comment.⁴

2) »Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire« was published in 1939/1940 volume of *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, which was printed in the United States; the next volume of the journal bore the title *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science*. A version of »On the Concept of History« appeared as the appendix to the volume of the journal dedicated to Benjamin's memory, which was mimeographed in Los Angeles. As in the case of the Baudelaire essay, there was no gesture toward an English translation.

3) In the early 1940s a small number of Jewish and left-wing newspapers and journals listed Benjamin among the vast number of writers and intellectuals who were victims of Nazi persecution. Notices of his death appeared in *The Jewish Refugee*, *The New Republic*, *The Free World*, and *The New International Yearbook*; the first three publications listed him among other victims of Nazi terror, while the last one described him as a »philosopher of singular stamp.«⁵ Similarly, Arthur Koestler, who became acquainted with Benjamin in the 1930s, includes him in a list of »exiled writers who took their lives when France fell« in the dedication page

1 R. P.: »Short Notices«, in: *Modern Language Review* 25 (1930), p. 124.

2 Gilbert Waterhouse: »The Reformation, Decadence, and Reconstruction«, in: *Germanic Studies* 1 (1930), pp. 148–149.

3 Félix Bertaux: *Panorama of German literature from 1871 to 1931*, trans. John Trounstein, New York (McGraw-Hill) 1935, p. 264: »Walter Benjamin in *Einbahnstrasse*, 1928, has both stated what is lacking then and suggested some of the means by which the German intellectual can overcome the lack.«

4 Louis Wirth/Edward Shils: »The Literature of Sociology«, in: *Social Studies* 26 (1935), pp. 528–529.

5 Cf. *The Jewish Refugee*, New York (Institute of Jewish Affairs) 1944, p. 156; *The New Republic* 110 (1944), p. 688; *The Free World* 5 (1945), p. 425; and *The New International Yearbook* (n. p.: Dobb, Mead, and Co., 1940), p. 305.

of his autobiography, *The Scum of the Earth*.⁶ And in commemoration of the hundredth anniversary of the publication of Heinrich Heine's *Deutschland. Ein Wintermärchen* in 1844, Hermann Kesten published a translation of the poem with a long preface in which he describes the conditions he experienced in a concentration camp in France. One Sunday morning, Kesten writes, the prisoners organized a »literary matinee,« during which

poor dear Walter Benjamin, the learned and eccentric philosopher, recited from memory a Chinese poem by a German poet. (This same Benjamin later took poison because the Spanish border police wanted to send him back to France after he had arrived in Spain; he had an American visa and an appointment at an American university.)⁷

4) In 1944 Hannah Arendt translated Benjamin's depiction of the »angel of history« for an essay she published in *The Partisan Review*.⁸ Without indicating as much, she also honors Benjamin by giving her essay a title, »Franz Kafka: A Reevaluation (On the Occasion of the Twentieth Anniversary of his Death),« which recalls the title of an essay he had written some ten years earlier, »Franz Kafka: Zur zehnten Wiederkehr seines Todestages.« Beyond the translation of the fragment, however, Arendt says nothing further about Benjamin – not even that he entrusted her with a typescript of the very text she translates. A year later, the film director and screen-writer Bertold Viertel, who had once worked with Karl Kraus, published an essay in *The Kenyon Review* that draws attention to Benjamin's concept of the »shock effect.«⁹ It is perhaps for this reason that the editors of *The Kenyon Review* made plans for a translation of the conversations between Benjamin and Brecht, but the plans never came to fruition.¹⁰ In 1948, however, the second part of »What is Epic Theater?« was translated by Edward Landberg for *The Western Review*.¹¹ In 1954, while analyzing Lope de Vega's

6 Arthur Koestler: *The Scum of the Earth*, New York (Macmillan) 1941, p. 6; see also Koestler's description of a Benjamin as an »author and critic« (247), who was his neighbor on 10, rue Dombalse, Paris.

7 Heinrich Heine: *Germany: Winter's Tale*, ed./intro by Hermann Kesten, New York (Fischer) 1944, pp. vi–vii.

8 Hannah Arendt: »Franz Kafka. A Reevaluation (On the Occasion of the Twentieth Anniversary of his Death)«, in: *The Partisan Review* 11 (1944), p. 407. Kurt Bergel's »Childhood and Love in Rilke's Fourth Elegy« mentions the *Trauerspiel* book in one of its footnotes; cf. *The Germanic Review* 21 (1946), p. 53.

9 Bertold Viertel: »Bertolt Brecht, Dramatist«, in: *The Kenyon Review* 7 (1945), pp. 467–475; esp. p. 468.

10 Cf. Walter Benjamin: *Über den Begriff der Geschichte* (= WuN XIX), ed. by Gérard Raulet, Frankfurt a.M. (Suhrkamp) 2010, p. 351.

