WALTER BENJAMIN

ILLUMINATIONS

Essays and Reflections

Edited by Hannah Arendt

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Edited and with an Introduction by
Hannah Arendt

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INTRODUCTION

Walter Benjamin: 1892–1940

I. The Hunchback

FAMA, THAT MUCH-COVETED GODDESS, has many faces, and fame comes in many sorts and sizes—from the one-week notoriety of the cover story to the splendor of an everlasting name. Posthumous fame is one of Fama's rarer and least desired articles, although it is less arbitrary and often more solid than the other sorts, since it is only seldom bestowed upon mere merchandise. The one who stood most to profit is dead and hence it is not for sale. Such posthumous fame, uncommercial and unprofitable, has now come in Germany to the name and work of Walter Benjamin, a German-Jewish writer who was known, but not famous, as a contributor to magazines and literary sections of newspapers for less than ten years prior to Hitler's seizure of power and his own emigration. There were few who still knew his name when he chose death in those early fall days of 1940 which for many of his origin and generation marked the darkest moment of the war—the fall of France, the threat to England, the still intact Hitler-Stalin pact whose most feared consequence at that moment was the close cooperation of the two most powerful secret police forces in Europe.

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Fifteen years later a two-volume edition of his writings was published in Germany and brought him almost immediately a *succès d'estime* that went far beyond the recognition among the few which he had known in his life. And since mere reputation, however high, as it rests on the judgment of the best, is never enough for writers and artists to make a living that only fame, the testimony of a multitude which need not be astronomical in size, can guarantee, one is doubly tempted to say (with Cicero), *Si vivi vicissent qui morte vicerunt*—how different everything would have been "if they had been victorious in life who have won victory in death."

Posthumous fame is too odd a thing to be blamed upon the blindness of the world or the corruption of a literary milieu. Nor can it be said that it is the bitter reward of those who were ahead of their time—as though history were a race track on which some contenders run so swiftly that they simply disappear from the spectator's range of vision. On the contrary, posthumous fame is usually preceded by the highest recognition among one's peers. When Kafka died in 1924, his few published books had not sold more than a couple of hundred copies, but his literary friends and the few readers who had almost accidentally stumbled on the short prose pieces (none of the novels was as yet published) knew beyond doubt that he was one of the masters of modern prose. Walter Benjamin had won such recognition early, and not only among those whose names at that time were still unknown, such as Gerhard Scholem, the friend of his youth, and Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno, his first and only disciple, who together are responsible for the posthumous edition of his works and letters.[1] Immediate, instinctive, one is tempted to say, recognition came from Hugo von Hofmannsthal, who published Benjamin's essay on Goethe's *Elective Affinities* in 1924, and from Bertolt Brecht, who upon receiving the news of Benjamin's death is reported to have said that this was

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the first real loss Hitler had caused to German literature. We cannot know if there is such a thing as altogether unappreciated genius, or whether it is the daydream of those who are not geniuses; but we can be reasonably sure that posthumous fame will not be their lot.

Fame is a social phenomenon; *ad gloriam non est satis unius opinio* (as Seneca remarked wisely and pedantically), "for fame the opinion of one is not enough," although it is enough for friendship and love. And no society can properly function without classification, without an arrangement of things and men in classes and prescribed types. This necessary classification is the basis for all social discrimination, and discrimination, present opinion to the contrary notwithstanding, is no less a constituent element of the social realm than equality is a constituent element of the political. The point is that in society everybody must answer the question of *what* he is—as distinct from the question of *who* he is—which his role is and his function, and the answer of course can never be: I am unique, not because of the implicit arrogance but because the answer would be meaningless. In the case of Benjamin the trouble (if such it was) can be diagnosed in retrospect with great precision; when Hofmannsthal had read the long essay on Goethe by the completely unknown author, he called it "*schlechthin unvergleichlich*" ("absolutely incomparable"), and the trouble was that he was literally right, it could not be compared with anything else in existing literature. The trouble with everything Benjamin wrote was that it always turned out to be *sui generis.*

Posthumous fame seems, then, to be the lot of the unclassifiable ones, that is, those whose work neither fits the existing order nor introduces a new genre that lends itself to future classification. Innumerable attempts to write à la Kafka, all of them dismal failures, have only served to emphasize Kafka's uniqueness, that abso-

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lute originality which can be traced to no predecessor and suffers no followers. This is what society can least come to terms with and upon which it will always be very reluctant to bestow its seal of approval. To put it bluntly, it would be as misleading today to recommend Walter Benjamin as a literary critic and essayist as it would have been misleading to recommend Kafka in 1924 as a short-story writer and novelist. To describe adequately his work and him as an author within our usual framework of reference, one would have to make a great many negative statements, such as: his erudition was great, but he was no scholar; his subject matter comprised texts and their interpretation, but he was no philologist; he was greatly attracted not by religion but by theology and the theological type of interpretation for which the text itself is sacred, but he was no theologian and he was not particularly interested in the Bible; he was a born writer, but his greatest ambition was to produce a work consisting entirely of quotations; he was the first German to translate Proust (together with Franz Hessel) and St.-John Perse, and before that he had translated Baudelaire's *Tableaux parisiens,* but he was no translator; he reviewed books and wrote a number of essays on living and dead writers, but he was no literary critic; he wrote a book about the German baroque and left behind a huge unfinished study of the French nineteenth century, but he was no historian, literary or otherwise; I shall try to show that he thought poetically, but he was neither a poet nor a philosopher.

