

BOOK REVIEWS

PRIMAL FALSEHOOD

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WALTER BENJAMIN: SELECTED WRITINGS, VOLUME 1: 1913-1926

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An apothegm of Novalis, quoted by Walter Benjamin in his dissertation on the German Romantic concept of criticism, asserts: "Many books need no review, only an announcement; they already contain their own review." Novalis's suggestion was that the critic seek to render explicit the artistic work's latent self-knowledge, the work's implicit reflection upon and judgment over itself. It would be comforting to be able to ask the same of Benjamin's writing, that it review itself and require only an extended announcement of its major topics and ideas. Indeed, this request might even seem justified by the extraordinary self-consciousness exhibited by Benjamin in issues of terminology, critical categories, and methods of investigation. Unhappily, however, Benjamin's difficult, often fragmentary works do not speak easily for themselves; any contemporary reading depends on editorial

design and translation to shed illuminating sparks over the whole corpus, revealing, if not the full inner complication of the originals, then at least the depths to which obscurity descends in them. Any judgment rendered on them today, accordingly, can only approach Benjamin's writing at a second remove, taking as the first object of criticism the editor's philological labors and the efforts of its translators.

Beyond the dispersion and esoteric density of Benjamin's texts, another difficulty faces their editor and translators. Two of the most important foci of Benjamin's work, especially during the phase of his research represented by this volume, are the problems of translation and the critical concepts by which texts may be distinguished, classified, and ordered. So while Benjamin's work is far from Novalis's reflexive artwork which provides its own review, it is rife with unconditional dicta and prohibitions derived from theology, rigorous if idiosyncratic doctrinal notions which editor and translator must take into account, even if ultimately to reject them as unsustainable in the fallen world of page counts and print runs. The organon of any Benjamin edition, however, can in no way be the orthodoxy with which his editorial and translation principles are realized. It is rather the richness of the critical dialogue that the presentation initiates with the material, of which Benjamin's principles are a crucial aspect. It is the integrity with

which the edition maintains the revelatory tensions between the translations and original texts, between writings diverse in format and genre and their unitary arrangement in an edition, that provides a measure for this undertaking.

Before considering the present edition's success in meeting this challenge, I wish first to indicate the significance of what its editors have attempted. This is no less than a major enrichment and revision of the image of Walter Benjamin's criticism in the English-speaking world. The reception of Benjamin's work has been, it may be said, very broad but equally shallow. It has not only entered into academic literary, artistic, and media studies down to the undergraduate lecture, but has also provided image-ballast to the works of popular artists such as Laurie Anderson and Carolyn Forché, and been liberally blended into the critical-theoretical gasohol fueling the contemporary gallery and art exhibition scene. This reception, however, has been based almost entirely on two English-language collections, *Illuminations* and *Reflections*, and from these, on only two texts, only partially read: the first five and the concluding sections of "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" and section IX of the "Theses on the Philosophy of History," Benjamin's anguished "Angel of History" (now suffering doubly in being degraded to the equivalent of an intellectual T-shirt logo).

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In this context, the impulse to make more texts available and to fill out the picture of this complex thinker is a salutary one. Three of Benjamin's major early

works, not available in English translation in any of the previous book-length collections, appear here: Benjamin's youthful essay on "Two Poems by Friedrich Hölderlin," in which he discusses poetic form and content, mythology, and literary art in the work of Hölderlin; the dissertation on the German Romantics and on Goethe, in which Benjamin distinguishes between romantic ideas of a transcendental unity of form (the interplay of genres) and the Goethean idea of transcendental contents (the muses); and the far-reaching, astonishingly dense essay on language, myth, and the tasks of criticism, "Goethe's *Elective Affinities*," the crowning achievement of Benjamin's early work. *One-Way Street*, a fascinating assemblage of fragmentary "thought-images" (as Benjamin designated their genre), is also reprinted in full, having been originally published only in excerpts in *Reflections*, and later in full in *One-Way Street and Other Writings*. Several other significant shorter essays—on Calderón and Hebbel, on Johann Peter Hebel, and on children's books—appear for the first time alongside essays previously available in English translation, key pieces of Benjamin's thought such as "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man," his most important early statement of his theological language-theory, and the "Critique of Violence," in which he advances an anarchist-influenced attack on law. Finally, the editors have mined the unpublished writings of Benjamin for scores of notebook entries and fragments, to provide additional elucidations of key concepts and concerns.

