

Walter Benjamin, under the Sign of Saturn

Benjamin BALINT

In a new biography, Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings recount the decisive moments of Walter Benjamin's life – his work on tragic drama and allegory, his friendship with Gershom Scholem and Berthold Brecht, his flight from Germany in 1933 and subsequent years in Paris –, focusing on his fascination with the messianic meaning of the everyday.

Reviewed: Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life*, Harvard University Press, 2014, 768 pages, \$39.95.

In his poem “The Ragpicker’s Wine,” Charles Baudelaire describes the solitary scavengers who rummage about in the side streets of Paris. In search of salvageable bric-à-brac, he writes, they sift through what the city discards like poets lost in thought, “each bent double by the junk he carries.”

In an impressive new biography of Walter Benjamin, Howard Eiland of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Michael W. Jennings of Princeton University portray their subject as a kind of ragpicker in the neglected alleyways of a culture in transition—a specialist in the marginal and mundane, the fragmentary and forgotten. Like a ragpicker, Benjamin zealously guarded his independence, or what he called “the freedom to juxtapose things and ideas that are supposed to be incompatible.” Eiland and Jennings give full rein to the incompatibilities in Benjamin’s life and thought, refusing to recruit him to a single cause. But as they take pains to show, his independence of mind came at a steep price.

Under the Sign of Saturn

Walter Benjamin was born into a well-off acculturated Jewish family in the rapidly modernizing Berlin of 1892. Early on, Eiland and Jennings write, Benjamin developed a taste for friendships conditioned by distance, and by the need to keep his friends compartmentalized. Beneath his fastidious courtesy, the authors show, Benjamin could be imperious, self-absorbed, emotionally cramped and inhibited. He exuded a sense of unworldly inwardness.

And yet his attachments ran deep. In 1915, during his final semester of studies in Berlin, Benjamin met Gershom Scholem, six years his junior. Though he remarked that Benjamin was “a man fanatically closed off,” Scholem would later call his relationship with Benjamin “the greatest experience of my life.” Another friend, Max Horkheimer, would later say, “a few hours with Benjamin are among the loveliest things.”

In April 1917, Benjamin married Dora Kellner, and after he got himself declared unfit for military service, the couple escaped the war to Switzerland, where their only child, Stefan, was born. Returning to Germany in 1920, he faced the slow disintegration of his marriage (he finally divorced Dora a decade later), and a falling-out with his parents, on whom he remained financially dependent. “He cares no more for Stefan’s and my future,” Dora complained to Scholem in 1929, “than for that of a total stranger.”

Although he found it difficult to establish what he called “that bourgeois rhythm of life which is indispensable for every project,” Benjamin completed his habilitation thesis, which used the *Trauerspiel*, or seventeenth-century German tragic drama, to examine the nature of allegory. Here Benjamin’s fascination with the fragmentary first appears. “It is common practice in Baroque literature to pile up fragments incessantly,” he writes. “Allegories are, in the realm of thought, what ruins are in the realm of things.”

The thesis, today regarded as a landmark of the field, was rejected by the University of Frankfurt for its “incomprehensible mode of expression.” Benjamin concluded that his “hopes of a position and a secure livelihood had always been in vain.” His strain of stoic pessimism darkened. He began to suffer nervous breakdowns and recurrent thoughts of suicide.

His academic ambitions thwarted, Benjamin freelanced for prominent newspapers and journals, but for the most part his reviews and feuilleton pieces were met with silence. “I feel that in Germany,” he writes in 1927, “I am completely isolated among those of my generation.” Relegated to the margins of his own day’s intellectual life, he swung between Berlin and Paris, and took long sojourns on Capri and Ibiza. He traveled on tangents.

Encouraged by Scholem, who was by then established at Hebrew University, Benjamin toyed with the idea of moving to Jerusalem. He met Judah Magnes, chancellor of Hebrew University, to explore a teaching position. He briefly took Hebrew lessons. He conceded to Martin Buber that the Jewish experience “is one of the most important and persistent objects of my thinking.”