Still, in the rare moments when he cared to define what he was doing, Benjamin thought of himself as a literary critic, and if he can be said at all to have aspired to a position in life it would have been that of "the only true critic of German literature" (as Scholem put it in one of the few, very beautiful letters to the friend that have been published), except that the very notion of thus becoming a useful member of society would have repelled him. No doubt

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he agreed with Baudelaire, "*Être un homme utile m'a paru toujours quelque chose de bien hideux.*" In the introductory paragraphs to the essay on *Elective Affinities,* Benjamin explained what he understood to be the task of the literary critic. He begins by distinguishing between a commentary and a critique. (Without mentioning it, perhaps without even being aware of it, he used the term *Kritik,* which in normal usage means criticism, as Kant used it when he spoke of a *Critique of Pure Reason.*)

> Critique [he wrote] is concerned with the truth content of a work of art, the commentary with its subject matter. The relationship between the two is determined by that basic law of literature according to which the work's truth content is the more relevant the more inconspicuously and intimately it is bound up with its subject matter. If therefore precisely those works turn out to endure whose truth is most deeply embedded in their subject matter, the beholder who contemplates them long after their own time finds the *realia* all the more striking in the work as they have faded away in the world. This means that subject matter and truth content, united in the work's early period, come apart during its afterlife; the subject matter becomes more striking while the truth content retains its original concealment. To an ever-increasing extent, therefore, the interpretation of the striking and the odd, that is, of the subject matter, becomes a prerequisite for any later critic. One may liken him to a paleographer in front of a parchment whose faded text is covered by the stronger outlines of a script referring to that text. Just as the paleographer would have to start with reading the script, the critic must start with commenting on his text. And out of this activity there arises immediately an inestimable criterion of critical judgment: only now can the critic ask the basic question of all criticism — namely, whether the work's shining truth content is due to its subject

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> matter or whether the survival of the subject matter is due to the truth content. For as they come apart in the work, they decide on its immortality. In this sense the history of works of art prepares their critique, and this is why historical distance increases their power. If, to use a simile, one views the growing work as a funeral pyre, its commentator can be likened to the chemist, its critic to an alchemist. While the former is left with wood and ashes as the sole objects of his analysis, the latter is concerned only with the enigma of the flame itself: the enigma of being alive. Thus the critic inquires about the truth whose living flame goes on burning over the heavy logs of the past and the light ashes of life gone by.

The critic as an alchemist practicing the obscure art of transmuting the futile elements of the real into the shining, enduring gold of truth, or rather watching and interpreting the historical process that brings about such magical transfiguration—whatever we may think of this figure, it hardly corresponds to anything we usually have in mind when we classify a writer as a literary critic.

There is, however, another less objective element than the mere fact of being unclassifiable which is involved in the life of those who "have won victory in death." It is the element of bad luck, and this factor, very prominent in Benjamin's life, cannot be ignored here because he himself, who probably never thought or dreamed about posthumous fame, was so extraordinarily aware of it. In his writing and also in conversation he used to speak about the "little hunchback," the "*bucklicht Männlein,*" a German fairy-tale figure out of *Des Knaben Wunderhorn,* the famous collection of German folk poetry.

Will ich in mein' Keller gehn,
Will mein Weinlein zapfen;

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Steht ein bucklicht Männlein da,
Tät mir'n Krug wegschnappen.

Will ich in mein Küchel gehn,
Will mein Süpplein kochen;
Steht ein bucklicht Männlein da,
Hat mein Töpflein brochen. *

The hunchback was an early acquaintance of Benjamin, who had first met him when, still a child, he found the poem in a children's book, and he never forgot. But only once (at the end of *A Berlin Childhood around 1900*), when anticipating death he attempted to get hold of "his 'entire life' . . . as it is said to pass before the eyes of the dying," did he clearly state who and what it was that had terrified him so early in life and was to accompany him until his death. His mother, like millions of other mothers in Germany, used to say, "Mr. Bungle sends his regards" (*Ungeschickt lässt grüssen*) whenever one of the countless little catastrophes of childhood had taken place. And the child knew of course what this strange bungling was all about. The mother referred to the "little hunchback," who caused the objects to play their mischievous tricks upon children; it was he who had tripped you up when you fell and knocked the thing out of your hand when it went to pieces.

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* When I go down to the cellar
There to draw some wine,
A little hunchback who's in there
Grabs that jug of mine.

When I go into my kitchen,
There my soup to make,
A little hunchback who's in there
My little pot did break.

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And after the child came the grown-up man who knew what the child was still ignorant of, namely, that it was not he who had provoked "the little one" by looking at him — as though he had been the boy who wished to learn what fear was — but that the hunchback had looked at him and that bungling was a misfortune. For "anyone whom the little man looks at pays no attention; not to himself and not to the little man. In consternation he stands before a pile of debris" (*Schriften* I, 650–52).

Thanks to the recent publication of his letters, the story of Benjamin's life may now be sketched in broad outline; and it would be tempting indeed to tell it as a sequence of such piles of debris since there is hardly any question that he himself viewed it in that way. But the point of the matter is that he knew very well of the mysterious interplay, the place "at which weakness and genius coincide," which he so masterfully diagnosed in Proust. For he was of course also speaking about himself when, in complete agreement, he quoted what Jacques Rivière had said about Proust: he "died of the same inexperience that permitted him to write his works. He died of ignorance . . . because he did not know how to make a fire or open a window" ("The Image of Proust"). Like Proust, he was wholly incapable of changing "his life's conditions even when they were about to crush him." (With a precision suggesting a sleepwalker his clumsiness invariably guided him to the very center of a misfortune, or wherever something of the sort might lurk. Thus, in the winter of 1939–40 the danger of bombing made him decide to leave Paris for a safer place. Well, no bomb was ever dropped on Paris, but Meaux, where Benjamin went, was a troop center and probably one of the very few places in France that was seriously endangered in those months of the phony war.) But like Proust, he had every reason to bless the curse and to repeat the strange prayer at the end of the folk poem with which he closes his childhood memoir:

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Liebes Kindlein, ach, ich bitt,
*Bet fürs bucklicht Männlein mit.**

