
Benjamin's Passages

Benjamin's Passages

Dreaming, Awakening

Alexander Gelley

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*For Mieke, first of all, and Ora, Mira,
Andrew, Reuben, and Levi*

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ABBREVIATIONS

- GB* *Gesammelte Briefe*, 6 vols., ed. Christoph GÖdde and Henri Lonitz (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1995–2000).
- GS* *Gesammelte Schriften*, 7 vols., ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schwepenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1974–89).
- SW* *Selected Writings*, 4 vols., ed. Michael W. Jennings, et al. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996–2003).
- TAP* *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).

P R E F A C E

Benjamin's Passages: Dreaming, Awakening is focused on Benjamin's work of the 1930s, though it reaches back to earlier writings, too (for example, "The Task of the Translator," the study of Goethe's novel *The Elective Affinities*), in order to establish certain continuities. The introduction and the seven chapters are intended to deal with central issues of Benjamin's later work: the interplay of aesthetics and politics in his criticism (Chapter 1); the conception of language (Chapter 2); aura and its relation to image (Chapter 3); the genre of *The Arcades Project* (Chapter 4); citation as the key structural principle of *The Arcades Project* (Chapter 5); the status of "messianism" in his thought (Chapter 6); the motifs of memory, the crowd, and awakening (Chapter 7).

Many (but not all) of Benjamin's principal writings of the later period are discussed in these chapters: the essay on Goethe's *The Elective Affinities* and "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility" (Chapter 1); "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man," "The Task of the Translator," and the essay on Karl Kraus (Chapter 2); "Little History of Photography" (Chapter 3); the materials published as *Das Passagen-Werk* (*The Arcades Project*) (Chapters 4, 5); "On the Concept of History" (Chapters 6, 7). But my intention is not to "cover" a period of Benjamin's writings but rather to trace a limited number of issues.

The Introduction has a number of aims: to situate Benjamin's place in the current field of "theory," to lay out elements of the biographical context of some of the writings, and to give a preview of some of the arguments of the subsequent chapters. A section on "The Storyteller" highlights one aspect of Benjamin's major accomplishment as a literary theorist, a topic that this book has not tried to address.

The title alludes to the *Passagen* (arcades) of the project, of course, but it also refers to Benjamin's effort to negotiate the "labyrinth" of his work and thought in this period. And it is intended to foreground the figurative status of awakening within the allegorical structure of *The Arcades Project*.

In transposing the Freudian dream work from the individual subject to the collective, Benjamin projected a "macrocosmic journey" of the individual sleeper to "the dreaming collective, which, through the arcades, communes with its own insides." He credited the Surrealists with being the first to offer a means of deciphering the nineteenth century's "narcotic historicism, its passion for masks." He was well aware of Marx's early remark that "reform of consciousness" will come when "people will see that the world has long possessed the dream of a thing—and that it only needs to possess the consciousness of this thing in order really to possess it." But any such invocation of a past cannot draw on some form of conscious recollection or antiquarian recovery. Rather, "the dialectical—the Copernican—turn of remembrance [Eingedenken]" functions as a solicitation, a call to a collectivity to come. This is linked to the motif of awakening, put forth in some entries of *The Arcades Project* and in "On the Concept of History," and it conveys, I will argue, a qualified performative intent, a reaching out to a virtual collective to be constituted by awakening. "The realization of dream elements in the course of waking up is the canon of dialectics. It is paradigmatic for the thinker and binding for the historian," he wrote in *The Arcades Project*. Benjamin's effort to transpose the dream phenomenon to the history of a collective remained fragmentary, but it underlies the principle of retrograde temporality, which, I argue, is central to his idea of history.

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. . . the conviction guiding me in my literary endeavors . . . That is to say, the conviction that every truth has its home, its ancestral palace, in language; and that this palace is constructed out of the oldest logoi; and that insights of individual bodies of knowledge remain subordinate to truth grounded in this way, insofar as, somewhat like nomads, they draw here and there on the domains of language, caught up in that signifying character of language that stamps its terminology with the most irresponsible arbitrariness.

