

Benjamin's Theses 'On the Concept of History'

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Benjamin, Andrew. (ed.). *Walter Benjamin and History*. London and New York: Continuum, 2005. 260pp.

Lówy, Michael. *Fire Alarm: Reading Benjamin's 'On the Concept of History'*. Translated by Chris Turner. London and New York: Verso, 2005. 148pp.

Benjamin's Theses were written during the spring of 1940, while living in the most wretched of circumstances as a Jewish exile and refugee in Paris. They were the last piece of discursive writing he could manage before the attempt to leave Nazi-dominated Europe for America ended in despair and suicide near the Spanish border town of Port Bou on September 27. Benjamin referred to the Theses in his correspondence as an explosive blend of materialism and theology, which he had kept safe within himself for over twenty years. They were not ready for publication, he said, because they were susceptible of "enthusiastic misunderstanding". At the same time, they served as "theoretical armature" for his 1939 essay 'On some motifs in Baudelaire': the kind of "mediation" that Adorno had found wanting in Benjamin's earlier work on Baudelaire and the *Arcades Project*, which Benjamin had begun to provide in the first section of his essay on 'Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian' (1937).

In the summer of 1940, Benjamin translated the Theses into French; that version remained unpublished until the *Gesammelte Schriften* (1972-89). The first appearance of the Theses in print was through a French translation by Pierre Missac (1947). The original German text was first published in a periodical through Adorno's efforts (1950), followed by their publication in book-form, edited by Adorno (1955). Their dissemination in English had to wait until Harry Zohn's translation (*Illuminations*, 1968), which is reproduced, with a full apparatus of notes and 'Paralipomena', in the fourth volume of the Harvard edition of the *Selected Writings* (2003). The afterlife of the Theses has been more fortunate than the life of their author: those who turn, and keep returning, to the Theses do so largely in a spirit of assent. The ideas and images articulated by Benjamin from war-torn Europe, in hermetic fashion, have by now become part of the cautionary melancholia with which the latter half the twentieth century has qualified its post-Enlightenment dreams of rational modernity and progress. And as the twenty-first century continues to perpetuate sanguine assertions of the

end of history, the timeliness of Benjamin's Theses renews their passionate and thoughtful plea against false hopes for the future and bad faith about the past.

The Theses are characteristic of Benjamin in several ways: their impact was posthumous; their format breaks down distinctions between the essay, the fragment and the note; their sense of crisis is both personal and representative of a generation; they react to a specific turn of events, yet represent the crystallization of decades of thought and reading; they suspend apparently incompatible elements of thought and belief (materialist and theological) in a collision that is also a form of collusion; and they introduce ideas gleaned from other writers, but transformed through a uniquely poetic mixture of the concrete and the abstract. In more specific terms, they transmute a Utopianism couched in materialist terms into an idea of redemption that accommodates the religious and mystical dimensions of hope and despair into a principled form of resistance to what Benjamin identified as the arch-enemies of the times: fascism in politics, positivism in historiography (Benjamin calls it historicism), and the bland orthodoxy of the Communist movement that rendered it ineffective against the rise of Nazism. The principal enemy is characterized by a notion of progress based on brute mastery over nature, allied to a mystique of technology. The secondary enemy is characterized by a naïve and complacent belief in the ability of the historian to present the past 'as it was'; and an empty idea of time and eternity, which remains blind to the theological grounding of materialist ideas.

Benjamin's resistance is overlaid by enormous and abiding melancholy. But despair is held at bay – only just, or only for the time being, or only in a manner of speaking – by the idea that it is only when we turn to the past (which is filled with unrealized potentialities), and only when we are filled with the shock of urgent recognition that a specific moment from that past can find acknowledgement in the specificity of one's present, only then is the idea of experience as redeemable from time made meaningful in a flash of recognition which Benjamin termed the moment of arrest: '*Jetztzeit*' ('now-time'). The materialist historian, as Benjamin conceives him, turns the gaze of longing away from the empty time of the future towards the unfulfilled potentialities of the past for his idea of redemption, thus providing a secularization of theology, which is also at the same time a theologization of materialism.

The secondary literature on the Theses pursues its exegetical course in one of two ways: either as commentary or as extrapolation. The first type of writing offers itself in the

margins of Benjamin's text as a form of annotation: it identifies sources and analogues; links motifs to other parts of Benjamin's work; explicates allusions; and provides an apparatus of historical, political, literary, philosophical and religious glosses for the Benjamin text. The second type of writing picks a single strand of thought, idea, argument or imagery from the Benjamin text, and then proceeds to elaborate that into a developed argument, using Benjamin's gnomic style as the pretext for its own expansiveness. The first kind of writing is neatly illustrated by Michael Löwy's *Walter Benjamin: Avertissement d'incendie* (first published 2001). The second variety can be illustrated by Andrew Benjamin's edited collection, *Walter Benjamin and History* (2005).