In retrospect, the inextricable net woven of merit, great gifts, clumsiness, and misfortune into which his life was caught can be detected even in the first pure piece of luck that opened Benjamin's career as a writer. Through the good offices of a friend, he had been able to place "Goethe's *Elective Affinities*" in Hofmannsthal's *Neue Deutsche Beiträge* (1924–25). This study, a masterpiece of German prose and still of unique stature in the general field of German literary criticism and the specialized field of Goethe scholarship, had already been rejected several times, and Hofmannsthal's enthusiastic approval came at a moment when Benjamin almost despaired of "finding a taker for it" (*Briefe* I, 300). But there was a decisive misfortune, apparently never fully understood, which under the given circumstances was necessarily connected with this chance. The only material security which this first public breakthrough could have led to was the *Habilitation,* the first step of the university career for which Benjamin was then preparing himself. This, to be sure, would not yet have enabled him to make a living—the so-called *Privatdozent* received no salary—but it would probably have induced his father to support him until he received a full professorship, since this was a common practice in those days. It is now hard to understand how he and his friends could ever have doubted that a *Habilitation* under a not unusual university professor was bound to end with a catastrophe. If the gentlemen involved declared later that they did not understand a single word of the study, *The Origin of German Tragedy,* which Benjamin had submitted, they can certainly be believed. How were they to understand a writer

* O dear child, I beg of you,
Pray for the little hunchback too.

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whose greatest pride it was that "the writing consists largely of quotations — the craziest mosaic technique imaginable" — and who placed the greatest emphasis on the six mottoes that preceded the study: "No one . . . could gather any rarer or more precious ones"? (*Briefe* I, 366). It was as if a real master had fashioned some unique object, only to offer it for sale at the nearest bargain center. Truly, neither anti-Semitism nor ill will toward an outsider — Benjamin had taken his degree in Switzerland during the war and was no one's disciple — nor the customary academic suspicion of anything that is not guaranteed to be mediocre need have been involved.

However — and this is where bungling and bad luck come in — in the Germany of that time there was another way, and it was precisely his Goethe essay that spoiled Benjamin's only chance for a university career. As often with Benjamin's writings, this study was inspired by polemics, and the attack concerned Friedrich Gundolf's book on Goethe. Benjamin's critique was definitive, and yet Benjamin could have expected more understanding from Gundolf and other members of the circle around Stefan George, a group with whose intellectual world he had been quite familiar in his youth, than from the "establishment"; and he probably need not have been a member of the circle to earn his academic accreditation under one of these men who at that time were just beginning to get a fairly comfortable foothold in the academic world. But the one thing he should not have done was to mount an attack on the most prominent and most capable academic member of the circle so vehement that everyone was bound to know, as he explained retrospectively later, that he had "just as little to do with academe . . . as with the monuments which men like Gundolf or Ernst Bertram have erected." (*Briefe* II, 523). Yes, that is how it was. And it was Benjamin's bungling or his misfortune to have announced this to the world before he was admitted to the university.

Yet one certainly cannot say that he consciously disregarded due

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caution. On the contrary, he was aware that "Mr. Bungle sends his regards" and took more precautions than anyone else I have known. But his system of provisions against possible dangers, including the "Chinese courtesy" mentioned by Scholem,[2] invariably, in a strange and mysterious way, disregarded the real danger. For just as he fled from the safe Paris to the dangerous Meaux at the beginning of the war—to the front, as it were—his essay on Goethe inspired in him the wholly unnecessary worry that Hofmannsthal might take amiss a very cautious critical remark about Rudolf Borchardt, one of the chief contributors to his periodical. Yet he expected only good things from having found for this "attack upon the ideology of George's school . . . this one place where they will find it hard to ignore the invective" (*Briefe* I, 341). They did not find it hard at all. For no one was more isolated than Benjamin, so utterly alone. Even the authority cf Hofmannsthal—"the new patron," as Benjamin called him in the first burst of happiness (*Briefe* I, 327)—could not alter this situation. His voice hardly mattered compared with the very real power of the George school, an influential group in which, as with all such entities, only ideological allegiance counted, since only ideology, not rank and quality, can hold a group together. Despite their pose of being above politics, George's disciples were fully as conversant with the basic principles of literary maneuvers as the professors were with the fundamentals of academic politics or the hacks and journalists with the ABC of "one good turn deserves another."

Benjamin, however, did not know the score. He never knew how to handle such things, was never able to move among such people, not even when "the adversities of outer life which sometimes come from all sides, like wolves" (*Briefe* I, 298), had already afforded him some insight into the ways of the world. Whenever he tried to adjust and be co-operative so as to get some firm ground under his feet somehow, things were sure to go wrong.

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A major study on Goethe from the viewpoint of Marxism — in the middle twenties he came very close to joining the Communist Party — never appeared in print, either in the Great Russian Encyclopedia, for which it was intended, or in present-day Germany. Klaus Mann, who had commissioned a review of Brecht's *Threepenny Novel* for his periodical *Die Sammlung,* returned the manuscript because Benjamin had asked 250 French francs — then about 10 dollars — for it and he wanted to pay only 150. His commentary on Brecht's poetry did not appear in his lifetime. And the most serious difficulties finally developed with the Institute for Social Research, which, originally (and now again) part of the University of Frankfurt, had emigrated to America and on which Benjamin depended financially. Its guiding spirits, Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, were "dialectical materialists" and in their opinion Benjamin's thinking was "undialectic," moved in "materialistic categories, which by no means coincide with Marxist ones," was "lacking in mediation" insofar as, in an essay on Baudelaire, he had related "certain conspicuous elements within the superstructure . . . directly, perhaps even causally, to corresponding elements in the substructure." The result was that Benjamin's original essay, "The Paris of the Second Empire in the Works of Baudelaire," was not printed, either then in the magazine of the Institute or in the posthumous two-volume edition of his writings. (Parts of it have now been published — "Der Flâneur" in *Die Neue Rundschau,* December 1967, and "Die Moderne" in *Das Argument,* March 1968.)