— TO HUGO VON HOFMANNSTHAL,
January 13, 1924 (GB 2: 409)

You know that I have always written in accordance with my convictions, but have seldom, and never otherwise than in conversation, made the attempt to express the whole contradictory fundament from which they, in their specific manifestations, derive.

— TO GERSHOM SCHOLEM, May 6, 1934 (GB 4: 408)

Introduction

Posthumous Fame

Walter Benjamin's reputation emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, well after his death in 1940, and to a degree that was hardly conceivable in his lifetime. As his writings became known, they assumed a place alongside those of other thinkers of the century—for example, Freud, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Foucault—who may be characterized as, in Foucault's words, "initiators of discursive practices," authors who "produced not only their own work, but the possibility and the rules of formation of other texts."¹ What is more, Benjamin's reputation has been singularly colored by a legendary "afterlife." Undoubtedly, his writings have been subject to scrupulous hermeneutic labor, but the meanings drawn from them have been conditioned to a con-

1. Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author?" in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1977), 131.

siderable degree by circumstances relative to his biography and the context of reception. Benjamin himself was keenly alert to this phenomenon, as is evident in his treatment of Baudelaire.² He enunciated the underlying issue in *The Arcades Project*:

Historical “understanding” is to be grasped, in principle, as an afterlife [Nachleben] of that which is understood; and what has been recognized in the analysis of the “afterlife of works,” in the analysis of “fame” [Ruhm], is therefore to be considered the foundation of history in general. (GS 5: 574f [N 2, 3]; TAP 460)³

The “legend” of a writer should not supersede the interpretation of the works, of course, but neither may it be ignored in evaluating their historical impact. It represents an indispensable index of cultural-political currents at a given moment. Benjamin was certainly sensitive to the “afterlife” of his own writings, which is hardly surprising in view of his belief in the transformative potential embedded in the “oppressed past” (unterdrückte Vergangenheit). Detlev Schöttker goes so far as to speak of “strategies” and “calculation” on Benjamin’s part in preparing his posthumous reputation.⁴

It is not accidental that Benjamin has been so eagerly received in recent decades, that his works have enjoyed an almost instant canonization, that he is cited, often for opposed ends, by the most diverse writers. There may be a sense of delayed justice, an effort to pay restitution to an individual who was ignored or misunderstood in his lifetime. The forms of the neglect and

2. “The figure of Baudelaire plays a decisive part in his fame [Ruhm]. . . . No study of Baudelaire can fully explore the vitality of its subject without dealing with the image [das Bild] of his life.” Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, 4 vols., ed. Michael W. Jennings, et al (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996–2003), vol. 4: 168. In German, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 7 vols., ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1974–89), vol. 1: 665. Citations from these editions are identified henceforth as, respectively, *SW* and *GS*. On Baudelaire, see also “Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers,” *GS* 4: 12–13.

3. Citations from *Das Passagen-Werk* (in English as *The Arcades Project*) will henceforth be identified with the page number in the *GS*, vol. 5 and the designation that Benjamin used within that work (for example, [N, 3, 1]), followed by *TAP* and the page of *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).

4. Detlev Schöttker provides an illuminating discussion of this issue in his *Konstruktiver Fragmentarismus* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1999), 92–142.

persecution are especially designed to appeal to our sympathies, academic and political. Early in his career Benjamin was denied the opportunity to pursue an academic path by the rejection of the Habilitation (the second dissertation); subsequently his hard-won success as a cultural journalist was brought to naught by the Nazi accession to power in 1933, and at the end he was driven to suicide in attempting to escape France after the installation of the Vichy government.

Of Benjamin's self-characterizations, one of the most provocative is this note, dated about 1934:

Being first has great difficulties but also some opportunities. In another sense, the same applies to being last, such as I am. (Ein Erster zu sein, hat große Schwierigkeiten, bietet auch einige Chancen. In anderer Weise gilt das selbe von einem Letzten, wie ich es bin.) (GS 6: 532)

Eckhardt Köhn links this passage to another: "It is indispensable, in any case, that any author who wants to attain to a minimal renown take possession of a precise strategic position within his generation" (GS 6: 201).⁵ In what series might Benjamin view himself as "being last," an end point?

