

HERETICAL CAPITAL: WALTER BENJAMIN'S CULT STATUS IN CULTURAL AND THEORETICAL HISTORY

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ABSTRACT

This piece of writing offers a survey angle of vision on the reception of Walter Benjamin by a myriad of European and US scholars of note in order to offer some working hypotheses and evidence for Benjamin's cult status in the world of academe today. Very exactly, certain lines in the spectrum of scholarship on Benjamin by Theodor Adorno, Hannah Arendt, Leo Bersani, Susan Buck-Morss, Beatrice Hanssen, Carol Jacobs, Martin Jay, Gregg Lambert, Pierre Missac and Richard Wolin will be engaged. Questions concerning modernism and postmodernism and the commodification of intellectual work in the academy and of their advent in the whole dialectic of the reception of Benjamin are also indirectly and directly broached.

KEYWORDS

Walter Benjamin; Theodor Adorno; Hannah Arendt; modernism; postmodernism; commodification of art; twentieth-century literary criticism; twentieth-century philosophy

This scholarly essay offers an investigation into and a survey view of the cult status that Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) has come to possess in literary and cultural theory from the mid-twentieth century down to the present. It will look at Benjamin in the context of other figures such as Theodor Adorno and Hannah Arendt, as well as such later readers as Carol Jacobs (*In the Language of Walter Benjamin*), Beatrice Hanssen (*Walter Benjamin's Other History: Of Stones, Animals, Human Beings, and Angels*), Pierre Missac (trans. *Walter Benjamin's Passages*), Susan Buck-Morss (*The Dialectics of Seeing*), Leo Bersani ("Boundaries of Time and Being" from *The Culture of Redemption*), Richard Wolin (*Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption*) and Martin Jay (*Refractions of Violence*), all of whom, simply by applying their critical lenses to him, have helped endow Benjamin with the educational and cultural prestige he now has in the academic and cultural social systems. One could have pursued Giorgio Agamben at length (a wonderful reader-commentator of Benjamin, who has done much to spread his work), among others, but the sheer limitations of the space for this article necessitated the restricted number of figures that are cited.

The theoretical orientation of the essay will draw inspiration from Pierre Bourdieu's writings on different forms of capital, including cultural capital, and also, more distantly and subterraneously, Niklas Luhmann's writings on aesthetics and on systems theory. Questions of Benjamin's critical work

and conceptual persona in the formation of the canon of cultural and literary theory will thus be brought to the fore by adducing a history of some of the aforementioned reactions to Benjamin for a more inclusive trans-disciplinary understanding of Benjamin's reception, which has at times, to say the very least, reached cult heights.

If one were to offer up a hit parade of arguably four of the more influential figures in thought in the western humanities in the twentieth century, one could do worse than adduce Walter Benjamin, Sigmund Freud, Martin Heidegger, and Ludwig Wittgenstein. And yet, of this quartet, Benjamin was the only one who did not find a place in establishment structures, in Benjamin's case a university or college post (although Wittgenstein, who, incidentally, used to teach at a school in Olomouc, found what he saw as the vanity of academe generally unbearable); therefore the skyrocketing aspect of the meteoric rise in Benjamin's fame was perhaps an historical necessity to make reparations for the profound neglect he received while alive. Benjamin's disciple, Adorno, puts it this way:

The fascination of the person and of his work allowed no alternative other than that of magnetic attraction or horrified rejection. Everything which fell under the scrutiny of his words was transformed, as though it had become radioactive. His capacity for continually bringing out new aspects, not by exploding conventions through criticism, but rather by organizing himself so as to be able to relate to his subject-matter in a way that seemed beyond all convention—this capacity can hardly be adequately described by the concept of 'originality'. . . Benjamin, who as subject actually lived all the 'originary' experiences that official contemporary philosophy merely talks about, seemed at the same time utterly detached from them.¹

The last point gives Benjamin a certain capital form of dignity, for he "actually lived all the 'originary' experiences that official contemporary philosophy merely talks about," thereby, in a Luhmannian spirit (Luhmann has talked of the importance of "testing texts with contexts"), contesting his ideas with experiential information or perhaps equally engendering ideas precisely through the filter of experience.