Benjamin probably was the most peculiar Marxist ever produced by this movement, which God knows has had its full share of oddities. The theoretical aspect that was bound to fascinate him was the doctrine of the superstructure, which was only briefly sketched by Marx but then assumed a disproportionate role in the movement as it was joined by a disproportionately large number of intellectuals, hence by people who were interested only in the

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superstructure. Benjamin used this doctrine only as a heuristic-methodological stimulus and was hardly interested in its historical or philosophical background. What fascinated him about the matter was that the spirit and its material manifestation were so intimately connected that it seemed permissible to discover everywhere Baudelaire's *correspondances,* which clarified and illuminated one another if they were properly correlated, so that finally they would no longer require any interpretative or explanatory commentary. He was concerned with the correlation between a street scene, a speculation on the stock exchange, a poem, a thought, with the hidden line which holds them together and enables the historian or philologist to recognize that they must all be placed in the same period. When Adorno criticized Benjamin's "wide-eyed presentation of actualities" (*Briefe* II, 793), he hit the nail right on its head; this is precisely what Benjamin was doing and wanted to do. Strongly influenced by surrealism, it was the "attempt to capture the portrait of history in the most insignificant representations of reality, its scraps, as it were" (*Briefe* II, 685). Benjamin had a passion for small, even minute things; Scholem tells about his ambition to get one hundred lines onto the ordinary page of a notebook and about his admiration for two grains of wheat in the Jewish section of the Musée Cluny "on which a kindred soul had inscribed the complete *Shema Israel.*"[3] For him the size of an object was in an inverse ratio to its significance. And this passion, far from being a whim, derived directly from the only world view that ever had a decisive influence on him, from Goethe's conviction of the factual existence of an *Urphänomen,* an archetypal phenomenon, a concrete thing to be discovered in the world of appearances in which "significance" (*Bedeutung,* the most Goethean of words, keeps recurring in Benjamin's writings) and appearance, word and thing, idea and experience, would coincide. The smaller the object, the more likely it seemed that it could contain in the

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most concentrated form everything else; hence his delight that two grains of wheat should contain the entire *Shema Israel,* the very essence of Judaism, tiniest essence appearing on tiniest entity, from which in both cases everything else originates that, however, in significance cannot be compared with its origin. In other words, what profoundly fascinated Benjamin from the beginning was never an idea, it was always a phenomenon. "What seems paradoxical about everything that is justly called beautiful is the fact that it appears" (*Schriften* I, 349), and this paradox—or, more simply, the wonder of appearance—was always at the center of all his concerns.

How remote these studies were from Marxism and dialectical materialism is confirmed by their central figure, the *flâneur.*[4] It is to him, aimlessly strolling through the crowds in the big cities in studied contrast to their hurried, purposeful activity, that things reveal themselves in their secret meaning: "The true picture of the past *flits* by" ("Philosophy of History"), and only the *flâneur* who idly strolls by receives the message. With great acumen Adorno has pointed to the static element in Benjamin: "To understand Benjamin properly one must feel behind his every sentence the conversion of extreme agitation into something static, indeed, the static notion of movement itself (*Schriften* I, xix). Naturally, nothing could be more "undialectic" than this attitude in which the "angel of history" (in the ninth of the "Theses on the Philosophy of History") does not dialectically move forward into the future, but has his face "turned toward the past." "Where a chain of events appears to *us, he* sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and join together what has been smashed to pieces." (Which would presumably mean the end of history.) "But a storm is blowing from Paradise" and "irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of ruins before him grows skyward. What we call progress is *this* storm." In this angel, which

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Benjamin saw in Klee's "Angelus Novus," the *flâneur* experiences his final transfiguration. For just as the *flâneur,* through the *gestus* of purposeless strolling, turns his back to the crowd even as he is propelled and swept by it, so the "angel of history," who looks at nothing but the expanse of ruins of the past, is blown backwards into the future by the storm of progress. That such thinking should ever have bothered with a consistent, dialectically sensible, rationally explainable process seems absurd.

It should also be obvious that such thinking neither aimed nor could arrive at binding, generally valid statements, but that these were replaced, as Adorno critically remarks, "by metaphorical ones" (*Briefe* II, 785). In his concern with directly, actually demonstrable concrete facts, with single events and occurrences whose "significance" is manifest, Benjamin was not much interested in theories or "ideas" which did not immediately assume the most precise outward shape imaginable. To this very complex but still highly realistic mode of thought the Marxian relationship between superstructure and substructure became, in a precise sense, a metaphorical one. If, for example—and this would certainly be in the spirit of Benjamin's thought—the abstract concept *Vernunft* (reason) is traced back to its origin in the verb *vernehmen* (to perceive, to hear), it may be thought that a word from the sphere of the superstructure has been given back its sensual substructure, or, conversely, that a concept has been transformed into a metaphor—provided that "metaphor" is understood in its original, nonallegorical sense of *metapherein* (to transfer). For a metaphor establishes a connection which is sensually perceived in its immediacy and requires no interpretation, while an allegory always proceeds from an abstract notion and then invents something palpable to represent it almost at will. The allegory must be explained before it can become meaningful, a solution must be found to the riddle it presents, so that the often laborious interpretation of allegorical figures always unhap-

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pily reminds one of the solving of puzzles even when no more ingenuity is demanded than in the allegorical representation of death by a skeleton. Since Homer the metaphor has borne that element of the poetic which conveys cognition; its use establishes the *correspondances* between physically most remote things—as when in the *Iliad* the tearing onslaught of fear and grief on the hearts of the Achaians corresponds to the combined onslaught of the winds from north and west on the dark waters (*Iliad* IX, 1–8); or when the approaching of the army moving to battle in line after line corresponds to the sea's long billows which, driven by the wind, gather head far out on the sea, roll to shore line after line, and then burst on the land in thunder (*Iliad* IV, 422–23). Metaphors are the means by which the oneness of the world is poetically brought about. What is so hard to understand about Benjamin is that without being a poet he *thought poetically* and therefore was bound to regard the metaphor as the greatest gift of language. Linguistic "transference" enables us to give material form to the invisible—"A mighty fortress is our God"—and thus to render it capable of being experienced. He had no trouble understanding the theory of the superstructure as the final doctrine of metaphorical thinking—precisely because without much ado and eschewing all "mediations" he directly related the superstructure to the so-called "material" substructure, which to him meant the totality of sensually experienced data. He evidently was fascinated by the very thing that the others branded as "vulgar-Marxist" or "undialectical" thinking.

