



WALTER BENJAMIN

A Philosophical Portrait

ELI FRIEDLANDER

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W A L T E R
B E N J A M I N

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Eli Friedlander

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For my parents, Hagith and Saul

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This book is dedicated with love to my parents Hagith and Saul.

ABBREVIATIONS

Throughout this work I refer to Benjamin's writings immediately following the quotes by way of the following abbreviations:

- A *The Arcades Project*, trans. H. Eiland and K. McLaughlin. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999.
- C *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin, 1910–1940*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1994.
- CAB Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence, 1928–1940*, ed. Henri Lonitz. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999.
- CBS *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem, 1932–1940*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989.
- O *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. J. Osborne. London: NLB, 1977.
- SW (followed by the volume number) *Selected Writings of Walter Benjamin*, 4 vols., ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996–2003.

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INTRODUCTION

The present work is an all-too-partial unfolding of the conviction that Walter Benjamin's corpus of writing constitutes a unique configuration of philosophy. Philosophy has appeared in many guises, some eccentric, others more easily assimilable to its tradition. However, the recognition of the unique spiritual character that Walter Benjamin's writings present faces numerous obstacles. In considering his body of writings, we find, especially early on, some essays that draw on the language of academic philosophy (such as his "On the Program of the Coming Philosophy" or his doctoral dissertation on the concept of criticism in German Romanticism). But for the most part Benjamin's published works would be identified and classified as essays in literary or cultural criticism. These are surrounded by a multitude of pieces, partly completed, for the most part fragmentary and unpublished on the most diverse topics. In addition, there is the monumental, incomplete *Arcades Project*.¹ Can one draw together this multiplicity and view it as the different traits contributing to a single physiognomy of thought?

The reluctance to engage the rigor of Benjamin's thought is evident in the often-encountered tendency to adopt his writings piecemeal. Various insights, images, and even phrases drawn from his writings lend themselves to the most varied interpretations and appropriations. Moreover, even his best readers sometime treat his corpus of writing as a vast array of brilliant and idiosyncratic insights with hardly more to unify them than the sense that they all bear the stamp of Benjamin's unique and unclassifiable genius. Arendt figured Benjamin as a "pearl fisher," and Adorno, even as he insists on the exoteric nature of Benjamin's insights, testifies that what Benjamin has said and written often sound "as if it has been conjured up out of a secret depth." This amazement at Benjamin's marvelous

richness of aperçus has probably contributed to his posthumous fame; it is catastrophic for the portrayal of the character of his thinking. An interpretation of Benjamin's work must strive to explicitly lay out the philosophical armature that both holds his writings together and provides a measure by which to judge the significance of particular moments within them.

It is true that nowhere has Benjamin himself explicitly laid out a system and no prior models of systematicity, of rigor, or of consistency are readily usable to characterize the unity of his writings. Moreover, speaking from experience, attempts to summarize lines of thought feel very soon all too forced and painfully artificial. This state of things led me to adopt a peculiar method to address the problem—a method, I might add, commensurate with the difficulties the task presents. I chose *The Arcades Project* as a focal point to bring out Benjamin's thinking as a totality. By this I do not mean to suggest that my book is a commentary on that work. Not enough of the details of the convolutes are discussed in what follows. Rather, the task set by *The Arcades Project* serves me as a schema for gathering into a unity of thinking the disparate moments of Benjamin's writing. That is to say, I construe *The Arcades Project* as the most extreme attempt to realize the task Benjamin set himself in philosophy.

Many readers would agree that there are philosophical reflections in *The Arcades Project* concentrated for the most part in "Convolute N" titled "Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress," but at the same time they would also hesitate to call the work itself a philosophical *investigation*.² As they are usually understood, the philosophical remarks are supposed to provide the theoretical grounding of the historical account. However, I take it that Benjamin's engagement with philosophy goes further than providing a philosophical theory of his historiographical practice. Rather, he conceives of the presentation of the material as itself a philosophical project—a philosophical investigation of historical experience.

The lack of explicit engagement with philosophical positions and the effacement of any philosophical theory or even of philosophical language throughout must be understood as a function of the conviction that the truth that philosophy has traditionally aimed at must now be recognized in the holding together, the presentation of (Benjamin also calls it "construction with") the historical material. Benjamin shows the possibility of the highest order of thinking taking the form of writing with the concrete, time-bound, particular contents of human experience.³ For Benjamin the

stakes of philosophy are not in a theoretical introduction to the practice of writing history but rather in the possibility of a concrete presentation of that reality as a philosophical constellation of contents. Benjamin is engaged not only in clarifying the nature of the philosophy of history but also in writing a philosophical history (competing, say, with Hegel's engagement with human history as a history of spirit).