Löwy's monograph is slim in size and modest in scope; but within his chosen limits, he accomplishes the task of the commentator in exemplary fashion. The short prefatory chapter establishes a context for Benjamin's pessimistic philosophy of history through its roots in German Romanticism, Jewish messianism and Marxism. Löwy is impatient with critiques like those of Habermas against Benjamin's alleged anti-evolutionism, or arguments that seek to find common ground between Benjamin and Heidegger, or between Benjamin and postmodernism. Löwy's characteristic predilections surface whenever he draws illustrations from political and cultural history subsequent to Benjamin's life from the political life of Central and South America. Such references reinforce the general claim for the continued relevance of Benjamin's ideas to our times, and the universal application of his remembrance of the oppressed, 'the pariahs (in the sense Hannah Arendt gave to this term) of all ages and all continents' (23).

The significant contributions of either approach can be reviewed by focusing first on the key elements of the various Theses. Löwy's commentary begins with theology as the chess-playing dwarf in Thesis I ("wizened and disreputable" in Benjamin's French translation, "small and ugly" in the English translation). The allegory of materialism as the automaton whose moves are governed by the concealed dwarf of theology has led many commentators to suppose that the dependency of one on the other needs to be resolved in favor of either theology or materialism. Löwy prefers the interpretation that neither is more important than the other: 'they need each other' (27). Thesis II introduces the claims of *Erlösung* ("redemption"), which are linked by Löwy to three affinities: Franz Rosenzweig's *The Star of Redemption* (1921), which provides the Hebrew equivalent, *ge'ulah* for the concept of redemption; the philosopher Hermann Lotze, who is quoted in the *Arcades Project*

(478-9) as arguing that progress, happiness (*Glück*) and fulfillment/completion (*Vollkommenheit*) are all possible only when the claims of the past on the present have been honored; and Max Horkheimer, who had argued in 1934 that since faith in eternity had now broken down, the only court of appeal left for the present to offer the past was that of historiography. Löwy argues that these affinities come to a focus in Benjamin's identification with 'messianic/revolutionary redemption as a task assigned to us by the past' (32). Benjamin's claim, that "we have been endowed with a *weak* messianic power" has occasioned much comment. Giorgio Agamben points to Corinthians. 12: 9 ("my strength is made perfect in weakness"), but Löwy inclines toward the supposition that the use of the word '*weak*' also acknowledges the apprehension that redemption might remain 'a slim possibility' (33). Werner Hamacher in his contribution to the Andrew Benjamin collection makes almost a paradox of a related interpretive nuance: "'*Weak*' denotes ... the susceptibility, on principle, to its failure. There is a messianic power only where it can fail' (44). Thus we see that divergent conjectures retain their plausibility without being mutually exclusionary, illustrating the enigmatic quality of Benjamin's text.

Thesis III speaks of a "redeemed mankind". Löwy relates the idea to Benjamin's allusion, in 'The Storyteller' essay (1936) to 'Origen's speculation about *apokatastasis* (the entry of all souls into Paradise)' (vol.3: 158), and then gives it a different twist when he invokes Benjamin's friend Scholem, whose writings on cabbalistic language provide the notion of *tikkun*, which alludes to "the return of all things to their original state" (35, 123). The nuances of the Christian and the Hebrew terms relate without being exact equivalents; hence, Löwy points out, the words Benjamin used in his French version have a bearing on the connotations of redemption: "*l'humanité restituée, sauvée, rétablie*" (36). Löwy's usefulness extends to glossing the disgust expressed by Theses X-XIII at the prostrate opponents of fascism, by which Benjamin meant the various factions of the political Left whose failure to stop the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact constituted a betrayal of the working-class that was lamely endorsed by the KPD (the German Communist Party) and by the Social Democrats. Such setbacks to the European labor movement put the task for the continual present in sharp relief: "to brush history against the grain" ("*à contre-sens*" in Benjamin's French version).

Löwy suggests that Benjamin's aphorism on documents of culture being at the same time documents of barbarism is analogous in sentiment to Brecht 1935 poem, 'Questions from a Worker who Reads', which asks a series of rhetorical questions: "Great Rome / Is full

of triumphal arches. Who erected them?” (54). Likewise, Lówy is useful in reminding readers that Benjamin’s Angel with his face turned to the past, blown backwards by the wind called Progress, contrasts dramatically with “the perfectly Olympian gaze of History as described by Schiller in one of the canonical texts of the progressive *Aufklärung*” (64). Benjamin’s Angel is kindred to, and may have exercised an influence over, the image used by Horkheimer and Adorno in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment* to underline a similar caveat: “The angel with the fiery sword who drove man out of paradise and onto the path of technological progress is the very symbol of that progress” (63).

That which the Angel is helpless to achieve awaits the Messiah, as a restitution that is both spiritual and political, in which the revolutionary proletariat are one with all the oppressed classes of history. In Thesis XIV, the Messianic principle is like a tiger, and where it leaps is into the past. Benjamin thus relocates the revolutionary principle as having more to do with the past than with the future: violence is called forth at this point because that is how Benjamin conceives of the revolutionary as blasting the “now-time” of the past into the present: a relativization of historicity as the function of a need shared between the past and the present, whose mutual and momentary kinship, once acknowledged by the present as already latent in the past, ejects both outside of chronological, empty time.

