
Walter Benjamin

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Walter Benjamin

Presence of Mind, Failure to Comprehend

By

Stéphane Symons



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*Es kann kein böser Geist sein, der an der Spitze der Welt steht;
es ist ein bloß unbegriffener.*

Heinrich Von Kleist,
letter to Otto August Rühle, August 1806

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VOLUME FOREWORD

The Social and Critical Theory Book Series welcomes Stéphane Symons' new major study on the work of Walter Benjamin. Stéphane Symons illuminates the great richness and depth of Walter Benjamin's work. His book is a comprehensive assessment of Benjamin's major themes of time, history, experience and redemption. By presenting such a comprehensive study, as well as tying it to current debates and assessments of Benjamin's work, the volume marks a significant contribution to our understanding of critical theory.

John Rundell, Series Editor
The University of Melbourne, Australia

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Ily en a qui ont le cœur si large qu'on en voit que la moitié, Jacques Brel once sang.

I am fortunate enough to know such people and to count them among my friends. If it were not for them, I would never have been able to start nor finish this book.

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I dedicate this book, with all the love in my heart, to my grandfather René Redig (1919–2011).

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

References to Benjamin's works are cited by volume, part (where applicable) and page from:

- SW *Selected Writings, Volume 1–4*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999–2004.
- GS *Gesammelte Schriften. Band I–VII*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schwepenhäuser. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1991.
- AP *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004.
- O *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne. London and New York: Verso, 2003.
- B *Briefe 1–2*, ed. Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1966.

PREFACE

It takes courage these days to publish a new book about Walter Benjamin. The number of publications that takes up his work has grown exponentially and this seems to have turned the project of reaching an overview of the sometimes controversial interpretations of Benjamin's philosophy into an illusory endeavor. This is also the case, perhaps even pre-eminently so, when one turns to a topic that is as tricky as the enigmatic relationship between messianism and historical materialism—perhaps even the most tricky topic in Benjamin's considerations.

Stéphane Symons is very well aware of the risks that come with the attempt to illuminate Benjamin's 'conceptual framework' in which a 'reconciliation' of logically exclusive extremities is sought. The effort of finding a solution to this problem is not made any easier by the fact that Benjamin never left behind even a mere outline of a possible philosophical system, let alone a more extensive elaboration of the way these extremities relate to each other.

It is laudable that Stéphane Symons did not allow these obstacles to dissuade him from his purpose since his analysis has managed to contribute to the discussion of Benjamin's key insights in an illuminating and, unless my assessment of the immensity of the secondary literature is too naïve, innovative manner.

The purpose of this analysis is, first of all, to show that the moment of a 'dialectics at a standstill' (Benjamin's term for the shock-like experience of truth in the midst of relations that are drastically distorted by power and capitalist economy) bears a most intimate connection with the end of history, with redemption and the coming of the messiah. This is what now needs to be clarified.

Benjamin believed an important philosophical view of time, and thus of history, to be false, that is, the position that understands time as a continuous succession of multiple instants. This quantitative understanding in which the governing course of time or history is thought to be devoid of content is misleading in that time and history can only be understood in a qualitative way. According to Benjamin the 'empty' understanding of time leads to the idea, central to historicism (Ranke), that all historical periods are 'equally close to God.' However, this view ignores that in some periods humanity stands closer to redemption than in other ones. Benjamin

believed that in the baroque or in the interwar-period—when on account of war, dictatorship and exploitation misery was at its peak—the possibility (and this needs to be illustrated) of salvation or reconciliation was nearer at hand than in times of so-called prosperity. This brings us to a second point. At the end of history awaits the possibility (Benjamin is very careful here) of the prophesied salvation, of redemption or deliverance, and this moment is imagined as the arrival of the messiah. This moment of redemption is not, as Benjamin maintains, a moment *in* history but a moment *of* history. It is, as Benjamin emphasizes, not a goal [*Ziel*] of history. We cannot pursue it, let alone bring it about, in part because it does not belong to the realm of history properly speaking. Benjamin knows that we can only express the nature of redemption through a paradox since it is something that cannot be thought of as a goal (*in* history) but only as an end (*of* history), that is, as something that brings history to a close. It is important to note that nothing less than Benjamin's philosophy of history is at stake here and that his view of the end of history entails a classless society. Only a classless society excludes the possibility that human beings exploit other human beings and thereby establish relations of power that allow inequality to persist. Benjamin's philosophy of history seeks to show that historical materialism and messianism do not exclude but complete each other.