11 Walter Benjamin: »Notes on Brecht's Epic Theater«, trans. Edward Landberg, in: *The Western Review* 12 (1947–1948), pp. 167–173.

Al Triunfo de Judit, Leo Spitzer made reference to Benjamin's motif of the »cadaver as emblem,« as it was developed in the *Trauerspiel* book.¹²

In the 1950s a small selection of Benjamin's writings came under discussion in a number of newly established journals associated with political theory and the sociology of art. In an early volume of *World Politics*, Philip Rieff (who had recently married Susan Sontag) mentions Benjamin's idea of the »aura« for the purpose of analyzing Nazi aesthetics. The »Artwork« essay was also mentioned in the first issue of *The Social History of Art*. The series of aphorisms Benjamin wrote under the title »Zentralpark« – which perhaps alludes to Manhattan, although it may also have nothing to do with the States – was cited in the journal *Social Problems*. In the first issue of *International Literary Annual* John Wain published an essay that drew inspiration from »Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire.« And an essay in *Dissent* quotes »Über den Begriff der Geschichte« in order to describe how history can be written »against the grain.«¹³

5) In 1960 the short-lived *Studies on the Left* published a translation of Benjamin's artwork essay under the title »The Work of Art in the Epoch of Mechanical Reproduction.« Three years later *The Chicago Review* published Harry Zohn's translation of »Der Erzähler.« As the first English translations of complete texts, they responded to a nascent realization that cultural and literary criticism in the United States was missing something of significance as a consequence of its almost total neglect of Benjamin's work. In his analysis of the crisis of contemporary literature Joseph Frank calls Benjamin »important but little-known.« In *The Necessity of Art* Ernst Fischer describes him as an »outstanding essayist who committed suicide in 1940 as a refugee from Hitler and whose work still awaits translation.« And in the introduction to his translation of Brecht's *The Mother* for Grove Press, Lee Baxandall credits Benjamin –»a brilliant essayist« – with the most perceptive analysis of the play and the finest insight into the aims of its author.¹⁴

12 Leo Spitzer: »Lope de Vega's *Al Triunfo de Judit*«, *Modern Language Notes* 69 (1954), pp. 1–11. A review of a book about Erich Kästner's political poetry from the same year briefly discusses Benjamin's »Left-Wing Melancholia«; cf. »Notes on Books«, in: *German Life and Letters* 7 (1954), p. 303.

13 The texts mentioned in this paragraph are: Philip Rieff: »Aesthetic Function in Modern Politics«, in: *World Politics* 5 (1953), p. 501; *Social Problems* 4 (1955), p. 197; *International Literary Annual* 1 (1958), p. 135; *Dissent* 6 (1959), p. 88.

14 The texts to which this paragraph refers are: Walter Benjamin: »The Work of Art in the Epoch of Mechanical Reproduction«, ed. by Hans H. Gerth/Don Martindale: *Studies on the Left* 1/2 (1960), pp. 28–73; Walter Benjamin: »The Story-Teller«, trans. Harry Zohn, *The Chicago Review* 16 (1963), pp. 80–103; Joseph Frank: *The Widening Gyre. Crisis and Mastery in Modern Literature*, New Brunswick/N.J. (Rutgers University Press) 1963, p. 70; Ernst Fischer: *The Necessity of Art: A Marxist Approach*, Baltimore (Penguin Books) 1963, p. 68; Bertolt Brecht: *The Mother*, trans./intro. by Lee Baxandall, New York (Grove Press), 1965, p. 20.

In the early 1960s tributes to Benjamin appeared in the work of four prominent writers, each of whom stood for a competing conception of literature, criticism, and culture. First, there is Thomas Mann, who in 1961 described Benjamin's *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* as a »powerful and profound book.« Second, György Lukács made a series of appreciative but critical comments about Benjamin's theory of allegory in the course of his attack on modernist literature. Third, Susan Sontag, who saw herself as a protégée of Thomas Mann, referred to Benjamin several times in her essay collection, *Against Interpretation*, especially in an essay directed against Lukács' recent work: »the truth is Benjamin is a great critic (it is he who deserves the title ›the only major German literary critic of our epoch‹), and the ›late‹ Lukács is not.« Sontag must have had only a passing acquaintance with Benjamin's work, however, since she claims that he »did not deal with any 20th century writers« and that the »Artwork« essay describes film as essentially fascistic; nevertheless, the name »Benjamin« in her influential manifesto represents the pinnacle of continental-European cultural criticism, with which American artists and intellectuals must someday contend. Finally, Herbert Marcuse (who once lived with Sontag and Rieff) concluded his influential study of modern alienation, *One-Dimensional Man*, with a quotation in both German and English from the conclusion to Benjamin's essay on *Elective Affinities*: »It is only for the sake of those without hope that hope is given to us.«¹⁵