But here too Benjamin remained ambivalent. Confessing “a truly pathological inclination to procrastinate in this matter,” he postponed or cancelled trips to Jerusalem at least seven times. “If I were to join you in Palestine,” he told Scholem in 1931, “it is entirely possible that my situation would improve. Then again, who can say? I tend, as you see, to pause at the fork in every road, shifting my weight from foot to foot.”

Like Scholem, the eminent scholar of kabbalah, Benjamin was learning to approach a tradition through its hidden streams. But unlike Scholem, he had not much truck with the Zionists, whom he thought were “the last people who should talk of the Jewish experience.”

Yet the financial pressures on Benjamin were meanwhile mounting. He felt increasingly constricted, increasingly weary, as he put it in 1932, of “the ignominy of wheeling and dealing in Berlin.” “It’s not easy,” he told Scholem, “to be without property and position, home and funds, at the threshold of one’s forties.”

In Eiland and Jennings’ telling, that weariness also had something to do with Benjamin’s idiosyncratic turn toward Marxism in the late 1920s. The turn, they suggest, was catalyzed by his reading of the Hungarian Marxist Georg Lukács, his love affair with a Latvian actress and director, Asja Lacis, a committed Bolshevik he visited in Moscow in the winter of 1926-1927, and his growing friendship with Bertolt Brecht. (Scholem complained that Brecht “for years held Benjamin spellbound.”)

Not relishing the prospect of a front-row seat at “the opening ceremonies of the Third Reich,” Benjamin fled Germany in March 1933, aged 41. He spent the last seven years of life in exile, much of it in itinerant isolation. “I have nothing and am attached to little,” he tells Scholem in 1933. A small stipend from Horkheimer’s Institute for Social Research, beginning in 1934, provided his only regular income.

With the exception of summer interludes at Brecht’s house on the Danish island of Fyn and stays at his ex-wife’s pension in San Remo (he remarked on the “disgrace to nest, as it were, in the ruins of my own past”), Benjamin spent most of these years in Paris, in a series of temporary sublets, cheap hotel rooms, and finally a tiny maid’s chamber, living a life of small-scale victories “offset by large-scale defeats.”

Eiland and Jennings put great stress on the defeats. As the Nazis consolidated their grip on the German press, editors wrote to say they could no longer publish Benjamin’s submissions, even under pseudonyms. Publishing houses on which he had relied went bankrupt. His autobiographical *Berlin Childhood Around 1900* (“the most precise portrait I shall ever be able to give of myself”) was rejected by three publishers. A book on Kafka for Schocken Verlag came to naught. What he had hoped would be a “truly exceptional book” about his experimentations with what he called the “profane illumination” of hashish was never finished. Radio plays were commissioned but never produced, lectures scheduled but never held. Two attempts to found a journal petered out. His application for French citizenship, supplemented by testimonials from André Gide and Paul Valéry, floundered. “I came into the world under the sign of Saturn,” Benjamin wrote, “the star of the slowest revolution, the planet of detours and delays.”

Finally, in the fall of 1939, he was sent to an internment camp, like countless other German nationals in Vichy France. (His brother Georg, active in the German Communist Party, would be killed in the Mauthausen concentration camp in 1942.) After he was freed, his health deteriorating and sense of foreboding deepening, he wrote to Scholem: “Every line we succeed in publishing today—no matter how uncertain the future to which we entrust it—is a victory wrested from the powers of darkness.”

In June 1940, Benjamin boarded one of the last trains carrying refugees out of Paris to the south of France, where (thanks to Horkheimer’s efforts) he obtained an emergency entry visa to

the United States but not an exit visa from France. In September, he and several other stateless people made the illegal crossing of the Pyrenees into Spain—the same route taken two weeks earlier by Heinrich Mann, Franz Werfel, and Alma Mahler. They made it to the coastal Catalan town of Port Bou only to be informed by the Spanish authorities that they would be returned to France the following day and face likely deportation to a concentration camp. That night, Benjamin killed himself with an overdose of morphine. He was 48 years old. He was buried in an unmarked grave in a steeply terraced cemetery overlooking the bay.