The dream of happiness for Adorno, too, underwrites Benjamin's cult-like literary integrity when he composes of:

a quality which intellectual departmentalization otherwise reserves for art, but which sheds all semblance when transposed into the realm of theory and assumes incomparable dignity—the promise of happiness . . . In his philosophical topography, renunciation is totally repudiated. Anyone who was drawn to him was bound to feel like the child who catches a glimpse of the lighted Christmas tree through a crack in the closed door . . . Benjamin's thought . . . had the generosity of abundance; it sought to make good everything, all the pleasure prohibited by adjustment and self-preservation, pleasure which is both sensual and intellectual.²

This speaks volumes about the excellent effects of Benjamin's creative oeuvre, and signals again how he got the best out of Adorno, his only true pupil.

1. Theodor W. Adorno, "A Portrait of Walter Benjamin," in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel Weber and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1967), 229.

2. Adorno, "A Portrait of Walter Benjamin," 230.

That Benjamin sought “the promise of happiness” echoes Benjamin’s own famous thoughts on the French novelist Marcel Proust’s similar quest. Adorno explicitly draws a comparison between Benjamin and Heidegger when he writes “that an essay on the Paris arcades is of greater interest philosophically than are ponderous observations on the Being of beings is more attuned to the meaning of his work than the quest for that unchanging, self-identical conceptual skeleton which he relegated to the dustbin.”³ Thus, Benjamin’s *Arcades Project*, compared with Heidegger’s influential philosophy of Being in *Being and Time*, reveals itself for Adorno as being rather more relevant to objective reality and to objective truth. Benjamin, too, was simply uncategorizable with regard to his own particular areas of inquiry. Hence, too, his malignant neglect by the academies of central Europe, from whom, notoriously, he failed to secure an academic post commensurate with his capacities. As concerns the flexibility and wide-ranging nature of Benjamin’s investigations, Adorno suggests that it was precisely the maltreatment his imaginative teacher received from the universities that forged his interdisciplinary critical bite, for Benjamin earned “his living as an essayist, on his own and unprotected. That greatly developed the agility of his profound mind. He learned how to convict the prodigious and ponderous claims of the *prima philosophia* of their hollowness, with a silent chuckle.”⁴ Benjamin, in a special word, had the intelligence to see through the sometimes overly self-congratulatory and well-nigh, if not out-and-out, fraudulent quality of the rather overblown claims of some schools of thought, such as certain spirits of Heideggerianism. Benjamin’s very isolation probably contributed to this ability to de-mythologize the dominant academic mythmakers of his era. And as for Benjamin’s legacy as an essayist, Adorno writes:

The essay as form consists in the ability to regard historical moments, manifestations of the objective spirit, ‘culture’, as though they were natural. Benjamin could do this as no one else . . . He was drawn to the petrified, frozen or obsolete elements of civilization, to everything in it devoid of domestic vitality no less irresistibly than is the collector to fossiles (*sic*) or to the plant in the herbarium. Small glass balls containing a landscape upon which snow fell when shook (*sic*) were among his favourite objects . . .⁵

Adorno’s words, “Small glass balls containing a landscape upon which snow fell when shook” remind one of the cinematic extract of Charles Foster Kane’s towering rage at the end of the 1941 film *Citizen Kane*, in which, after he tears up his wife Susan’s apartment because she had left him, he clutches just such a glass sphere.

