

The Political Walter Benjamin, a Review Essay

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Howard Eiland and Michael E. Jennings, *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life*
(Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2014). 755 pp., ISBN: 978-0-674-05186-7.

and

Andrew Benjamin, *Working with Walter Benjamin: Recovering a Political
Philosophy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013). 272 pp., ISBN:
978-0-748-64898-6.

Walter Benjamin's name is known for several reasons. He is known as the creator of a rather pessimistic theory of history, of an eschatological reading of time, of a Kafkaesque understanding of law, and of a persistent post-Nietzschean critique of progress. A new biography, written by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, the chief editors of Benjamin's *Selected Writings*, suggests that from time to time Walter Benjamin slipped into clinical depressions that drove him to wander, somewhat lost, in foreign lands. The biographers ground their claim in a careful historical analysis of Benjamin's letters, manuscripts, and a host of other archival documents that change the order of known narratives. Like many depressives,

Dedicated to the memory of my friend Erin Williams Hyman (1972–2014), who read Benjamin and Bergson with me, and whose wide gentle smile will accompany me for the rest of my life.



Benjamin killed himself, but his famous suicide at the Port Bou checkpoint, on the France-Spain border, took place after a failed attempt to flee occupied France. A melancholic disposition, a life that ended in suicide, and the writer's fascination with the Angel of History all suggest the demise of high European humanism during a time of radical nationalism. "The idea of suicide," Eiland and Jennings state, "plays a defining role in [Benjamin's] theory of modernity," especially in his later texts (362).

There have been previous biographies of Benjamin, but this "critical life" offers the first truly multilayered approach, and the result is a figure seen in the round. The authors' main task was to rehistoricize their subject, demythologizing and rehumanizing him. Much like the work of Benjamin himself, the book brings together different worlds, shedding new light on them.

Benjamin was, undoubtedly, a melancholic man. A recent book devoted to the subject explained: "Beyond being a personal trait or choice of subject, melancholy represents a cornerstone of his epistemological and metaphysical claims."¹ Yet his biographers remind us that "to treat Walter Benjamin as a hopeless melancholic is to caricature and reduce him. For one thing, he was possessed of a delicate, if sometimes biting, sense of humor, and was capable of an owl's gaiety" (5). Indeed, the new biography, a masterpiece of its kind, offers no caricatures. It depicts Benjamin as a multifaceted human being whose own sense of self could be characterized, using one of his favorite adjectives, as intense. Examined here are his interests in friends, playful objects, institutions, political mechanisms, culture, religion, art, gender, law, and even gambling and drugs. But beyond everything else he was an obsessive intellectual who pursued his ideas to a self-destructive degree. He hovered between two opposite states: an intense engagement in both spirit and body and a chilly disinterest that was both personal and intellectual. His thinking proceeded through negation: to think about friendship one began with its demise; objects and institutions were seen via the idea of destruction; culture, via decline; religion, via eschatology and apocalypse; law, via its suspension; and so on.

Benjamin scholarship has grown, during the past two decades, into a vast territory. He has inspired societies, conferences, journals, and countless dissertations; the Benjamin name has become a brand. With this has come the growth of a sort of personal myth, to correct which the biography offers an image of a political Benjamin, "although one that operates at a considerable distance from party politics" (9). This political Benjamin is not new, but for the first time it is the key to a wide range of his activities, from the critical to the theological, philosophical, and literary. The richly detailed narrative of a life proves as satisfying for theoreticians as for historians.

For the authors, Benjamin's fascination with the political was a constant, though it evolved over his career. They link the stress he placed on language and metaphysics in the 1910s with a left-wing political inclination: "Benjamin understood politics at this point in both narrow and broad senses; educational reform subserved the latter" (50). He implemented some of his ideas as the elected president of the Berlin Independent Students' Association in February 1914. When World War I broke out, he found himself at odds with many of the other members of the association, who supported Germany's role in the conflict, and so he resigned his post. As the two authors explain, even during his university days, Benjamin's political engagement could not be detached from his philosophical position.

¹ Ilit Ferber, *Philosophy and Melancholy: Benjamin's Early Reflections on Theater and Language* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), 9.