The difficulties in even conceiving of the possibility of such an enterprise, not to speak of realizing it, are enormous. Among Benjamin's close acquaintances, Adorno was probably the one who took most seriously the philosophical import of *The Arcades Project*, and his ambivalent response to what he read of it is all the more interesting to examine. In a letter following the reading of Benjamin's 1935 exposé of the project he writes: "I openly confess to regarding the 'Arcades' not as a historical-sociological investigation but rather as *prima philosophia* in your own particular sense . . . I regard your work on the 'Arcades' as the centre not merely of your own philosophy, but as the decisive philosophical word which must find utterance today; as a *chef d'oeuvre* like no other" (CAB, 83). Even so, some worry creeps into Adorno's praise, precisely as to the difficulty of recognizing the philosophical character of a work that limits its means of revealing the highest truth to the ordering of the contingent historical material: "We certainly have no need to quarrel with one another concerning the decisive significance of the material character of the work, and there is no one who understands better than I do precisely how the interpretation of the piece must be sought in this material character alone. But there is also no one less tempted than I am to try and forgo its interpretation and total articulation in the medium of the concept; and I think I possess a sufficient idea of the project to realize quite clearly that this is also part of your intention" (CAB, 83).

Adorno warns that the lack of explicit theorizing might have disastrous consequences: "any weakening of the innermost claims of this work, and any consequent repudiation of its own peculiar categories, would strike me as catastrophic and quite irreparably damaging" (CAB, 84). This line of criticism only intensified in his reaction, three years later, to "Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire," part of a book on Baudelaire that was supposed to become a model for *The Arcades Project* as a whole and which was submitted to the judgment of the Institute for Social Research, of which Adorno was a prominent member. Adorno warns Benjamin of the danger that his work would either collapse into mere facticity or provoke in its readers an amazement lacking any critical distance. He calls that juncture at which Benjamin's work stands the

crossroad of positivism and magic. In his letter, Adorno objects to what he perceives as Benjamin's wish to let things speak for themselves "without theoretical interpretation" and complains that Benjamin is "omitting all the crucial theoretical answers, and even . . . making the questions invisible to all but initiates" (SW IV, 100–101). Such "self-effacing" writing would be both intellectually and politically powerless. Moreover, the fear is that it would fall prey to the spell of what it engages with. A forceful theorizing is required to overcome the temptation: "Only theory could break the spell: your own relentless theory, speculative in the best sense" (SW IV, 102). The theoretical vantage point would make criticism possible by revealing the true nature of the material and exposing its illusory character.

Adorno brings to the fore many of the tensions implicit in Benjamin's philosophical practice only to revert from the revolutionary aspirations of the work to safer intellectual ground. His worries, needless to say, are not unfamiliar to Benjamin himself. Indeed, Benjamin would be the first to admit the spellbinding potential of the *Arcades'* material manifest incomparably in Aragon's *Paysan de Paris*, a book he admired but from which, at the same time, he felt the need to distance himself.⁴ However, critical force, as Benjamin understands it, does not require occupying an external theoretical standpoint from which to direct one's critique. His insistence not to take apart form and content, method and subject matter, concrete singularity and ideal presentation, as well as description and criticism, has itself deep philosophical grounds.

It is thus an assumption of my work that Benjamin's writing is everywhere informed by a philosophical task. Yet, he is committed to working with and out of the historically concrete material, thus doing away with the organizing power of a systematic theory. In the face of such a lack of explicit philosophical elaboration, it is in the mode in which historical material is ordered and *presented* that one must recognize the face of necessity of history. I assume it possible *for us* to lead through Benjamin's writings to the understanding of the necessity of resorting to such a method of presenting the truth philosophy is after.⁵ It is the framework for *that* approach to philosophical history that I aim to recover here by returning from the *Arcades* to Benjamin's body of writings.

The Arcades Project is Benjamin's ultimate work. It is his most ambitious project, and, judging by the many years of composition and the in-

complete state in which the work was left, it is also his most difficult and dangerous undertaking. Nonetheless, would that be justification enough to take it as the gathering point of Benjamin's thinking as a whole, and did he mean it to be so? The fame of Walter Benjamin's unfinished *Arcades Project*, the reputation of that work, can easily lend an aura of mystery to the phenomenon it strives to articulate. A good guidebook to Paris would recount that the arcades were covered streets that served as mercantile galleries and that were built and flourished mainly in the first half of the nineteenth century. As the occasion for the early use of iron and glass as materials for their roofs, they became places of "promenade" for Parisians. How can that be what a life of philosophy ultimately revolves upon?