For this reason, in the first chapter of his work Symons seeks to clarify the relationship between, on the one hand, the interruption of history in the sudden flash of the 'now-time' [*Jetztzeit*] (and thus *in* history) and, on the other, the moment of redemption (or the end *of* history). Symons maintains that the possibility of a failed redemption suddenly lights up in each moment that 'rejuvenates' the past and that it is this absence of redemption—and nothing as intensely as this—which refers forward to the possibility of the ultimate redemption that is hoped for at the end of history. With this entanglement of an instantaneous recognition of the past with the possibility of ultimate redemption Symons gives a fresh impetus to a new debate.

What is at stake in the second chapter is an attempt to show that unequal relations of power are one with the systematic distortion of truth (ideology), and for this reason we do not have an immediate access to truth. This is illuminated by Symons with the help of Benjamin's *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* and his interpretation of Kafka. After this he analyzes the correspondence between Benjamin and his friend Gershom Scholem, who defended a decidedly religious reading of Kafka and who (like Theodor Adorno) noticed a pernicious influence of Brecht in Benjamin's affinities with historical materialism. For Benjamin, Kafka was an important writer

because he was convinced that it is impossible to truly know God. Symons deals extensively with the so-called *Kafka*-letter to Scholem (1938) that, according to Symons, is to be placed ‘in the heart of Benjamin’s theory of modernity’ and with the *Kafka*-essay (1934). It is in the letter to Scholem that one can find the famous passage that says: “Kafka’s work is an ellipse; its widely spaced focal points are defined, on the one hand, by mystical experience (which is, above all, the experience of tradition) and, on the other, by the experience of the modern city-dweller.”¹

For his thesis that historical materialism and messianism complete each other and that they are therefore equally important, Symons does not just find support in this passage but also in more extensive and systematic considerations of Benjamin (for example, in Benjamin’s essay *The Storyteller*) and in the *Theological-Political Fragment*. Benjamin writes there:

If one arrow points to the goal toward which the secular dynamic acts, and another marks the direction of messianic intensity, then certainly the quest of free humanity for happiness runs counter to the messianic direction. But just as a force, by virtue of the path it is moving along, can augment another force on the opposite path, so the secular order—because of its nature as secular—promotes the coming of the Messianic Kingdom.²

Symons is thereby clearly disagreeing with some contemporary, not inauthentic interpretations (like Uwe Steiner’s) that regard the emphasis on Benjamin’s affinities with the theological theorem as a possible threat to the enlightened nature of his thinking.

Adorno retained a distinctly skeptical attitude towards Benjamin’s messianism as well, but he found a solution that was not merely elegant but also systematically presented, with the figure of ‘inverse theology’—that is, a theology that, like the little hunchback in the chess-automaton, keeps out of sight but secretly pulls the strings.

The third chapter raises the question of how Benjamin’s messianism relates to his art-historical considerations. Symons analyzes Benjamin’s reception of Riegl and Warburg and then returns to the Kafka-interpretation. Central to his art-historical views is the thesis that there are no supra-historical criteria to assess the correctness of the reception and the interpretation of artworks and, moreover, that in this regard economic relations and conditions of production play an important role. This idea is now, along with medium-theoretical considerations, reconnected to the underlying

¹ SW: 3, 325.

² SW: 3, 305.

viewpoint that historical materialism and messianism complete each other. Of decisive importance is the insight that this completion is not dependent on any historical period in specific but on the way in which the realm of history as such refers forward to a moment of ultimate redemption.

With this work Symons sets off on a mountain trip in between the summits of the different interpretations of Benjamin's oeuvre; interpretations that, from Scholem to Brecht, Adorno to Habermas, could not have been more divergent. At the same time, he has explored the metaphorical ciphers in Benjamin's text all throughout the systematical and most fundamental traits of his thinking. The image of two extremities at work within one ellipse remains open for further interpretation, also and most certainly in the dynamical image of the two arrows that point in different directions, but Symons's contribution to this discussion is helpful for a more precise clarification.