It seems plausible that Benjamin, whose spiritual existence had been formed and informed by Goethe, a poet and not a philosopher, and whose interest was almost exclusively aroused by poets and novelists, although he had studied philosophy, should have found it easier to communicate with poets than with theoreticians, whether of the dialectical or the metaphysical variety. And there is indeed no question but that his friendship with Brecht—unique

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in that here the greatest living German poet met the most important critic of the time, a fact both were fully aware of—was the second and incomparably more important stroke of good fortune in Benjamin's life. It promptly had the most adverse consequences; it antagonized the few friends he had, it endangered his relation to the Institute of Social Research, toward whose "suggestions" he had every reason "to be docile" (*Briefe* II, 683), and the only reason it did not cost him his friendship with Scholem was Scholem's abiding loyalty and admirable generosity in all matters concerning his friend. Both Adorno and Scholem blamed Brecht's "disastrous influence"[5] (Scholem) for Benjamin's clearly undialectic usage of Marxian categories and his determined break with all metaphysics; and the trouble was that Benjamin, usually quite inclined to compromises albeit mostly unnecessary ones, knew and maintained that his friendship with Brecht constituted an absolute limit not only to docility but even to diplomacy, for "my agreeing with Brecht's production is one of the most important and most strategic points in my entire position" (*Briefe* II, 594). In Brecht he found a poet of rare intellectual powers and, almost as important for him at the time, someone on the Left who, despite all talk about dialectics, was no more of a dialectical thinker than he was, but whose intelligence was uncommonly close to reality. With Brecht he could practice what Brecht himself called "crude thinking" (*das plumpe Denken*): "The main thing is to learn how to think crudely. Crude thinking, that is the thinking of the great," said Brecht, and Benjamin added by way of elucidation: "There are many people whose idea of a dialectician is a lover of subtleties. . . . Crude thoughts, on the contrary, should be part and parcel of dialectical thinking, because they are nothing but the referral of theory to practice . . . a thought must be crude to come into its own in action."[6] Well, what attracted Benjamin to crude thinking was probably not so much a referral to practice as to reality, and to him this reality manifested

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itself most directly in the proverbs and idioms of everyday language. "Proverbs are a school of crude thinking," he writes in the same context; and the art of taking proverbial and idiomatic speech literally enabled Benjamin—as it did Kafka, in whom figures of speech are often clearly discernible as a source of inspiration and furnish the key to many a "riddle"—to write a prose of such singularly enchanting and enchanted closeness to reality.

Wherever one looks in Benjamin's life, one will find the little hunchback. Long before the outbreak of the Third Reich he was playing his evil tricks, causing publishers who had promised Benjamin an annual stipend for reading manuscripts or editing a periodical for them to go bankrupt before the first number appeared. Later the hunchback did allow a collection of magnificent German letters, made with infinite care and provided with the most marvelous commentaries, to be printed—under the title *Deutsche Menschen* and with the motto "*Von Ehre ohne Ruhm/Von Grösse ohne Glanz/Von Würde ohne Sold*" (Of Honor without Fame/Of Greatness without Splendor/Of Dignity without Pay); but then he saw to it that it ended in the cellar of the bankrupt Swiss publisher, instead of being distributed, as intended by Benjamin, who signed the selection with a pseudonym, in Nazi Germany. And in this cellar the edition was discovered in 1962, at the very moment when a new edition had come off the press in Germany. (One would also charge it to the little hunchback that often the few things that were to take a good turn first presented themselves in an unpleasant guise. A case in point is the translation of *Anabase* by Alexis Saint-Léger Léger [St.-John Perse] which Benjamin, who thought the work "of little importance" [*Briefe* I, 381], undertook because, like the Proust translation, the assignment had been procured for him by Hofmannsthal. The translation did not appear in Germany until after the war, yet Benjamin owed to it his contact with Lé-

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ger, who, being a diplomat, was able to intervene and persuade the French government to spare Benjamin a second internment in France during the war — a privilege that very few other refugees enjoyed.) And then after mischief came "the piles of debris," the last of which, prior to the catastrophe at the Spanish border, was the threat he had felt, since 1938, that the Institute for Social Research in New York, the only "material and moral support" of his Paris existence (*Briefe* II, 839), would desert him. "The very circumstances that greatly endanger my European situation will probably make emigration to the U.S.A. impossible for me," so he wrote in April of 1939 (*Briefe* II, 810), still under the impact of the "blow" which Adorno's letter rejecting the first version of the Baudelaire study had dealt him in November of 1938 (*Briefe* II, 790).

Scholem is surely right when he says that next to Proust, Benjamin felt the closest personal affinity with Kafka among contemporary authors, and undoubtedly Benjamin had the "field of ruins and the disaster area" of his own work in mind when he wrote that "an understanding of [Kafka's] production involves, among other things, the simple recognition that he was a failure" (*Briefe* II, 614). What Benjamin said of Kafka with such unique aptness applies to himself as well: "The circumstances of this failure are multifarious. One is tempted to say: once he was certain of eventual failure, everything worked out for him *en route* as in a dream" (*Briefe* II, 764). He did not need to read Kafka to think like Kafka. When "The Stoker" was all he had read of Kafka, he had already quoted Goethe's statement about hope in his essay on *Elective Affinities:* "Hope passed over their heads like a star that falls from the sky"; and the sentence with which he concludes this study reads as though Kafka had written it: "Only for the sake of the hopeless ones have we been given hope" (*Schriften* I, 140).