Thesis XV commemorates remembrance through the symbolism of the calendar (and Robert Gibbs devotes his entire essay, in the Andrew Benjamin book, to an elaborate gloss on the significance of the Jewish calendar to this Thesis). Thesis XVI dismisses the positivist’s image of history (as something that occurred ‘once upon a time’) as a prostitute who drains men in the bordello of historicism (startling images from Benjamin that have left commentators scurrying for explanations). Thesis XVII rejects the notion of universal history, substituting in its place the establishment of constellations between past and present moments that shock consciousness into monads which arrest time and restore to the revolutionary the possibility of continuing “the fight for the oppressed past”. It is in the articulation of such ideas that Benjamin is most elusive, and that is where the need for explication is most acutely felt.

Lówy’s monograph can be highly recommended as an aid to reading (and teaching) the Benjamin text. In contrast, the Andrew Benjamin collection shows what can be done by taking hold of a single motif, sometimes a single Thesis, and exploring it in depth. The essays

are variable in style, interpretive strategy, and the quality of the insights they offer: none of them makes for easy reading; some are rewarding, while most leave one with the feeling of having to make a very steep climb to a rather short prospect. None of them is quite as suggestive as Benjamin, even at his most opaque; none is as handy as Lówy (with one or two exceptions).

Andrew Benjamin makes it clear in his Preface that the contributors have been given the freedom to approach the Theses from a variety of angles. In principle, that is a good idea; in practice, some do it quite obliquely. Georges Didi-Huberman focuses on modern and postmodern aesthetics with specific reference to Barnett Newman and Benjamin's pairing of aura and trace ("In the trace, we gain possession of the thing; in the aura, it takes possession of us", *Arcades Project*, 447). David Ferris develops the allegory of photography as the image of history by dwelling on the significance of the fact that "the image produced from the negative can bring out what could not have been seen but remains hidden in the historical moment in which the image was captured in its negative form" (29). As an allegory of interpretation this is intriguing; what is less evident is how this might help us see the call to materialist history in a clearer light. Stephanie Polsky approaches the Theses via a long excursus through Kafka's K. in order to promote "a rhizomatic approach to history", in which the Theses are treated as arguing that "the future and past are constantly in the process of becoming each other" (80). Her approach to Benjamin is complicit with assimilating Benjamin to a discourse informed by Deleuze and Guattari. Rebecca Comay approaches Benjamin's attitudes to positivism and historicism via a detour through the role of melancholia and fetishism in Benjamin: we get rather more on the latter than the former. Rainer Nägele acknowledges that the connection he proposes is not self-evident: Kierkegaard-Benjamin-Brecht; in the event, the only bearing this has on Benjamin and history is in how Kierkegaard might have contributed to the image of theology as a dwarf. Charles Rice approaches the topic of historicity through architecture and the role of nineteenth century interiors in that perspective: unfortunately, much of what he has to say is more apt for a collection of essays on the *Arcades Project* than on *Benjamin and History*.

The editor, Andrew Benjamin, offers a characteristically compact and elegant essay on the motifs of boredom and distraction in Benjamin, whose implications refer more to an aesthetics of modernity than to a philosophy of history. There is a sense in which the scholars he has assembled write primarily for other scholars, pursuing their own specific interests over

the Benjamin terrain, less mindful of the title of the book in which they appear than of the gaps and corners in the critical canon to which they contribute, always mindful that yet another essay on a familiar set of topics must have something novel to offer if it is not to appear a rehash of the existing commentary. The essays that deal in more direct and sustained ways with Benjamin's philosophy of history face the problem of covering terrain already much-trampled, but at least their work belongs more aptly in a book with the given title. Werner Hamacher elaborates on those moments in the Theses where Benjamin is suggestive but obscure about the nature of the claims the present must acknowledge in respect to the past. Dimitris Vardoulakis applies the notion of parataxis to the idea of a universal history. Howard Caygill contextualizes the Theses in terms of Benjamin's 1921 fragment, 'Capitalism as Religion', and the role played by Carl Schmitt's idea of a 'state of emergency' and Max Weber's 'Protestant ethic' in Benjamin's approach to capitalism as a mutated religion, while also making room to recognize the significance of Paul Scheerbart for Benjamin. The most accessible and useful essay is by Philippe Simay, in which the author shows how Benjamin's notion of tradition can be distinguished from the philosophical hermeneutics of Dilthey, Heidegger and Gadamer, while also being recognized as primarily an ethical injunction in respect to the vanquished: redemption as a fulfillment of "a promise incessantly betrayed and incessantly deferred" (154).

The somewhat depressing moral to be derived from reviewing the Andrew Benjamin collection is that when academics feel it incumbent upon themselves to extrapolate elaborations on a canonical author as brilliant and baffling as Benjamin, alas, the results can be more labored than seems justified by what the reader can hope to retrieve from so much learning. What Benjamin needs, today – what he always lacked – is greater accessibility, a wider readership. The Andrew Benjamin collection is suited to keeping a score of Benjamin scholars busy in sifting novelty from affect, agreements from disagreements. In contrast, the Lówy book is likely, in its more humble way, to help ordinary as well as academic readers grasp the 'Theses' more closely to the interests of the present.