Furthermore, for Adorno in this key essay on his teacher:

Benjamin overexposes the objects for the sake of the hidden contours which one day, in the state of reconciliation, will become evident, but in so doing he reveals the chasm

3. Adorno, “A Portrait of Walter Benjamin,” 232.

4. Adorno, “A Portrait of Walter Benjamin,” 232.

5. Adorno, “A Portrait of Walter Benjamin,” 233.

separating that day and life as it is. The price of hope is life . . . and happiness, according to a late fragment which risks everything, is its 'intrinsic rhythm'. Hence the core of Benjamin's philosophy is the idea of the salvation of the dead as the restitution of distorted life through the consummation of its own reification down to the inorganic level . . . In the paradox of the impossible possibility, mysticism and enlightenment are joined for the last time in him.⁶

That "the price of hope is life" taps into the revolutionary aesthetic energies of a kind of theological cast of mind that was Benjamin's own. Additionally, that "happiness according to a late fragment which risks everything, is its 'intrinsic rhythm'" hints at what is among the most profound of Benjamin's critical legacies. Therefore, Adorno's pinpointing that "the core of Benjamin's philosophy is the idea of the salvation of the dead as the restitution of distorted life through the consummation of its own reification down to the inorganic level" cuts to the chase of what is of high creative value for his intellectual master and for the aesthetic, cultural, political and social effects of the cult value of Benjamin.

Another notable figure of twentieth-century thought, Hannah Arendt, writes of Benjamin's delayed acknowledgment:

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.⁷

Such was the case with Benjamin, at least as regards the members of the Institute of Social Research in New York City, which underwrote Benjamin's precarious material situation in the last years of his existence. Arendt here touches upon something we noted that Adorno hinted at above, which is that it was Benjamin's creative particularity and vocational singularity that was not taken on board by academic, social and economic reality:

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 . . . those whose work neither fits the existing order nor introduces a new genre that lends itself to future classification.⁸

So, in this framework Benjamin would be considered brilliant, though he just did not fit into the existing academic and literary structures: an understandable fate given how structured mental experience and activity are in the control-oriented late modern era, including the businesses of thinking and of writing. Benjamin's mode of thinking and writing caused too much classificatory interference for his own lifetime success in an academic

6. Adorno, "A Portrait of Walter Benjamin," 241.

7. Hannah Arendt, "Introduction: Walter Benjamin: 1892–1940," in *Illuminations*, by Walter Benjamin (London: Pimlico, 1999), 8.

8. Arendt, "Introduction: Walter Benjamin: 1892–1940," 9.

social system that could not help but be inherently hostile to his cosmic properties. Yet Arendt underpins the aforementioned with another overall aspect attached to Benjamin, “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.”⁹ Another key quality of the cultural effect of Benjamin’s cult status derives from what Arendt thinks here about Benjamin being the last in a longstanding line of eminent “men of letters”:

[I]n Benjamin the element of culture combined in such a unique way with the element of the revolutionary and rebellious. It was as though shortly before its disappearance the figure of the *homme de lettres* was destined to show itself once more in the fullness of its possibilities, although—or, possibly, because—it had lost its material basis in such a catastrophic way, so that the purely intellectual passion which makes this figure so lovable might unfold in all its most telling and impressive possibilities.¹⁰

So it is that with the *facta bruta* of the onslaught of advanced capitalism the traditional man of letters of independent means would become an anachronism with Benjamin’s passing. Arendt argues, too, with regard to the cult, that “the fetish character which Benjamin explicitly claimed for the collector as well as for the market determined by him has replaced the ‘cult value’ and is its secularization.”¹¹ Therefore in this schema one may speak of various fetishizations of Benjamin, instead of various Benjamin cults (in the same way that New Testament scholars today speak of various competing Christ-cults in the first century of our era after the death of Jesus of Nazareth).