On September 26, 1940, Walter Benjamin, who was about to emigrate to America, took his life at the Franco-Spanish border.

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There were various reasons for this. The Gestapo had confiscated his Paris apartment, which contained his library (he had been able to get "the more important half" out of Germany) and many of his manuscripts, and he had reason to be concerned also about the others which, through the good offices of George Bataille, had been placed in the Bibliothèque Nationale prior to his flight from Paris to Lourdes, in unoccupied France.[7] How was he to live without a library, how could he earn a living without the extensive collection of quotations and excerpts among his manuscripts? Besides, nothing drew him to America, where, as he used to say, people would probably find no other use for him than to cart him up and down the country to exhibit him as the "last European." But the immediate occasion for Benjamin's suicide was an uncommon stroke of bad luck. Through the armistice agreement between Vichy France and the Third Reich, refugees from Hitler Germany — *les refugiés provenant d'Allemagne,* as they were officially referred to in France — were in danger of being shipped back to Germany, presumably only if they were political opponents. To save this category of refugees — which, it should be noted, never included the unpolitical mass of Jews who later turned out to be the most endangered of all — the United States had distributed a number of emergency visas through its consulates in unoccupied France. Thanks to the efforts of the Institute in New York, Benjamin was among the first to receive such a visa in Marseilles. Also, he quickly obtained a Spanish transit visa to enable him to get to Lisbon and board a ship there. However, he did not have a French exit visa, which at that time was still required and which the French government, eager to please the Gestapo, invariably denied to German refugees. In general this presented no great difficulty, since a relatively short and none too arduous road to be covered by foot over the mountains to Port Bou was well known and was not guarded by the French border police. Still, for Benjamin, apparently suffering from a cardiac condition (*Briefe* II, 841),

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even the shortest walk was a great exertion, and he must have arrived in a state of serious exhaustion. The small group of refugees that he had joined reached the Spanish border town only to learn that Spain had closed the border that same day and that the border officials did not honor visas made out in Marseilles. The refugees were supposed to return to France by the same route the next day. During the night Benjamin took his life, whereupon the border officials, upon whom this suicide had made an impression, allowed his companions to proceed to Portugal. A few weeks later the embargo on visas was lifted again. One day earlier Benjamin would have got through without any trouble; one day later the people in Marseilles would have known that for the time being it was impossible to pass through Spain. Only on that particular day was the catastrophe possible.

II. The Dark Times

> "Anyone who cannot cope with life while he is alive needs one hand to ward off a little his despair over his fate . . . but with his other hand he can jot down what he sees among the ruins, for he sees different and more things than the others; after all, he is dead in his own lifetime and the real survivor."
>
> — FRANZ KAFKA, *Diaries,* ENTRY OF OCTOBER 19, 1921

> "Like one who keeps afloat on a shipwreck by climbing to the top of a mast that is already crumbling. But from there he has a chance to give a signal leading to his rescue."
>
> — WALTER BENJAMIN IN A LETTER TO GERHARD SCHOLEM DATED APRIL 17, 1931

Often an era most clearly brands with its seal those who have been least influenced by it, who have been most remote from it, and who therefore have suffered most. So it was with Proust, with Kafka,

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with Karl Kraus, and with Benjamin. His gestures and the way he held his head when listening and talking; the way he moved; his manners, but especially his style of speaking, down to his choice of words and the shape of his syntax; finally, his downright idiosyncratic tastes—all this seemed so old-fashioned, as though he had drifted out of the nineteenth century into the twentieth the way one is driven onto the coast of a strange land. Did he ever feel at home in twentieth-century Germany? One has reason to doubt it. In 1913, when he first visited France as a very young man, the streets of Paris were "almost more homelike" (*Briefe* I, 56) to him after a few days than the familiar streets of Berlin. He may have felt even then, and he certainly felt twenty years later, how much the trip from Berlin to Paris was tantamount to a trip in time—not from one country to another, but from the twentieth century back to the nineteenth. There was the *nation par excellence* whose culture had determined the Europe of the nineteenth century and for which Haussmann had rebuilt Paris, "the capital of the nineteenth century," as Benjamin was to call it. This Paris was not yet cosmopolitan, to be sure, but it was profoundly European, and thus it has, with unparalleled naturalness, offered itself to all homeless people as a second home ever since the middle of the last century. Neither the pronounced xenophobia of its inhabitants nor the sophisticated harassment by the local police has ever been able to change this. Long before his emigration Benjamin knew how "very exceptional [it was] to make the kind of contact with a Frenchman that would enable one to prolong a conversation with him beyond the first quarter of an hour" (*Briefe* I, 445). Later, when he was domiciled in Paris as a refugee, his innate nobility prevented him from developing his slight acquaintances—chief among them was Gide—into connections and from making new contacts. (Werner Kraft—so we learned recently—took him to see Charles du Bos, who was, by virtue of his "enthusiasm

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for German literature," a kind of key figure for German emigrants. Werner Kraft had the better connections—what irony![8]) In his strikingly judicious review of Benjamin's works and letters as well as of the secondary literature, Pierre Missac has pointed out how greatly Benjamin must have suffered because he did not get the "reception" in France that was due him.[9] This is correct, of course, but it surely did not come as a surprise.