With all this wealth of material and the potential impact it might have, it is painful to have to conclude that the editors have squandered the better part of this fortune

through a lack of philological and conceptual rigor in handling it. The problems begin with an absence of any serious discussion of the rationale and organization of the edition. By comparison to the excellent German edition of the collected works, whose editors have carefully justified the selection and grouping of the texts, the editors of the English selected writings offer a hodgepodge with no further explanation: some (but not all) fragmentary writings, a few of the writings from Benjamin's student and youth movement activities, one lone letter (already published in the University of Chicago's 1994 *Correspondence of Walter Benjamin* in a different translation), a single isolated review. The collection of aphoristic writings, *One-Way Street*, is included as the final work of the edition, even though it was not published before 1926, as the chronological span of the edition would imply, but only in 1928; yet *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, similarly composed in the early and mid-1920s and published in 1928, is not included. No grounds for the inclusion of the one and the exclusion of the other are given, despite analogous composition and publishing circumstances. The reasons for this selection, whether pragmatic or principled, are not evident from the material, which is drawn freely from several different volumes in the German edition. Inexplicably, moreover, no page references to the German edition are provided, which renders still more tiresome the task of fathoming the editorial reasoning behind the selections.

A clue to the guiding editorial conception, however, may be found in the two cursory paragraphs in the "Note on the Texts" at the end of the book and in the "Chronology" of Benjamin's life from 1892-1926 that make up most of the book's scanty editorial apparatus. Both of these stress

chronology—the texts are arranged chronologically and, presumably, are meant to be correlated with the biographical facts of Benjamin's career and life. Yet several objections can be raised to chronology as a principle of organization.

First, despite all the good efforts of the German editors, who have treated Benjamin's texts with exemplary philological rigor, many of the texts, especially the fragments, can only be approximately dated. For example, it is hard to see why on chronological grounds "The Paradox of the Cretan," dated "1919 or 1920," should be included in the "1913-1919" section of the edition, while "The Theory of Criticism," "Categories of Aesthetics," "On Semblance," and "World and Time," all dated "1919-1920," are placed in the "1920-1926" section. Yet no other justification for their placement is given.

Second, as the example of *One-Way Street* (included) and *The Origins of German Tragic Drama* (not included) shows, chronology is inconsistently applied. It sometimes seems to refer to the date of composition, at other times to the date of publication. Both of these major works, as I have noted, were composed in the early to mid-1920s; both were published in 1928. But the latter book on German baroque drama, submitted by Benjamin for advancement to professorial status, had been failed by his Frankfurt University examiners already by 1925, and so must have been complete well within the chronological limits of this edition. Moreover, in thematic and material terms, it is more obviously linked to the other work in the volume—strongly centered on metaphysics, language theory, and German literature—than is the surrealist-influenced prose of *One-Way*



Street.

Third, chronology often obscures substantive links between materials that conceptual or philological analysis reveals. The fragment entitled "The Theory of Criticism," for example, clearly picks up on the discussions of artistic theory in Benjamin's dissertation study of Romantic art theory; conceptually, then, it could profitably be grouped with that longer study. Alternatively, the philological information in the German edition reveals that this fragment was a first draft of the third section of the essay on Goethe's *Elective Affinities*. "The Theory of Criticism" fragment, however, lies seventeen pages after the Romanticism study and seventy-six pages before the *Elective Affinities* essay, with no note indicating its relation to either, a placement even more puzzling given that the fragment can only be vaguely dated (1919-1920).