To shift registers here, in one of the most outstanding books on Benjamin published in English, Susan Buck-Morss’s *The Dialectics of Seeing*, she notes:

After the initial, politically charged reception that greeted the first volumes of Benjamin’s complete works in the early 1970s, he has quite rapidly gained respectability within universities . . . where he has been inserted into the developmental histories of the disciplines and bent to fit existing course progressions.¹²

This objective situation is partly because the humanities have become more flexible in their own self-understandings, self-descriptions and self-presentations in advanced commodity society. In a way one may argue that Benjamin’s critical reception has benefited from the cross-fertilization of disciplines of the last forty years. Of Benjamin’s particular form of

9. Arendt, “Introduction: Walter Benjamin: 1892–1940,” 11. It is perhaps worthy of note that for some researchers even just working on Benjamin may augur bad luck, for the present writer had his own research notes on Benjamin for the present prose piece lost in one check-in piece of luggage that remains missing from a flight on 31 May 2005 from Paris to Prague; nevertheless, the requisite re-reading and re-note-taking accomplished in the intervening time has no doubt brought the present research somewhat closer to Benjamin’s cult status.

10. Arendt, “Introduction: Walter Benjamin: 1892–1940,” 33.

11. Arendt, “Introduction: Walter Benjamin: 1892–1940,” 47.

12. Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), 222.

philosophical sanity Buck-Morss remarks that “if Benjamin threw the traditional language of Western metaphysics into the junkroom, it was to rescue the metaphysical experience of the objective world, not to see philosophy dissolve into the play of language itself.”¹³ Hence a certain sort of philosophical and literary play Benjamin’s thought would denude as part of a narcissistic intellectual western culture and occidental world.

Buck-Morss also espouses Benjamin’s own vocation with these words (a line of business that could only intensify his being a counter-agent of counter-culture and thus heretical or counter-capital in the Pierre Bourdieu-inspired notion of the stock exchange of cultural capital):

Benjamin’s comments on the figure of the flâneur, the nineteenth-century stroller on the city streets . . . the ‘ur-form’ of the modern intellectual [whose] object of inquiry is modernity itself [who] he walks the streets and ‘studies’ the crowd . . . his economic base shifts . . . no longer protected by the academic’s mandarin status . . . Baudelaire embodies the qualities of the flâneur . . . his acute awareness of his highly ambivalent situation—at once socially rebellious bohemian and producer of commodities for the literary market— . . . accounts for Baudelaire’s ability to “teach” Benjamin’s generation of intellectual producers about their own objective circumstances, in which their interests in fact converge with those of the proletariat.¹⁴

Benjamin’s publishing activities and work, then, dovetail with those that are more to do with working class forms of presentation and expression. The same may be said today of certain agents of counter-capital within proletarianized quarters of academia.

Regarding the slide the Jewish Benjamin took downhill into his appalling physical obliteration, which was ostensibly due (although it has never been properly corroborated, it has to be said) to suicide through fear of Nazi power and a need to flee from where it might find and thus incinerate him, Buck-Morss recounts an eyewitness:

I noticed that Benjamin was carrying a large black briefcase . . . It looked heavy and I offered to help him carry it. “This is my new manuscript,” he explained. “But why did you take it for this walk?” “You must understand that this briefcase is the most important thing to me,” he said. “I cannot risk losing it. It is the manuscript that must be saved. It is more important than I am.”¹⁵

This would seem a kind of archetypal sacrificial gesture on the part of Benjamin that could only help to service the moral effects of his cult status for future generations to come. Further, we read:

Now back to the steep vineyard . . . Here for the first and only time Benjamin faltered. More precisely, he tried, failed, and then gave formal notice that this climb was beyond his capability. José and I took him between us, with his arms on our shoulders we dragged him and the bag up the hill. He breathed heavily, yet he made no complaint, not even a sigh. He only kept squinting in the direction of the black bag.¹⁶

13. Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 223.

14. Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 304.

15. Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 332.

16. Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 332.