No matter how irritating and offensive all this may have been, the city itself compensated for everything. Its boulevards, Benjamin discovered as early as 1913, are formed by houses which "do not seem made to be lived in, but are like stone sets for people to walk between" (*Briefe* I, 56). This city, around which one still can travel in a circle past the old gates, has remained what the cities of the Middle Ages, severely walled off and protected against the outside, once were: an interior, but without the narrowness of medieval streets, a generously built and planned open-air *intérieur* with the arch of the sky like a majestic ceiling above it. "The finest thing here about all art and all activity is the fact that they leave the few remainders of the original and the natural their splendor" (*Briefe* I, 421). Indeed, they help them to acquire new luster. It is the uniform façades, lining the streets like inside walls, that make one feel more physically sheltered in this city than in any other. The arcades which connect the great boulevards and offer protection from inclement weather exerted such an enormous fascination over Benjamin that he referred to his projected major work on the nineteenth century and its capital simply as "The Arcades" (*Passagenarbeit*); and these passageways are indeed like a symbol of Paris, because they clearly are inside and outside at the same time and thus represent its true nature in quintessential form. In Paris a stranger feels at home because he can inhabit the city the way he lives in his own four walls. And just as one inhabits an apartment, and makes it comfortable, by living in it instead of just using it for

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sleeping, eating, and working, so one inhabits a city by strolling through it without aim or purpose, with one's stay secured by the countless cafés which line the streets and past which the life of the city, the flow of pedestrians, moves along. To this day Paris is the only one among the large cities which can be comfortably covered on foot, and more than any other city it is dependent for its liveliness on people who pass by in the streets, so that the modern automobile traffic endangers its very existence not only for technical reasons. The wasteland of an American suburb, or the residential districts of many towns, where all of street life takes place on the roadway and where one can walk on the sidewalks, by now reduced to footpaths, for miles on end without encountering a human being, is the very opposite of Paris. What all other cities seem to permit only reluctantly to the dregs of society—strolling, idling, *flânerie*—Paris streets actually invite everyone to do. Thus, ever since the Second Empire the city has been the paradise of all those who need to chase after no livelihood, pursue no career, reach no goal—the paradise, then, of bohemians, and not only of artists and writers but of all those who have gathered about them because they could not be integrated either politically—being homeless or stateless—or socially.

Without considering this background of the city which became a decisive experience for the young Benjamin one can hardly understand why the *flâneur* became the key figure in his writings. The extent to which this strolling determined the pace of his thinking was perhaps most clearly revealed in the peculiarities of his gait, which Max Rychner described as "at once advancing and tarrying, a strange mixture of both."[10] It was the walk of a *flâneur,* and it was so striking because, like the dandy and the snob, the *flâneur* had his home in the nineteenth century, an age of security in which children of upper-middle-class families were assured of an income without having to work, so that they had no reason to hurry. And

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just as the city taught Benjamin *flânerie,* the nineteenth century's secret style of walking and thinking, it naturally aroused in him a feeling for French literature as well, and this almost irrevocably estranged him from normal German intellectual life. "In Germany I feel quite isolated in my efforts and interests among those of my generation, while in France there are certain forces—the writers Giraudoux and, especially, Aragon; the surrealist movement—in which I see at work what occupies me too"—so he wrote to Hofmannsthal in 1927 (*Briefe* I, 446), when, having returned from a trip to Moscow and convinced that literary projects sailing under the Communist flag were unfeasible, he was setting out to consolidate his "Paris position" (*Briefe* I, 444–45). (Eight years earlier he had mentioned the "incredible feeling of kinship" which Péguy had inspired in him: "No written work has ever touched me so closely and given me such a sense of communion" [*Briefe* I, 217].) Well, he did not succeed in consolidating anything, and success would hardly have been possible. Only in postwar Paris have foreigners—and presumably that is what everyone not born in France is called in Paris to this day—been able to occupy "positions." On the other hand, Benjamin was forced into a position which actually did not exist anywhere, which, in fact, could not be identified and diagnosed as such until afterwards. It was the position on the "top of the mast" from which the tempestuous times could be surveyed better than from a safe harbor, even though the distress signals of the "shipwreck," of this one man who had not learned to swim either with or against the tide, were hardly noticed—either by those who had never exposed themselves to these seas or by those who were capable of moving even in this element.

Viewed from the outside, it was the position of the free-lance writer who lives by his pen; however, as only Max Rychner seems to have observed, he did so in a "peculiar way," for "his publications were anything but frequent" and "it was never quite clear . . .

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to what extent he was able to draw upon other resources."[11] Rychner's suspicions were justified in every respect. Not only were "other resources" at his disposal prior to his emigration, but behind the façade of free-lance writing he led the considerably freer, albeit constantly endangered, life of an *homme de lettres* whose home was a library that had been gathered with extreme care but was by no means intended as a working tool; it consisted of treasures whose value, as Benjamin often repeated, was proved by the fact that he had not read them—a library, then, which was guaranteed not to be useful or at the service of any profession. Such an existence was something unknown in Germany, and almost equally unknown was the occupation which Benjamin, only because he had to make a living, derived from it: not the occupation of a literary historian and scholar with the requisite number of fat tomes to his credit, but that of a critic and essayist who regarded even the essay form as too vulgarly extensive and would have preferred the aphorism if he had not been paid by the line. He was certainly not unaware of the fact that his professional ambitions were directed at something that simply did not exist in Germany, where, despite Lichtenberg, Lessing, Schlegel, Heine, and Nietzsche, aphorisms have never been appreciated and people have usually thought of criticism as something disreputably subversive which might be enjoyed—if at all—only in the cultural section of a newspaper. It was no accident that Benjamin chose the French language for expressing this ambition: *"Le but que je m'avais proposé . . . c'est d'être considéré comme le premier critique de la littérature allemande. La difficulté c'est que, depuis plus de cinquante ans, la critique littéraire en Allemagne n'est plus considérée comme un genre sérieux. Se faire une situation dans la critique, cela . . . veut dire: la recréer comme genre"* ("The goal I set for myself . . . is to be regarded as the foremost critic of German literature. The trouble is that for more than fifty years literary criticism in Germany has not been considered a serious genre. To cre-

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ate a place in criticism for oneself means to re-create it as a genre") (*Briefe* II, 505).