In January 1930, on returning to Paris after a longer absence, Benjamin wrote an important letter to Scholem, taking stock of his situation at the time. He can report a significant achievement:

First of all I have attained—in modest proportions, to tell the truth—a position in Germany. The goal that I had set myself is not yet fully realized, but, finally, I am quite close. This is to be considered the leading [*le premier*] critic of German literature. The difficulty is that for more than fifty years literary criticism in Germany has no longer been considered a serious genre.⁶ To fashion a position for oneself in criticism, this means, fundamentally, to recreate it as a genre. And on this road some serious progress has been realized—by others, but mostly by me.⁷

5. Eckhardt Köhn, "Ein Letzter, wie ich es bin.' Bemerkungen zum schriftstellerischen Selbstverständnis Walter Benjamins," in *Was nie geschrieben wurde, lesen*, ed. Lorenz Jäger and Thomas Regehly (Bielefeld: Aisthesis Verlag, 1992), 158–59.

6. A year earlier, on February 14, 1929, Benjamin had written Scholem of a plan to write an essay on the low level of literary criticism in Germany. This was never written, but notes on the topic have survived; see GS 6: 161–69.

7. Letter of January 20, 1930. Walter Benjamm, *Gesammelte Briefe*, 6 vols., ed. Christophe Göttsche and Henri Lonitz (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1995–

In this letter he writes too of his intense focus on the *Passagen* project (“in fact, this is the theater of all my struggles and all my ideas”), but also of much work still to be done to provide it a theoretical grounding.

But two years later his mood is much darker. (The 1930 parliamentary election marked the start of Hitler’s ascendancy, which became manifest in innumerable ways in Germany in the following year.) In August 1931, Benjamin begins a diary ominously entitled “Diary from the seventeenth of August nineteen-hundred thirty-one to the day of (my) death” (Tagebuch vom siebensten August neunzehnhunderteinunddreissig bis zum Todestag). It begins with, “This journal is not likely to become very long.” And then he immediately notes the rejection of a book he had proposed to the publisher Anton Kippenberg to commemorate the centenary of Goethe’s death (1832), and adds, “and thus my plan gains all the relevance that can come from a dead-end” (und damit gewinnt mein Plan die ganze Aktualität, die ihm die Ausweglosigkeit nur geben kann) (GS 6: 441). The suicide plan would come close to being realized almost a year later, on Benjamin’s fortieth birthday (July 15, 1932).⁸

In April 1932, he set sail for Ibiza (Capri) where he would spend over three months, until July 17, when he sailed to Nice. The suicide that was to take place there, although scrupulously prepared, did not occur. A letter to Scholem on July 26, 1932, expresses the hopelessness of his situation. (In Germany, the failure of Franz von Papen’s chancellorship signaled the triumph of Hitler.) Benjamin judges that “the literary forms of expression” that he had evolved in the previous ten years are doomed. While his writings were numerous, they were “small-scale victories but correspondingly large-scale defeats.” The works he had planned (including the *Passagen*) he calls “the veritable sites of ruin and catastrophe, of which I see no end . . . in the coming years” (GB 4: 112–13).

It is noteworthy that Benjamin, in spite of the precarious situation in those years, did not abandon his work. On the contrary, up to the final ca-

2000), vol. 3: 502. Henceforth cited as *GB*. Translations from this edition are mine. The letter is written in French, and Benjamin admits at the beginning that this serves him as a way of overcoming a resistance in writing it to Scholem, perhaps because he admits here his abandonment of efforts to learn Hebrew.

8. See Gerschom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: Die Geschichte einer Freundschaft* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1975), 223f, 232–35, for the circumstances.

pitulation, every blockage in his career seemed to serve as impetus for a fruitful reorientation of his thought. As late as May 7, 1940, three months before the departure from Paris that would end with his ill-fated attempt to leave France, he could still write a long letter to Adorno, one that touches on a variety of literary issues familiar to both and mentions English lessons and other aspects of his anticipated trip to New York.