With this rather poignant retelling, Buck-Morss underwrites what could only contribute to Benjamin as a kind of heroic cult figure deserving of every single iota of such social, cultural and philosophical capital that would, in turn, service the ethical and moral effects of the cult quality of his conceptual persona and of his creative work. Nevertheless, we read the following disclaimer about Benjamin's fate:

In October 1940, Horkheimer requested detailed information from the Spanish border police. He was told Benjamin's death was "not suicide but from natural causes," . . . and that his personal effects taken into custody consisted of . . . a leather briefcase of the type used by businessmen, a man's watch, a pipe, six photographs, an X-ray photograph (radiografía), glasses, various letters, periodicals and a few other papers, the contents of which are not noted, as well as some money . . . No mention of a "heavy" manuscript. The "few other papers" have not been preserved. Nor was his grave marked or tended.¹⁷

So, perhaps we shall never know what happened to Benjamin's long script on that mountain, or if there even was one, and how it was that he checked out, i.e., died. The mystery instead multiplies geometrically.

Furthermore, Buck-Morss makes a political point when she warns those who work in the wake of Benjamin that they may well ignore and betray his true motivations:

Benjamin's dialectical images are neither aesthetic nor arbitrary. He understood historical "perspective" as a focus on the past that made the present, as revolutionary "now-time," its vanishing point. He kept his eyes on this beacon, and his interpreters would do well to follow suit. Without its constant beam, they risk becoming starry-eyed by the flashes of brilliance in Benjamin's writings (or in their own), and blinded to the point.¹⁸

This sort of forceful, poetic and metaphorical cultural criticism seems goaded on by Benjamin's own form of being (and not only his mode of writing) and, for many other thinking beings even now, Benjamin as a conductor of non-organic energies (that is, as a dead human being but a living creating and thinking being who spurs others on), and Buck-Morss is scarcely alone in offering up this kind of criticism of Benjamin among our adduced scholar-critics. Even more importantly for us here, Buck-Morss implies an undeniable danger that middle-class teachers and students hijacked by advanced capitalism would forget that the impetus for Benjamin's investigations was profound social change rather than flashy post-modern, post-structuralist or post-literary features.

In a nice twist to the cult function that Benjamin ostensibly has, Buck-Morss writes incisively that

"One should never trust what an author himself says about his work," wrote Benjamin. Nor can we, because if Benjamin is correct, the truth content of a literary work is released only after the fact, and is a function of what happens in that reality which becomes the medium for its survival.¹⁹

17. Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 334.

18. Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 339.

19. Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 339.

A creative and participatory sort of cultural criticism is therefore required. Buck-Morss adds that, “In the flâneur, concretely, we recognize our own consumerist mode of being-in-the-world. (The same can be argued for all of Benjamin’s historical figures. In commodity society all of us are prostitutes, selling ourselves to strangers; all of us are collectors of things.)”²⁰ We also read,

The *Passagen-Werk* suggests that it makes no sense to divide the era of capitalism into formalist “modernism” and historically eclectic “post-modernism,” as these tendencies have been there from the start of industrial culture. The paradoxical dynamics of novelty and repetition simply repeat themselves anew.

Modernism and postmodernism are . . . political positions in the century-long struggle between art and technology. If modernism expresses utopian longing by anticipating the reconciliation of social function and aesthetic form, postmodernism acknowledges their nonidentity and keeps fantasy alive. Each position thus represents a partial truth; each will recur “anew,” so long as the contradictions of commodity society are not overcome.²¹

Beyond the din of voices that argue for one or the other of the two positions of modernism and of postmodernism, Buck-Morss here lucidly articulates with such a conceptual cartography a more dialectical approach to the question, including, of course, Benjamin’s own objective intellectual and life situation.