Continuity through Discontinuity

What makes this book stand out is that, in telling this ragpicker's life, Eiland and Jennings ably respect the contradictions and complexities in Benjamin's character, what he called his "contradictory and mobile whole." But by means of lucid expositions of his dense, aphoristic writings, the authors also bring into high relief what they call "the continuity of concern in Benjamin's thought through all the discontinuity of form and focus." In this they succeed in offering not only the most comprehensive biography to date, but a *tour de force* introduction to an incomparably incandescent mind.

The authors, scholars who since the 1990s have been editing and publishing Benjamin's writings in English, begin with the discontinuities. They show how Benjamin's mind was brilliantly brought to bear on a remarkably wide range of subjects: on language (the theologically inflected 1916 essay "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man") and on the debasements of language in an era of mass communication; on translation ("The Task of the Translator," 1923); on German literature (including a 1922 study "Goethe's Elective Affinities" and a 1931 essay on Karl Kraus); on French literature (from Proust to the Surrealists to Baudelaire); and on popular culture, photography and film ("The World of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," 1936).

In each case, Eiland and Jennings argue, Benjamin understood the inconspicuous and seemingly superficial as revelatory of something larger. He sought, as he said, "to assemble large-scale constructions out of the smallest and most precisely cut components. Indeed, to discover in the analysis of the small individual moment the crystal of the total event."

This technique goes well beyond literary criticism: Benjamin saw things in the world itself as signs bearing a hidden meaning to be redeemed by their interpreters. "I have never been able to do research and think in any sense other than, if you will, a theological one," Benjamin once confessed, "namely, in accordance with the Talmudic teaching about the forty-nine levels of meaning in every passage of the Torah."

The same technique informs the inimitable way Benjamin read the physiognomy of a metropolis, as in his precisely observed "city portraits" of Naples, Marseille, Moscow, Berlin, and, closest to his heart, Paris. His unfinished and perhaps unfinishable study of that "capital of the nineteenth century," as he called it--and the capital of his own sensibility--occupied him off and on for thirteen years. The result was a thousand-page patchwork of elaborately juxtaposed quotations, aphorisms, and cryptic notes that came to be known as the *Arcades Project*. (Eiland co-translated it into English.) Eiland and Jennings make the case that this work, with its subtle

sketching of architectural and conceptual passages, is “the most gripping analysis of modernity to be produced in the twentieth century.” Benjamin himself regarded it as his masterpiece, “the theater of all my struggles and all my ideas,” and the stage on which his technique of deliberate discontinuity could realize its full force.

Method of this project: literary montage. I needn't *say* anything. Merely show. I shall purloin no valuables, appropriate no ingenious formulations. But the rags, the refuse—these I will not inventory but allow, in the only way possible, to come into their own: by making use of them.

In tearing motifs from their original context, Walter Benjamin spent his short life wresting meaning from the detritus of history, extracting something of value from the most inconspicuous, ephemeral, and outmoded oddities. In his writing from the brink, he was guided all the while by a vision, as he wrote, “that perceives the everyday as impenetrable, the impenetrable as everyday.” It is as though he saw the unredeemed and the mundane from the perspective of redemption, and redemption from the perspective of the mundane.

But what, in the end, did Benjamin, “bent double” under the rags and refuse he redeemed from the nineteenth century, hemmed in by the encroaching “powers of darkness” of the twentieth, bring back from his restless ragpicking forays? What, ultimately, did this enigmatic man of montage seek in the everyday?

The last sentence of the piece Benjamin had been writing before he took his life may offer a clue. “For the Jews... every second was the narrow gate through which the messiah might enter.” Maybe, looking ahead toward an ever-deferred future, he sought the possibility of redemption, of overcoming what is for what will be, of not merely collecting rags but putting them together into some new and resplendent whole. In this search he did not ignore the everyday, but depended on it. “Just as a force can, through acting, increase another that is acting the opposite direction,” Benjamin wrote, “so the order of the profane assists, through being profane, the coming of the messianic kingdom.”

If despite the obscurity of the man and his writing, Walter Benjamin still exerts such enduring fascination, if we today count him among the most far-seeing modern thinkers, it is because we are all ragpickers in a world as fragmented and profane as his.

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