Finally, with respect to the biographical correlation the chronology allows, one might question how much a knowledge of the life lends to an interpretation of the texts. It is, undoubtedly, interesting to know that Benjamin's marriage was on the rocks as he was at work on the *Elective Affinities* essay; but does this really help us sort out the difficult and crucial conceptual distinctions that Benjamin elaborates, often in cryptic ways, between commentary and criticism, myth and theology, hero and character, and so on? Though Benjamin need not be the last word on the value of biographical material and the mode of handling it, surely his thoughts are relevant here, at least as a caution. At the opening of the second section of "Goethe's *Elective Affinities*," he writes:

If an edition of a classic author only

rarely fails to stress in its introduction that its content...is understandable solely in terms of the author's life, then this judgment already basically contains the *proton pseudos* [primal falsehood] of the method that seeks to represent the development of the work in the author by the cliché of an essential image and an empty or incomprehensible "lived experience." This *proton pseudos* in almost all modern philology—that is, in the kind that is not yet determined by the study of word and subject matter—is calculated, in proceeding from the essence and from the life, if not quite to derive the poetic work as a product of them, nevertheless to make it more accessible to the lazy understanding.

It would be otiose, given these more fundamental problems of editorial conception, to dwell at length on the quality of individual translations. Some of the major pieces, indeed, are excellent in this regard. Stanley Corngold's translations of the Hölderlin essay and the *Elective Affinities* essay are scrupulous and elegant, setting the standard for future Benjamin translations admirably high. The translations of the fragments by Rodney Livingstone, in contrast, are erratic and unreliable. These, too, bear the marks of the general editorial weakness, since there is little attempt to coordinate the translations, neither among the several texts translated by Livingstone nor between Livingstone's translations and those of other hands.

I will point out only one example, but one which I believe illustrates the extent to which editorial and translation work must be informed by a conceptual understanding of the work and an intention to render

this conceptual ground communicable to a reader of the translation. An insistently recurrent term in Benjamin's critical vocabulary is *Schein*, which means "appearance" and "semblance" and carries connotations of luster and light (suggested in its near-homophony with the English word "shine"). Conceptually, Benjamin lays emphasis on the sense of "seeming" (as opposed to truly being) and on lustrous manifestations of nature, such as reflections in surfaces of water. For the semblance of truth in nature, Benjamin believed, may hold human beings in thrall, subjecting them to fate, to the bondage of mere creaturely life. At the same time, however, "semblance" is a crucial aspect of aesthetic experience, in the manifestation of beauty. The passage from beauty to truth, from work to criticism, implies for Benjamin the shattering of semblance through language and knowledge. *Schein* thus stands at the center of his aesthetics, his theory of knowledge, and his ethics.

Livingstone's translations of this term (and others) are inconsistent and unreflective, with little regard for conceptual content. Sometimes he translates it with the relatively neutral "appearance," sometimes with the more explicitly pejorative "semblance." In "The Philosophy of History of the Late Romantics and the Historical School," Livingstone renders the Platonic opposition of true being and semblance, *Sein* and *Schein*, with the improbable "existence" and "appearance," obscuring this philosophical commonplace about as much as one could. Nor does he even attempt to pick up on the light connotations in the fragment "Imagination," which Benjamin is clearly evoking through metaphors of dawn and dusk. By comparison, Stanley Corngold, in translating the *Elective Affinities* essay, opts for the obtrusive but justified expedient of translating *Schein* as "semblance/ luster," even adding a

footnote to explain the translator's predicament.

The fault lies, however, only partially with Livingstone's shortcomings as a translator. For a synthetic *editorial* practice would have controlled the translations more carefully, seeking to provide readers with a view of the range of problems posed by the term *Schein*: the status of images, beauty, imagination, reflection, light, fate, and truth. The lack of editorial coordination evident in the translations, however, is unfortunately symptomatic of the edition at several levels, which thus vitiates much of its potential to clarify Benjamin's thought for his English-language readers.

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