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INTRODUCTION

MELANCHOLY, HOPE, REDEMPTION

In *The Captive* (1923), book five of *Remembrance of Things Past*, Proust describes a scene where Marcel, upon entering his bedroom, finds the sleeping Albertine and, becoming so enthralled by what he sees, cannot bring himself to turn away from her side. While he sits down beside the bed and takes in the view of the sleeping body of his mistress, Marcel falls under the spell of her “attitude so natural that no art could have designed it”¹ and a “spontaneity carried to the second degree.”² Proust describes how Albertine’s unconscious state releases her from the complex network of multiple personalities, mysteries and desires that Marcel continuously encounters in ordinary existence. Albertine’s sleep surrenders her fully to Marcel’s gaze “as though ... she had become a plant,”³ that is, as if by falling asleep her body was turned into a natural object that, divested from the set of meanings that condition her presence in waking life, allows itself for the first time to be meticulously scrutinized and contemplated. When Albertine is thus turned into the mere presence of a body, what disappears from sight may be the mask she wears in daily life or even her beauty pure and proper, but the loss of this first superficial layer of expression is but the precondition for the liberation of a second and more profound one.⁴ Marcel, namely, is so enchanted by the view of his sleeping lover because it opens up a universe from which he cannot but remain excluded in waking life—a universe, moreover, in which Albertine has cast off the particular sense of distance and inaccessibility that marks her in ordinary life. “She was animated now,” writes Proust, “only by the unconscious life of vegetation, of trees, a life more different from my own, more alien, and yet one that belonged more to me. Her personality did not escape at every moment, as

¹ Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past. Volume 2*, trans. C.K. Scott Moncrieff and Frederick A. Blossom (New York: Random House, 1932), 425–426.

² *Ibid.*, 427.

³ *Ibid.*, 426.

⁴ See *ibid.*, 426. “By shutting her eyes, by losing consciousness, Albertine had stripped off, one after another, the different human characters with which she had deceived me ever since the day when I had first made her acquaintance.”

when we were talking, by the channels of her unacknowledged thoughts and of her gaze.”⁵

The same dynamic between nearness and distance and the same sensibility for the unanticipated opening-up of a not formerly encountered universe within what is most close at hand mark the work of the German philosopher and literary critic Walter Benjamin (1892–1940). The gaze that Benjamin shares with Proust is, in fact, the mirror-image of that of the fetishist: whereas the latter is out to endow dead objects with a life of their own in order to keep an unwelcome scene from reality at bay,⁶ Benjamin and Proust seek precisely to strip away the semblance and the enigmatic appearance of the lifelike nature of objects and phenomena in order to bring to expression for the first time a more profound and irreducible kernel of reality. Benjamin’s philosophy of art, for instance, is rooted in the feeling that works of art need to be met with a movement of ‘mortification’; that is, they first need to be released from their splendor, charms, and ‘ephemeral beauty’ before they can be brought to reveal their ‘truth-content’ in a moment of genuine ‘rebirth.’⁷ His overall epistemological viewpoints are likewise founded in the belief that fragments of an absolute truth can only be encountered in the most concrete and ordinary objects and in the insight that ideas, however transcendent they may be, can only become visible within immanent phenomena that retain an irrevocable sense of materiality.

The absence of any systematic philosophy underlying Benjamin’s oeuvre makes it particularly hard to write a book that starts from his overall philosophy to develop ideas about a supposedly ‘messianic experience’—a combination of terms that Benjamin himself, however, does not use—and the possibility that truth be revealed within history. Borrowing insights and beliefs, concepts and intuitions from sources as diverse as Jewish messianism and historical materialism, German Romanticism and surrealism, Goethe and Brecht, Benjamin’s writings form a meeting point of widely diverging strands of thought, deriving their continuity most often from an ongoing attempt to bring together what is otherwise kept strictly apart.

⁵ Ibid., 426.

⁶ For the most canonical references see Sigmund Freud’s characterization of the ‘luminous shine’ of the fetish which is “a substitute for the woman’s (the mother’s) penis that the little boy once believed in and ... does not want to give up” in “On Fetishism” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud. Volume XXI*, trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1978), 152–153.

⁷ O, 182.