In yet another instance of Benjamin’s ability to live on as a living, thinking being if not as a human being, Martin Jay declares in his *Refractions of Violence*:

Benjamin’s intransigent resistance to symbolic healing and positive commemoration merits continued respect . . . he gave the lie to the assumption that the victims of the war—or more profoundly, of the society ruled by myth and injustice that could have allowed it to happen—could be best understood as heroic warriors who died for a noble cause. This is a lesson that ironically can be learned as well from the fate Benjamin himself suffered on the eve of the Second World War. For his suicide on the French/Spanish border also defied symbolic closure.²²

This extract highlights Benjamin’s rare power to defetishize and demystify the social, adding yet more to his credibility as a genuine cult figure and to its specifically social and moral effects. Jay may also help us to further our argument by offering another example; since it makes the blanket assumption that Benjamin’s suffering did not contribute to his profundity in some fashion, Jay here states in a way that resonates with a certain spirit of American positivity of

a plaintive letter Walter Benjamin sent to Gershom Scholem from Berlin in 1931, almost a full decade before he ended his life fleeing fascism on the French-Spanish border. “I have reached an extreme,” he wrote, “Someone shipwrecked, who climbs the crumbling mast of his boat’s wreckage.” And then he added with desperate hope: “But he has the

20. Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 345.

21. Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 359.

22. Martin Jay, *Refractions of Violence* (London: Routledge, 2003), 24.

chance from there to signal for his rescue.” Benjamin’s signals were, as we know, not heard . . .²³

However harsh such a macro-level diagnosis of Jay’s North American positivism as argued above may seem, one may simply believe that to nuance his assertion a little bit would be a good thing for it may after all be precisely the fact that Benjamin was in such a “shipwreck” that gave him the purchasing power to obtain a special insight.

In a certain kind of deflation of Benjamin’s intellectual currency, we read from Beatrice Hanssen’s hand: “If Gershom Scholem was one of Benjamin’s early companions in his study of the cabala, he also often turned into one of his harshest critics, chiding his friend for engaging in a dialogue with conservative or protofascist authors whose politics defied redemption.”²⁴ Further than this, in a radical remark meant to put Benjamin’s real subversive and heretical value as a thinker on center stage, Hanssen writes:

Invoking phenomenological data about the perception of the insane and so-called primitive, preanimistic peoples, Benjamin boldly subverted philosophical tradition when he suggested that Kant’s cognitive, empirical consciousness was itself no more than “a type of insane consciousness.” . . . In so doing, he not only turned the Kantian tradition inside out but in fact meant to expand the notion of experience to include religious experience and the phenomenon of madness.²⁵

For Hanssen,

the iconoclastic potential of Benjamin’s notions of allegory and the fragment has been well established . . . But less attention has been devoted to the way in which the categories of decay and transience, at the center of the *Trauerspiel* study, anticipate the later materialistic theory of the work of art in an age of mechanical reproduction . . . Benjamin’s preoccupation with transience was not simply motivated by the baroque’s obsession with things in decay but equally concerned the temporal, historical, and process-like nature of modern art.²⁶

The three lattermost aspects of the work of art cited here for Benjamin remain topical and up-to-the-minute for current critical and academic debates.

As for the powerful specter of yet another cult figure, Nietzsche himself, we read from Hanssen:

Benjamin carefully distinguished the *Unmensch* from the hedonism of Nietzsche’s *Übermensch*, who was to overcome the “Krankheit Mensch” (the illness of being human) . . . Instead of celebrating Nietzsche, Benjamin saw his own theory of the *Unmensch*, which he claimed to have taken from Salomo Friedländer, as a corrective to the overman. . . . Benjamin’s desire to expel the specter of Nietzschean politics can also be gleaned from one of the notes to a draft version of the Kraus essay, which stated,

23. Jay, *Refractions of Violence*, 116. The quotation is from “Walter Benjamin to Gershom Scholem, April 17, 1931,” in *Briefe*, ed. Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1966), 2:532.

24. Beatrice Hanssen, *Walter Benjamin’s Other History: Of Stones, Animals, Human Beings, and Angels* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 6.

25. Hanssen, *Walter Benjamin’s Other History*, 29. The quotation is from Benjamin, “On the Program of the Coming Philosophy.”