The title Benjamin adopted for the exposés of the project "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century" is instructive in that respect. It has a structure that resembles *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, as well as "The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire." By conjoining a place and an epoch, Benjamin did not only mean to assert that Paris was a central place in the nineteenth century. Rather, the idea is that tendencies spread out in time are gathered by way of a place. By further taking the arcades as the preeminent phenomenon investigated in his project, Benjamin implies that they bring together and concentrate within themselves such broader expanses of meaning. One could think of it as a structure of miniaturization: the nineteenth century, concentrated in Paris, concentrated in the arcades. Benjamin indeed opens "Convolute A" of the manuscript by quoting how an *Illustrated Guide to Paris* referred to the arcades as "a city, a world in miniature." However, the true microcosm presented by the project is a result of Benjamin's monadological practice, of his singular construction of history out of the meaning material of the arcades.

At the same time as Benjamin conceives of the work on the arcades as gathering history, he also describes this work to Scholem as the theater of all of his struggles. About the projected Baudelaire book (which itself was supposed to gather the broader expanse of the *Arcades*) he writes: "The subject matter necessarily puts in motion the entire mass of thoughts and studies I have launched myself into over the last years" (CBS, 230). *The Arcades Project* became for Benjamin a field of forces upon which his struggles, past and present, were brought to bear. It was not just as if Benjamin had at last found "his" subject matter. Rather, making the engagement with the subject matter into such an opportunity to draw his past thought and studies together is for him a postulate of method

grounded in his conception of truth: “how everything one is thinking at a specific moment in time must at all costs be incorporated into the project then at hand. Assume that the intensity of the project is thereby attested, or that one’s thoughts, from the very beginning, bear this project within them as their telos” (A, 45). For Benjamin, everything leads to the engagement with the arcades. For us, the project must, conversely, lead back to everything he was ever engaged with.

The gathering power of *The Arcades Project*, its capacity to hold broad expanses of meaning together (one might call this the sovereignty of thought manifest in it) is what also allows it to function as the centerpiece of my attempt to bring out the character of Benjamin’s thinking. Making manifest the significance of the work should take the form of telescoping through it the variety of Benjamin’s concerns, thereby drawing explicitly their inner relationships. In other words it is necessary to put into practice something analogous to the kind of concentration of meaning Benjamin attributes to the work of the historical materialist, who constructs history monadically, so as “to blast a specific era out of the homogeneous course of history, . . . a specific life out of the era, a specific work out of the lifework. As a result of this method, the lifework is both preserved and sublated *in* the work, the era *in* the lifework, and the entire course of history *in* the era” (SW IV, 396).

The following chapters thus undertake to schematize the internal relation among some of the central notions of Benjamin’s *Arcades* by bringing to bear the weight or mass of his earlier writings. They also aim to place Benjamin in a tradition of philosophy and point to the ways in which he transforms the sources that he inherits so as to make for an authentic originating moment of philosophy. Benjamin’s explicit remarks about philosophy and philosophers are, as I have pointed out, scarce. This is why I often also comment on and elaborate those few astoundingly precise remarks, thus forming a derivation of sorts. Three of the philosophers to which Benjamin’s thought is traceable—Plato, Leibniz, and Kant—can be called defenders of a sober and rigorous ideal of reason.⁶ The decision to place Benjamin’s thinking in that lineage of philosophy is not, at least judging by the reception of his work, the first choice to suggest itself.

Wanting to take *The Arcades Project* as the gathering point for a large corpus of Benjamin’s writings, thus showing how those writings also

relate to one another or can come together, runs into an obvious problem, namely the incomplete state of the work. How far from completion it was is a matter of some controversy. As late as 1936 Benjamin wrote to Scholem: “not a syllable of the actual text exists, even though the end of the preparatory studies is now within sight. And for the moment the emphasis is not on the text so much as on the planning of the whole, which needs to be thought through very carefully and will certainly give rise to this or that experiment for some time to come” (C, 527).