Benjamin was an interdisciplinary thinker. Theory was never far from practice, and his analysis of culture was never distant from a certain philosophy of life. Linking his theory of life, politics, and a critical reading of culture was that Benjaminian concept of intensity, clear in his reading of the classics, in his political analysis, and even in contemporary descriptions of his gestures. Fifty years later, the historian of Jewish mysticism Gershom Scholem described his young friend: “I don’t think I ever saw him walk erect with his head held high. . . . He was easy to recognize from behind by his peculiar gait, which became even more pronounced over the years” (77).

Involvement with the conservative revolutionaries Ludwig Klages, Carl Schmitt, and other thinkers associated with Stefan George would leave a deep impression on his thinking about life and politics. As important to him were the distinctively religious anarchism of Gershom Scholem and the anarchic view of Franz Kafka. Benjamin, the authors show, engaged with the political philosophy of his day from an antiliberal, anti-Kantian perspective (97). During the early 1920s he produced a “multipartite” political theory that merged his interests in philosophy, theology, and aesthetics (127). In 1921 he wrote “A Critique of Violence,” which looked at the contemporary struggle between Fascists and Communists, the state and its opponents, from a surprising angle. Rather than fall back on the familiar opposition of left and right wing, Benjamin asked what mechanism enabled the opposition. He then proposed a different contrast, between a self-serving, conservative impulse of retaining an existing order and a revolutionary drive to create a new world. Benjamin’s method of analysis drew inspiration from anarchist circles and theory, and the authors see that influence in what they call “a particular coloration” of “The Task of the Translator,” a celebrated essay published in 1923 (130). They write, “Benjamin’s thought is from the outset nihilistic, in the Nietzschean sense of ‘divine nihilism,’ which has a creative dimension” (168).

Toward the middle of the 1920s, Benjamin reacted to the growing Fascist movements by cleaving more closely to Marxist Socialism. He moved in intellectual circles committed to fighting radical nationalism, getting to know many Jewish intellectuals, including Ernst Bloch and György Lukács. It was also during this time that Benjamin’s understanding of language became less metaphysical and more political. Reality itself seemed to become “explosively and extensively temporal,” prompting what Benjamin called the principle of the “now of its recognizability” (193).

After meeting Asja Lācis, the Latvian theater director who became the love of his life, Benjamin completed the political shift to Marxism, though he never joined any party. The shift was encouraged by Bertolt Brecht, a friend of Lācis and her husband, Bernhard Reich. (Scholem, always suspicious of Marxists, routinely bemoaned Benjamin’s ideological commitment.)

Although he never held an academic position, the biography claims that this did not hinder his rise to prominence as a literary and cultural critic during the second half of the 1920s (313). The statement rejects two decades of romantic histories that follow Hannah Arendt’s depiction of Benjamin as “unfortunate,” the representative, together with Kafka, of a generational failure.² In contrast, the biographers assert that the recognition that Benjamin received fits with his image of himself as an “intellectual sharpshooter” and as taking “the role of the intellectual pacesetter” (272–73).

His interests during this period included different mediums of expression, such as the “literary montage,” a confirmation that as the nature of political time changed, so did the rest of reality: “The past moment awakens to a present dreaming of it, at the same time as the present

² Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), 182.

moment, waking to the dream of the past, awakens from that dream and hence to itself” (289). These various awakenings were by and large political.

During the 1930s the rise of fascism and his own sexual turmoil cast Benjamin onto heavier issues; he was forced to consider leaving his wife and his adopted country. Eiland and Jennings do not try to prettify Benjamin’s domestic cruelty, labeling him an insensitive husband and a distant father. Against this difficult background, his thinking grew ever more sophisticated, and his work on theoretical and political hermeneutics gave rise to a series of examinations of “the operative power,” or the “life-blood” of the nineteenth century—the flaneur (329).

At about the same time, and contra the recent interpretation offered by Peter Fenves,³ Benjamin and Brecht cooked up a plan for a new critical reading circle with an agenda that included “the annihilation of Heidegger, whose *Being and Time* had appeared in 1927” (346). Heidegger is repeatedly used as a foil in the biography, as the authors show that in spite of a shared opposition to Kant the two thinkers sat on opposite sides of the basic political and intellectual divides of the day. Benjamin’s interpretation of dialectics, for instance, is presented as a reaction against Heidegger (355). The position also constituted, as I have already indicated, a rejection of Scholem, a religious anarchist and sworn foe of atheism who immigrated to Palestine in 1923; he always regretted Benjamin’s failure to join him. In other words, Benjamin rejected both the German and the Zionist, while agreeing with both that the German-Jewish symbiosis has failed. The only sense of belonging left after that, so it seems, was with other radical critics.