When, in what follows, in a formula borrowed from his own philosophy of history, Benjamin's thinking will be characterized as "neither a-theological, nor immediately theological," this is to substantiate the claim that adaptations of Jewish messianism and historical materialism are not as irreconcilable as they are so often taken to be.⁸ With this, however, we do not mean to state that Jewish messianism and historical materialism can easily be unified *as such* since, it must be noted, Benjamin's own interpretations do sometimes differ in quite substantial ways from both their original and their canonized conceptions. It is, moreover, still unclear whether Benjamin ever did study Jewish religion and Marxist philosophy in a serious and systematic manner and did not derive his own messianic and historical materialist beliefs and convictions primarily from conversations with friends.⁹ His capacity to bring Jewish messianic beliefs together in a fruitful constellation with historical materialist ideas is thus not to be taken for a mere token of his intellectual brilliance but just as much for a sign of his refusal to reduce the significance of philosophical and theological writings to the underlying viewpoints of their initial conceivers. As a philosopher but also as a critic and a translator, Benjamin brought on display an extraordinary sense of creativity, more often than not dissolving ideas and insights from their original context and developing them in a manner that was entirely his own. For this reason, the choice was made to focus, not so much on the intellectual sources of Benjamin's thinking, nor on the differences between those original sources on the one hand and his own interpretation of them on the other, but to enter into the conceptual framework of his writings and to explore the stakes, unexpected connections and possible philosophical consequences of their key insights from within. Benjamin was able to reconcile Jewish messianism and historical materialism and even revealed them to be complementary to each other because his view on the former was anything but dogmatic and his endorsement of the latter not at all uncritical.

⁸ See AP, 471. See also Benjamin's famous dictum that his "thinking is related to theology as blotting pad is related to ink. It is saturated with it. Were one to go by the blotter, however, nothing of what is written would remain." (AP, 471).

⁹ Though a large part of his essays is influenced by either Jewish messianism or historical materialism, Benjamin did never devote an entire text to a systematic elaboration of his views on either system of thought, something he did do for German Romanticism, for example, as well as surrealism, Goethe and Brecht. See also Susan Sontag's claim that Benjamin "barely looked into Marx until the later 1930s" in "The Last Intellectual," *The New York Times*, October 12, 1978.

Benjamin's adherence to insights drawn from Jewish messianism, for instance, did not revolve around an unshakeable belief in the existence of God but precisely around a profound sentiment that this world—our history—lacks an undistorted and immediate grasp on anything divine or transcendent. Benjamin was neither fanatical in his beliefs nor excessive in his religious practices since what is at stake for him is not at all the certainty that salvation *will* come at some point in the future but the mere possibility that it *might*. Essentially rooted in an attempt to develop a concept of hope of fulfillment in a philosophically substantial way, his thinking cannot be reduced to the theological presuppositions on which it was built. Benjamin's framework is not *immediately* theological since what he took from Jewish messianism were no articles of faith but mere images of an original state of bliss and the accompanying longing for its restoration. Jewish religion, more than Christianity, not only offers a view of how man and God were once fully reconciled in a paradisiacal universe but also of how the hope can be maintained that ultimate fulfillment for humankind will come at a specific moment in time, that is, of why it is to be seen as a public event that will take place in history. The significance of Jewish concepts and references to biblical stories in Benjamin's work should therefore not be reduced to the immediately theological context these are derived from: the story of the Garden of Eden, for instance, is for him neither a religious dogma nor a purely fictional story but the most suitable way to imagine an original universe in which man and nature were still fully reconciled with one another.¹⁰ Similarly, concepts like 'messianic power' and 'godly violence' are not to be reduced to dogmatic terms that are of a purely religious nature: since they denote, first and foremost, a redeeming force that transcends all things historical and reveals itself only very briefly in the 'flash' of now-time they are deeply marked by the fact that, from the standpoint of history, no genuine truth can be methodologically aimed at or systematically comprehended.¹¹

¹⁰ For a similar viewpoint, see for instance Andrew Benjamin's statement that Benjamin's interpretation of Genesis is "not a straightforwardly theological argument. ... [T]he reference to God has to be read as a reference to the simultaneity of creating, being and naming. ... Theology, for Benjamin, provides the language in which the Absolute's necessity can be both posited and identified." In Andrew Benjamin, "The Absolute as Translatability: Working Through Walter Benjamin on Language." *Walter Benjamin and Romanticism*, ed. Beatrice Hanssen and Andrew Benjamin (New York and London: Continuum, 2002), 115–116.