One could rely on the form of Benjamin’s earlier works to think through the possible completion of the *Arcades*. Indeed, to some extent I do that here, in particular by turning to what might be his only other comparable book, *The Origin of German Trauerspiel*. But Benjamin also warns against such analogies: “. . . I periodically succumb to the temptations of visualizing analogies with the baroque book in the book’s inner construction, although its external construction decidedly diverges from that of the former.” He adds: “whereas the baroque book mobilized its own theory of knowledge, this will be the case for the *Arcades* at least to the same extent, though I can foresee neither whether it will find a form of presentation of its own, nor to what extent I may succeed in such a presentation” (C, 482; translation modified).⁷

Benjamin did attempt to summarize *The Arcades Project* in the two exposés written in 1935 and 1939, each drafted for the Institute of Social Research. The exposés no doubt were intended to interest others in the work, in part for very practical reasons. But are they also blueprints for the final presentation of his work? Are they (so to speak) schemata for the project or modes of organization of the material? Benjamin seems to feel differently, at least about the 1935 exposé (and the 1939 version is hardly different). In a letter to Scholem dated August 9, 1935, he writes: “a précis for the Institute—I want to say for superficial, even the most superficial, use—which has been circulating for quite some time, has made me realize the precise point at which constructive work (which simultaneously entails deciding on the literary form and its potential success) will one day have to begin. That day has yet to arrive.” (C, 505)⁸

Some of the material of *The Arcades Project* was developed and elaborated for what was to become a book on Baudelaire. It provides an example of how a particular convolute (namely, “Convolute J,” titled “Baudelaire”) would be turned into a more continuous prose form and was to serve Benjamin as a model for the work as a whole. In 1938 Benjamin wrote to Scholem: “I can say that a very precise model of the

'Arcades' project would be finished if the 'Baudelaire' were to succeed. Another question is what guarantee there might be for this success." (CBS, 231) The book on Baudelaire, needless to say, was never completed.⁹ Is this deep and pervasive incompleteness a reason to avoid the experiment I attempt with the *Arcades*? It might help to reiterate that here I am neither engaging in a commentary on *The Arcades Project* itself nor aiming to complete what was left unfinished. The schematic scaffolding of *The Arcades Project* enables me to open up the panoramic unity or landscape of Benjamin's writings as a whole. Conversely, as they come together, those writings serve to make comprehensible the task Benjamin set himself in this project. That is, I aim by way of these writings to lead to the threshold of the project, to make understandable how it became a project at all and how it was thought to actualize Benjamin's highest aspirations.

To conclude this introduction, let me add a word about the form the present book takes. In the process of writing, I was faced with two opposite demands. On the one hand, the necessity for abbreviation and condensation was obvious to me if only because of the need to bring together so many texts so that their relatedness, thus the force of Benjamin's thinking as a whole, could be made manifest. On the other hand, each text I engaged demanded in itself endless efforts of elaboration and clarification; each issue broached revealed a further need to unfold Benjamin's concentrated thinking; each point developed only made more evident what had to be put aside. To satisfy these two conflicting demands I chose to remain concise in the presentation in the body of the text and add long clarificatory remarks to some of the chapters, in which I follow the unfolding of the themes. I introduce another gradation by means of endnotes, in which I discuss further points, as well as different interpretations of Benjamin's achievement.

1

LANGUAGE

The greatest obstacle to conceiving of Benjamin's enterprise as philosophical is probably the sense one gets of the utter contingency of the materials gathered in the convolutes. How could iron construction, dolls, and fashion, to take but a few examples, exhibit the necessity and universality characteristic of *philosophy's* concern with truth? It might help therefore to stress that Benjamin is not concerned with truth to the facts but with truth in the medium of meaning, with the possibility of recognizing the meaning of the contingent material. However, one might argue, any genuine concern with historical facts betokens an interest in their meaning. In what way is the philosophical character of Benjamin's work manifest in its distinctive relation to meaning? A first step in addressing this question would be to clarify the place of language in Benjamin's inquiry.

§1. Quotation

An insight into the centrality of language, of its being not merely a means of representation but also the very *medium* of the investigation or of the revelation of truth is afforded by reflecting on the prevalent place given to quotations in the *Arcades*, the methodical importance of which is easy to overlook given the work's incomplete condition. One could easily tell oneself that Benjamin gathered material for his investigation in the *Bibliothèque nationale* in Paris, yet never succeeded in incorporating it into a narrative or an argumentative structure. Nonetheless, while there is no doubt that, if completed, the work would have assumed a more continuous appearance, citations were not meant to serve as illustration or as evidence in longer stretches of argument. Moreover, in using quotation

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