6) In the 1960s four of Benjamin's friends wrote essays in which they produced portraits of his life and times. The portraits are as different as the friendships. The earliest, shortest, and least influential was written by Herbert Belmore, whom Benjamin knew under the name of Blumenthal and with whom he abruptly severed all contact around 1918. As would be expected from the fractured character of their youthful friendship, Belmore's attitude toward Benjamin is highly ambivalent and largely negative: although »brilliant,« he was »completely self-centered, the absolute, and therefore naïve egoist,« who simply lacked »common sense.« Gershom Scholem's reflections on Benjamin, which first appeared in the 1966 proceedings of the Leo Beck Institute, are very different from Belmore's except with respect to a single point: both deplored his turn toward Marxism, which, in their view, deformed the promise of his early thought. In a comparable vein, Theodor Adorno's »Portrait of Walter Benjamin,« which appeared 1967 as the penultimate essay in *Prisms*, makes a case for Benjamin as a philosopher whose

15 The texts to which this paragraph refers are: Thomas Mann: *The Story of a Novel: the Genesis of ›Doctor Faustus‹*, trans. Richard Winston/Clara Winston, New York (Knopf) 1961, pp. 43–44; György Lukács: *Realism in Our Time*, New York (Harper & Row) 1964, pp. 41–43; Susan Sontag: *Against Interpretation, and Other Essays*, New York (Macmillan) 1966, p. 13, pp. 88–91; and Herbert Marcuse: *One-Dimensional Man*, Boston (Beacon Press) 1964, p. 257.

turn to Marxist-material categories was incidental to the basic intention of his work. The most influential portrait of Benjamin, however, was that of Hannah Arendt, which appeared in three places around 1968: *The New Yorker*; her collection of essays, *Men in Dark Times*; and the introduction to her edition of *Illuminations*. Soon after the end of the Second World War, Arendt had secured Zalman Schocken's approval for the publication of a major English-language volume of Benjamin's writings, and she sought help in this endeavor from both Scholem and Brecht, while seeking to keep Adorno at bay. The project failed for obscure reasons, which Arendt attributed to certain »grudges« that Schocken held against both herself and Scholem.¹⁶ The opening section of her portrait of Benjamin silently refers to this episode, for she presents her late friend as a man haunted by mishaps and missed opportunities, including the events surrounding his suicide and – but this is only implicit, for Arendt characteristically reveals nothing of herself – the collapse of her own plans to publish his work soon after the Second World War.¹⁷

7) The neglect of Benjamin's work in the United States uncannily returns in a different form. In Great Britain the following titles become available: *Charles Baudelaire* (1973), *Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1977), *Reflections* (1978); *One-Way Street* (1979), and *Understanding Brecht* (1983). Of these only *Origin* and *Reflections* were also published in the States, the first with a preface by George Steiner, the second with an introduction by Peter Demetz. One trait immediately distinguishes the works published in the States from those that were also available in Great Britain: the former can be seen as relatively neutral with respect to political questions, whereas the latter are decidedly oriented toward left-wing politics.

8) The first doctoral dissertation produced in the United States that included Benjamin's work as a major element was Carol Jacobs's *Dissimulating Harmony: Readings of Nietzsche, Artaud, Rilke, and Benjamin*, which she completed at the Johns Hopkins University in 1974; a revised version of the dissertation, with an introduction by Paul de Man, was published in 1978. The first scholarly book devoted in large measure to Benjamin's work and published in the States was Susan

16 Cf. the letters collected in Benjamin: *Über den Begriff der Geschichte* [note 10], pp. 349–350.

The plan to publish a translation of Benjamin's work is mentioned in the remarks with which Edward Landberg introduces his translation of a portion of »What is Epic Theater?« Cf. *The Western Review* 12 (1947–1948), p. 193.

17 The texts to which this paragraph refers are: Herbert Belmore: »A Portrait of Walter Benjamin«, in: *German Life and Letters* 15 (1962), pp. 309–313; Gershom Scholem: *Walter Benjamin*, New York (Leo Baeck Institute) 1965; Theodor W. Adorno: *Prisms*, trans. Samuel Weber/Shierry Weber, Cambridge/Mass. (MIT Press) 1967, pp. 229–241; Hannah Arendt: »Walter Benjamin«, in: id. (ed.): *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, New York (Harcourt Brace) 1968, pp. 1–55.

Buck-Morss' *Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt Institute*, which appeared in 1977. The works of Jacobs and Buck-Morss effectively established two of the major lines of inquiry through which a generation of scholars would approach Benjamin's work.