¹¹ AP, 463. Though truth is for Benjamin—and this claim will need to be further elaborated—neither ineffable nor merely mystically intuitable, it cannot crystallize into an object of experience or intention. For an illuminating discussion of these matters, see Eli Friedlander, *Walter Benjamin: A Philosophical Portrait* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London,

Similar strategies of interpretation and *re*-interpretation of Marxist and neo-Marxist ideas underlie Benjamin's endorsement of historical materialism. If Jewish messianic beliefs provided him with a view of an *original* state of paradise and the *hope* that it will one day be restored, historical materialism brought him the images of a *future* state of reconciliation and the awareness that it has not yet been attained in our age. The theories and experiments of utopian socialism, for instance, granted him a glimpse on a radically modified nature that, rather than being dominated by human beings, corresponds to our needs and desires in a paradisiacal universe. Likewise, on account of its analysis of society in terms of substructure and superstructure and its severe diagnosis of the capitalist form of production, Marxist philosophy was indispensable to Benjamin's understanding of the alienated condition of the modern world. With this, however, Benjamin never considered Marxist ideas, nor any other philosophical framework for that matter, as a guideline for immediate political action. True redemption, namely, is in his mind only to be expected from an a-historical force that interrupts the course of history, bringing our thinking "suddenly ... to a stop" and severely problematizing the instrumental logic and means-end rationality behind our actions.¹² For the same reason, Benjamin releases a certain strand in Marxist thought from the shallow *naïveté* of its belief in universal progress: in his opinion, there is no principle at work within history which could bring about, on its own account, a fully reconciled humanity and a totally perfected universe. Benjamin maintains that human beings can and should allow their social ideas and political actions to be inspired by both originary and utopian images of a fulfilled world but that these become mythic and illusionary when they are taken for immediate goals that can be actively realized within history: the messianic power and godly violence from which the force to truly redeem our world goes out constitute a wake-up call for social awareness and revolutionary praxis but they can never be fully appropriated by humankind.

The place where Benjamin's Jewish messianism and his historical materialism meet is not a philosophical insight in the true sense of the word but the urgent moral feeling that it is necessary to side with the weak. It is

England: Harvard University Press, 2012), 12, and the claims that "insofar as the presentation of truth is concerned, there is no element of intention, nothing that allows us to *aim* at [a] consistency of meaning" and that "methodical digression reflects, for Benjamin, the understanding that truth is unapproachable, not that it is ever receding and reaching an end infinitely deferred."

¹² SW: 4, 396.

this stance that will be explored in the first chapter, focusing on Benjamin's philosophy of history. From the standpoint of Benjamin's historical materialism, the weak party is, of course, the proletariat. If the revolution should be proclaimed—and this, in Benjamin's opinion, is not even an issue—it is in the name of the economically deprived, the politically powerless and the socially oppressed. It is their material conditions that need to be radically improved and it is, most obviously, the dream of a classless society which should continue to inspire our social goals and political action. However, the weak whose side Benjamin has so clearly chosen do not just wear the mask of one particular social class. For Benjamin weakness remains, first and foremost, messianic: if it deserves our continuous attention and unceasing support, it is not only because it reveals the discontents that mark modernity or the aberrations that characterize industrial capitalism but, in the first instance, because it is in its features that comes to expression the lack of fulfillment of history *in toto*. If Benjamin's philosophy is indeed an attempt to think through a concept of hope of fulfillment, it is developed from the perspective of those who most obviously lack it because they have lost access to anything truly absolute or divine.

The second chapter, therefore, places the 'failure' to comprehend truth as an object of knowledge and the subsequent confrontation with the limits of human understanding at the heart of Benjamin's interpretation of the work of Franz Kafka and the *Trauerspiel*. In his account, these texts are not just *about* a fundamental inaccessibility of absolute truth or doctrine [*Lehre*] but they become *expressions* [*Ausdrücke*] of it: it is by virtue of their capacity to *expose* the failure to truly know that is central to the human condition that these literary texts can be considered messianic.

Building on the concept of allegory that is crucial in this context, the third chapter focuses on the view of art that underlies this discussion and brings Benjamin's project in the vicinity of the iconographic approach of his near-contemporaries Alois Riegl (1858–1905) and Aby Warburg (1866–1929). Alongside the views on the truth-content and the material content of artworks that are laid out in the essays on German Romanticism and Goethe, an alternative interpretation of the power of art can be found in Benjamin's oeuvre. This chapter will look at the way in which he, in certain places of his writings, does not just regard works of art as expressions of an idea but rather understands them as concrete instantiations of a necessity on the part of human beings to come to terms with the universe that surrounds them. In this sense, the concept of a 'will to allegory' refers to the ability to hold out a profound failure to know while neither repressing it nor modifying it into a more fundamental *docta ignorantia*. Benjamin's

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