Politicizing Benjamin, according to the two scholars, directs our unflinching look at the core of modern culture. In Benjamin’s descriptions, European culture seems always to be on the brink of extinction. His last, monumental project, the *Passagen* (arcades), feels like the unearthed remnants of a vanished civilization. Post-World War II culture, defined by a globalized American order, lent Benjamin and his grand humanist enterprise the feeling of a myth, something close to the idea of the “last European” Benjamin often mentioned. Eiland and Jennings wryly observe that little would have annoyed Benjamin more than this facile fabulation.



Another recent book, *Working with Walter Benjamin: Recovering a Political Philosophy*, complements the new biography. A leading interpreter of Benjamin for two decades, Andrew Benjamin draws on terminology familiar to the readers of “Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” and other essays in his own philosophical explorations. Two of the volumes he has coedited, *Walter Benjamin’s Philosophy: Destruction and Experience* (1994) and *Walter Benjamin and Romanticism* (2002), have become standard references. For his new book, the author has examined a few short texts, setting them in a dialogue with contemporary politics, theology, and life. He is especially interested in the subversive “counter-measure” he associates with Benjaminian critique (2). The way to such a system of counter-measures is through a well-planned interruption in the regular narrative and the conventional connotations—for example, the conflation of religious and secular—offering what Andrew Benjamin calls the “caesura of allowing” (4).

The author’s most troubling question ends his first chapter: how to put the different political and social pressures together in a critique that, as he puts it, “demands that which stands

³ Peter Fenves, *The Messianic Reduction: Walter Benjamin and the Shape of Time* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011).

‘outside.’ . . . If doctrine emerges then it will be the presence of philosophy taking place after the work of destruction” (10). In other words, not only does an ethics of defamiliarization help resist conventions, but it also defines the heart of every “opening” or caesura, and in turn potentiality and happiness. This ethics of otherness “indicates an opening that occurs with and as destruction” (21).

At times this book offers a view of Walter Benjamin quite different from that offered by Eiland and Jennings. Whereas the latter portray their subject as a radical who is willing to destroy everything and begin anew, the former argues forcefully that Benjamin’s bleakness is not nihilistic: “The presence of norms to be undone . . . is not nihilism in any sense at all. What occurs is a critique of norms in the name of norms” (31). Where Eiland and Jennings read destruction as a literal force in Benjamin’s oeuvre, Andrew Benjamin sees it as a hermeneutic tool, “a form of exposure” (31). The key to Benjamin’s half-open doors, destruction means that the eschatological and the messianic are read as metaphors for the “politics of time” or the “interarticulation of destruction and value. . . . The political becomes the way in which that potentiality is actualized or its actualization resisted” (38).

The author is not much interested in Benjamin’s life or his ideas about history. Instead he homes in on the insistent return to actions he associates with Descartes’s legacy of *eversioni* (eversio), which he defines as “overturning as well as . . . destruction” (47). By linking this with Benjamin’s philosophy and politics of time, the author suggests an important thread running through a rather heterogeneous oeuvre. Yet, much like Eiland and Jennings, never does he fall into the trap of mythologizing Benjamin or of the expected liberal order of things; for example, Walter Benjamin, he shows, emphasized the use of violence (or what he called “the confusion of means and ends”) before addressing the value that is given to it, something always connected to ideology and the sense of identity. This aligns Andrew Benjamin with those interpreters, like Sigrid Weigel, who have chosen to interpret Benjamin as a critic of ideology rather than a supporter of one or the other. In other words, the highest form of political thinking, according to both books, seems to be in the critique of political thinking itself or the critique of critique.



These two works impress with their combination of theoretical sophistication, detailed argumentation, and precise historicization, offering readers who come to Benjamin from a range of disciplines unimpeachable tools for expanding their understanding of one of the most influential thinkers of twentieth-century Europe. A