It is worth returning to the comment of 1934 and considering in what sense Benjamin saw himself as “last.” In spite of the shipwreck of his career as an essayist, in spite of his exile from Germany, Benjamin could not abandon the hope of making a definitive contribution to literary criticism. The ambition expressed in the letter of 1930, “to recreate it [criticism] as a genre,” had not faded. One of his last feuilleton articles, “Germans of 1789” (*SW* 3: 284–301), written in 1939, takes up one of the aims of *German Men and Women* (a series of letters by German figures in the period 1783–1883, published in 1931–32, with commentary, as feuilletons)—this was, to exhibit “the age when the German bourgeoisie placed its weightiest and most sharply etched words on the scales of history” (*SW* 3: 167, trans. modified). In the 1939 article, Benjamin cites (for the second time, as Alexander Honold notes⁹) the words that Hölderlin had written in 1801 just before setting off on his trip to Bordeaux: “I shall and must remain a German, even if want and famine drive me as far as Tahiti,” to which Benjamin adds, “Like an echo in the mountains, reverberating from valley to valley, this lament of Hölderlin’s resounds through the century” (*SW* 3: 293). Of the many ways that Benjamin might have seen himself as concluding an era in 1934, not the least was as witness to the destruction of German bourgeois culture.

The posthumous publication of Benjamin’s writings, including an enormous body of journals, letters, notes, and drafts—all in carefully edited and annotated versions¹⁰—has provided us with an exceptional opportunity to examine this seminal thinker from a variety of perspectives: first, in the evolution of his thought and writing over some three decades of intense productivity; then, as an exemplary figure whose work crystallized major

9. Alexander Honold, *Der Leser Walter Benjamin: Bruchstücke einer deutschen Literaturgeschichte* (Berlin: Vorwerk 8 Verlag, 2000), 10.

10. Suhrkamp Verlag is currently issuing *Werke und Nachlass*, a multi-volume series intended to provide definitive texts for Benjamin’s writings, including drafts and preparatory materials. The arcades material has not yet appeared.

elements of the philosophical temper of the era just prior to the great divide of the Second World War; and finally, in the extraordinary emergence of his reputation since the sixties, a phenomenon inseparable from the new status of “theory” in the human and social sciences. Of those thinkers who most strongly inflected theories of art and of history in this period—Adorno, Foucault, Derrida, Blumenberg, Deleuze, Lyotard—Benjamin holds a special place in that his work achieved its impact well after his lifetime.

Benjamin’s intellectual career parallels a transformation of philosophical temper that extends from Romanticism and Idealism to the crisis of humanist culture that may be dated from the Weimar period. Yet it would be misleading to trace the path of this thinker—with his extraordinary critical, and self-critical, acuity—primarily in light of the age or epoch. He was, as we know, highly suspicious of the methods and pretensions of history of ideas (*Geistesgeschichte*), and his own conception of historical temporality was in part motivated by a radical reaction to that approach. In this context, a passage in *Einbahnstrasse* (*One-Way Street*) is revealing:

TECHNICAL POINTER

There is nothing more impoverished than a truth expressed as it was thought. In such a case its writing down is not even a bad photo. And truth is loath (like a child, like a woman, who does not love us) to hold still and smile before the lens of writing, while we stoop under the camera’s black cloth. (*SW* 1: 480 [trans. modified]; *GS* 4: 138)

This little fable of “writing” (I cite only the beginning), however playful (*Einbahnstrasse*, let us recall, is an experiment in an avowedly Surrealist vein), is indicative of a determined resistance to conceptualization in the practice of criticism. In a letter to Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Benjamin articulated “the conviction guiding me in my literary endeavors . . . that every truth has its home, its ancestral palace, in language; and that this palace is constructed out of the oldest logoi. . . .” (*GB* 2: 409.) The precedence that Benjamin grants to language over any repertory of philosophical concepts should serve to curb any overly neat assimilation of his thought to a school or other ideological tendency, whether it be that of Adorno and the Frankfurt School, or of Brecht and Marxist materialism, or of Scholem and Jewish tradition. All these offer, at a given moment, relevant parallels, but none provide a consistent blueprint for Benjamin’s thought.