There is no doubt that Benjamin owed this choice of a profession to early French influences, to the proximity of the great neighbor on the other side of the Rhine which inspired in him so intimate a sense of affinity. But it is much more symptomatic that even this selection of a profession was actually motivated by hard times and financial woes. If one wants to express the "profession" he had prepared himself for spontaneously, although perhaps not deliberately, in social categories, one has to go back to Wilhelminian Germany in which he grew up and where his first plans for the future took shape. Then one could say that Benjamin did not prepare for anything but the "profession" of a private collector and totally independent scholar, what was then called *Privatgelehrter.* Under the circumstances of the time his studies, which he had begun before the First World War, could have ended only with a university career, but unbaptized Jews were still barred from such a career, as they were from any career in the civil service. Such Jews were permitted a *Habilitation* and at most could attain the rank of an unpaid *Extraordinarius;* it was a Career which presupposed rather than provided an assured income. The doctorate which Benjamin decided to take only "out of consideration for my family" (*Briefe* I, 216) and his subsequent attempt at *Habilitation* were intended as the basis for his family's readiness to place such an income at his disposal.

This situation changed abruptly after the war: the inflation had impoverished, even dispossessed, large numbers of the bourgeoisie, and in the Weimar Republic a university career was open even to unbaptized Jews. The unhappy story of the *Habilitation* shows clearly how little Benjamin took these altered circumstances into account and how greatly he continued to be dominated by prewar ideas in all financial matters. For from the outset the *Habilitation*

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had only been intended to call his father "to order" by supplying "evidence of public recognition" (*Briefe* I, 293) and to make him grant his son, who was in his thirties at that time, an income that was adequate and, one should add, commensurate with his social standing. At no time, not even when he had already come close to the Communists, did he doubt that despite his chronic conflicts with his parents he was entitled to such a subvention and that their demand that he "work for a living" was "unspeakable" (*Briefe* I, 292). When his father said later that he could not or would not increase the monthly stipend he was paying anyway, even if his son achieved the *Habilitation,* this naturally removed the basis of Benjamin's entire undertaking. Until his parents' death in 1930, Benjamin was able to solve the problem of his livelihood by moving back into the parental home, living there first with his family (he had a wife and a son), and after his separation—which came soon enough—by himself. (He was not divorced until 1930.) It is evident that this arrangement caused him a great deal of suffering, but it is just as evident that in all probability he never seriously considered another solution. It is also striking that despite his permanent financial trouble he managed throughout these years constantly to enlarge his library. His one attempt to deny himself this expensive passion—he visited the great auction houses the way others frequent gambling casinos—and his resolution even to sell something "in an emergency" ended with his feeling obliged to "deaden the pain of this readiness" (*Briefe* I, 340) by making fresh purchases; and his one demonstrable attempt to free himself from financial dependence on his family ended with the proposal that his father immediately give him "funds enabling me to buy an interest in a secondhand bookstore" (*Briefe* I, 292). This is the only gainful employment that Benjamin ever considered. Nothing came of it, of course.

In view of the realities of the Germany of the twenties and of

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Benjamin's awareness that he would never be able to make a living with his pen—"there are places in which I can earn a minimum and places in which I can live on a minimum, but there is no place where I can do both" (*Briefe* II, 563)—his whole attitude may strike one as unpardonably irresponsible. Yet it was anything but a case of irresponsibility. It is reasonable to assume that it is just as hard for rich people grown poor to believe in their poverty as it is for poor people turned rich to believe in their wealth; the former seem carried away by a recklessness of which they are totally unaware, the latter seem possessed by a stinginess which actually is nothing but the old ingrained fear of what the next day may bring.

Moreover, in his attitude to financial problems Benjamin was by no means an isolated case. If anything, his outlook was typical of an entire generation of German-Jewish intellectuals, although probably no one else fared so badly with it. Its basis was the mentality of the fathers, successful businessmen who did not think too highly of their own achievements and whose dream it was that their sons were destined for higher things. It was the secularized version of the ancient Jewish belief that those who "learn"—the Torah or the Talmud, that is, God's Law—were the true elite of the people and should not be bothered with so vulgar an occupation as making money or working for it. This is not to say that in this generation there were no father-son conflicts; on the contrary, the literature of the time is full of them, and if Freud had lived and carried on his inquiries in a country and language other than the German-Jewish milieu which supplied his patients, we might never have heard of an Oedipus complex.[12] But as a rule these conflicts were resolved by the sons' laying claim to being geniuses, or, in the case of the numerous Communists from well-to-do homes, to being devoted to the welfare of mankind—in any case, to aspiring to things higher than making money—and the fathers were more than willing to grant that this was a valid excuse for not making

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a living. Where such claims were not made or recognized, catastrophe was just around the corner. Benjamin was a case in point: his father never recognized his claims, and their relations were extraordinarily bad. Another such case was Kafka, who—possibly because he really was something like a genius—was quite free of the genius mania of his environment, never claimed to be a genius, and ensured his financial independence by taking an ordinary job at the Prague workmen's compensation office. (His relations with his father were of course equally bad, but for different reasons.) And still, no sooner had Kafka taken this position than he saw in it a "running start for suicides," as though he were obeying an order that says "You have to earn your grave."[13]

For Benjamin, at any rate, a monthly stipend remained the only possible form of income, and in order to receive one after his parents' death he was ready, or thought he was, to do many things: to study Hebrew for three hundred marks a month if the Zionists thought it would do them some good, or to think dialectically, with all the mediating trimmings, for one thousand French francs if there was no other way of doing business with the Marxists. The fact that despite being down and out he later did neither is worthy of admiration, and so is the infinite patience with which Scholem, who had worked very hard to get Benjamin a stipend for the study of Hebrew from the university in Jerusalem, allowed himself to be put off for years. No one, of course, was prepared to subsidize him in the only "position" for which he was born, that of an *homme de lettres,* a position of whose unique prospects neither the Zionists nor the Marxists were, or could have been, aware.

Today the *homme de lettres* strikes us as a rather harmless, marginal figure, as though he were actually to be equated with the figure of the *Privatgelehrter* that has always had a touch of the comic. Benjamin, who felt so close to French that the language became for him a "sort of alibi" (*Briefe* II, 505) for his existence, prob-

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