Benjamin's radically isolate position—both ideologically and conceptually—places a particular burden on his readers. To articulate the stakes of a reading presupposes an entry into the subject matter, an entry that may be articulated retroactively, from the vantage of a given position. But this is especially difficult in the case of a thinker like Benjamin, whose work cannot be easily fitted within any of the familiar categories of writerly production—whether philosophy, feuilleton, autobiography, sociology, cultural commentary, literary criticism. Benjamin is often invoked in the name of a progressive political stance, but that which is deemed political today could hardly be confirmed in Benjamin's terms. The most relevant concepts in his terminological repertory, such as *Aktualisieren* and messianism, can be taken as “political” only in a very qualified sense, as will be developed further. Uwe Steiner, in the most detailed examination of Benjamin's lost or unfinished manuscript “The True Politician,” offers this sobering analysis:

Though Benjamin decisively rejects all writing which puts itself at the disposition of politics as a mediate utilization of language through the deed, he wants to accord to his own conception of an immediate, “magical” effect the predicate of “highly political” writing. It is precisely the separation of politics from the spiritual that is supposed to meet the preconditions necessary so that “the magical spark can leap between the word and the moving deed.” (GB I: 127)

The attempt to define politics as an independent, profane sphere in its relation to the metaphysical sphere of the idea also comprises the premise of the conception of politics and of political commitment. It is a conception that is abstract in the sense that it abstains entirely from a concrete, substantial definition of political targets.¹¹

If we look to Benjamin's writings for guidelines regarding his philosophy or his beliefs, we will not find a ready answer. In the circle of his friends and associates Benjamin was repeatedly challenged to take a stand, to declare his adherence, whether at the level of religion, of politics, or of class. What he wrote to his friend Gershom Scholem in reply to one such challenge is characteristic: “You know that I have always written in accordance with my convictions, but have seldom, and never otherwise than in conversation, made the attempt to express the whole contradictory foundation [den gan-

11. Uwe Steiner, “The True Politician: Walter Benjamin's Concept of the Political,” *New German Critique* 83 (2001): 85.

zen widerspruchsvollen Fundus] from which they, in their specific manifestations, derive" (May 6, 1934, *GB* 4: 408).

Yet, what is asked of us, as readers of Benjamin's oeuvre, is just this: to posit as a point of departure "the whole contradictory foundation" from which his convictions derive. In this Introduction I want to pursue this matter along two paths: one more personal and biographical, as revealed through Benjamin's relation to two of his friends, and the other more conceptual and theoretical.

"Dic cur hic?" Friendship and a Thinker's Identity

In his treatment of writers and thinkers Benjamin often uses a personal feature or anecdote as a heuristic, a mode of entry into the linguistic-conceptual complex that, in a sense, discloses an individual's core identity. An illustrative anecdote, even a fictive one, may have a decisive function—for example, the story of Potemkin at the beginning of the Kafka essay, or the title "On the Image of Proust" ("Zum Bilde Prousts"), which refers quite precisely to the image of the writer as a paradigmatic literary-existential construct. Proust's "is not a model life in every respect," he writes there, "but everything about it is exemplary" (*SW* 2: 237). This exemplarity is then glossed as "the highest physiognomic expression which the irresistibly growing discrepancy between literature and life was able to assume."

A similar conception of exemplarity is also evident in *German Men and Women (Deutsche Menschen)*, a collection Benjamin made of letters written between 1783 and 1883 by individuals both well-known and obscure. He introduced each letter with a brief commentary illustrative of the writer's personal-ethical profile. This work, first published as a series in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* during 1931–32, was conceived as a subversive counter-canon to the typical monumental treatment of leading German figures.

Where might one look for Benjamin's own "physiognomic expression"? He had no strong autobiographical bent. It is true that he began a kind of memoir in 1932, "Berlin Chronicle," but he left it unfinished to make way for a series of sketches, "Berlin Childhood Around Nineteen Hundred," in which the personal element is highly stylized. He had close friendships with individuals of commanding intellectual stature, and the letters that survive

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