26. Hanssen, *Walter Benjamin’s Other History*, 66.

“deepest opposition to Nietzsche: the relation of the inhuman to the over-man” Perhaps Benjamin aspired to hold the disturbing shadow of Nietzsche’s over-man at bay by means of the category of sobriety, which was to dispel the irrationalism of Nietzschean intoxication.²⁷

Let it not remain unremarked that Hanssen’s fine book particularly adds to the aesthetic and intellectual effects of Benjamin’s cult status.

In another well-tuned study of Benjamin, by Carol Jacobs, we read, “In a sense, reading Benjamin is inevitably an attempt to redeem him—though, certainly, to rearticulate his work does not mean “to recognize ‘it as it really was.’” Much in Benjamin speaks to the contrary.”²⁸ This sort of critical motivation of Jacobs, of course, reminds one of Kafka’s famous injunction, which Gregg Lambert spotlights:

The categorical imperative of modernity’s unfinished project can be found in a formula that Benjamin first ascribes to Kafka: ‘Act in such a manner that you give the gods something to do.’ The principal reference here is to a passage from the *Phenomenology of Mind*, where Hegel describes the function of the Epic narrative as the invocation, or call, through the mimesis of the ‘voice of the dead’ (*mnemosyne*, memory), that cuts a ‘ditch’ in the earth, a rift or crack in time, through which the dead return to seek revenge on the living. Consequently, it is only in such moments that the gods have ‘something to do’—to provide a measure of justice, victory and *kudos*—that there is the chance of sealing or closing up the ditch in memory and restoring order to time.²⁹

Jacobs notes of the status of memories in Benjamin’s *Berlin Chronicle* that they form “a medium in which debris and buried ruins are reinterred as one probes, a digging in which no thing is brought to the surface. And yet Benjamin hardly bemoans a loss of treasure, but celebrates, rather, the dark good fortune of the digging itself and even the failure to find.”³⁰ Here it is the subjective creative journey and the process of memory that count and not the end-point. Further, Jacobs underscores again why Benjamin failed to receive his just desserts institutionally with respect to academic structures: “Benjamin, like others before him, dissolves an old genre (literary criticism) in order to found a new genre that combines fiction and commentary in one.”³¹ This is precisely the point and what ultimately will prove Benjamin’s most valuable intellectual contribution and legacy. For his cult status as a writer of interdisciplinary work now legitimates new cultural effects such as the disciplines of contemporary literary and cultural theory and inter-cultural studies, which, when operating at their best, are on the side of that which

27. Hanssen, *Walter Benjamin’s Other History*, 123.

28. Carol Jacobs, *In the Language of Walter Benjamin* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 3. The quotation is from Benjamin’s essay “Ober den Begriff der Geschichte,” translated by Jacobs as “On the Concept of History.” Under the title “Theses on the Philosophy of History” it was published in Zorn’s translation in *Illuminations*, 253–64. There it is translated as “to recognize it ‘the way it really was’” (255).

29. Gregg Lambert, *The Return of the Baroque in Modern Culture* (London: Continuum, 2004), 70.

30. Jacobs, *In the Language of Walter Benjamin*, 11.

31. Jacobs, *In the Language of Walter Benjamin*, 40.

can contest the abuse of forms of social power that unfortunately have co-opted critical academic thought.

In yet another critical study of Benjamin, composed by Pierre Missac across some five decades (he was introduced to Benjamin by Georges Bataille), we note Benjamin's enforced peripatetic existence, which fueled his trans-disciplinary investigations, for his wings, after all, were tied down neither to any particular department nor to any geographical, institutional or ideological school:

it is clear that material circumstances cannot be ignored . . . This is particularly true for Benjamin . . . leading him to take refuge in the suspended temporality of travel, forcing him to move ceaselessly from one place to another, or preventing him from doing so—making, in short, a passant, a transient, of this man who was born to be a flâneur, and making of the transient a fugitive.³²

The real material brutality visited on Benjamin teaches one to think of the very ignorance of what underwrote that dominant day-to-day reality. Missac writes here with some passion:

Benjamin's fate can be defined as extending 'from one suicide to the other,' the phrase 'from one war to another' is just as accurate . . . war would have its revenge, making the machinations of the Little Hunchback, whose worst exploits were no more than adolescent pranks, seem ridiculous . . . Benjamin, who would not be its last victim, had foreseen it. His body, which, despite what some have said, did indeed exist, disappeared after his death. We have nothing but one more death without burial among so many others; no name on a common grave, even for someone who, while alive, provided a name for the nameless . . .³³

That Benjamin endured "one suicide after another" perhaps also encouraged him to commit a kind of interpretive and egoistical suicide in his intellectual investigations, thereby adding to his depth, insight, and, most of all, true authority of what we may call, for lack of a better term, impersonality (Benjamin, after all, had no official post that gave him redoubtable cultural or academic authority). This also probably helped Benjamin to forge new compositional genres for which there is as yet no name, except perhaps creative criticism. In a word, we need new categories to capture the reality of Benjamin's emancipatory work.

Let us now turn our attention to Richard Wolin's outstanding introductory book on Benjamin, in which he writes of "Benjamin's profound identification with the 'destructive character' who appreciates 'how immensely the world is simplified when tested for its worthiness for destruction.' The destructive character is anything but goal-oriented and devoid of an overarching vision of the way the world should be." Wolin continues by quoting Benjamin: "He has few needs, and the least of them is to know what will replace what has been destroyed." It was in the same spirit that he enthusiastically cited a remark of Adolf Loos: 'If human work consists only of destruction, it is truly human,

32. Pierre Missac, *Walter Benjamin's Passages*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), 2.

33. Missac, *Walter Benjamin's Passages*, 10.

natural, noble work."³⁴ Here what Wolin suggests is a kind of conceptual persona of Benjamin as a saboteur or even Nietzsche-like agent of the false, the falsifier of established truths. Furthermore, Wolin notes:

For Benjamin, the more manifestly historical life appears destitute of salvation, the more inexorably it presents itself as a ruin, the more it refers to that sphere *beyond* historical life where redemption lies in store. This sphere can only be reached through the utter *devaluation and mortification of all worldly values*. Just as the critical mortification of works of art points the way to their ultimate salvation, so, too, the *mortification of historical life serves as the negative indication of the path to redeemed life*.³⁵

The same may be said of Benjamin's own life narrative and life's work, of course, in how in ironical fashion the authentically academic or academistic may be said very precisely in due course to prove to be Benjamin's anti-academic enforced status and mode of operation as an ephemeral human-being-in-the-world. Wolin also offers up a very pointed statement about Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht when he considers:

Originally, both men . . . were inspired by the possibility of transforming art itself from within, and thus preventing it from degenerating to the level of mere consolation. Both men . . . realize[d] the inherent foolhardiness of attempting to reach the masses directly; instead, they sought to influence other left-leaning intellectuals of similar backgrounds.³⁶

So here at least Benjamin and the subsequent specter of his cult status would seem to want to affect the propensities and proclivities of, above all, other academic- and thinking-being leftists. To try and exercise any interventionary force on the multitude would, for them, be dewy-eyed and inefficacious. Given their own particularities, this need not sound, with respect to the general reader, as if Benjamin and Brecht are throwing in the towel with respect to contesting abusive power and injustice. Quite the opposite. What Wolin writes about Adorno on music might also enrich our present considerations:

there is the growing cult of musical 'stars,' the beneficiaries of a totally artificial and contrived buildup on the part of the industry. The result is that the specific quality of this or that individual song ceases to matter . . . and it is purchased merely for the sake of the *name* of the artist. Art thereby regresses to *cult* in the full-fledged totemic sense of the word. It becomes nothing more than a *fetish*, part of the logic of commodification or the 'fetishism of commodities' in Marx's sense.³⁷

Here cult status would be a bad, repressive and deceptive thing, more to do with a name brand that spoils one's taste and not a good, authentic or genuine thing more to do with revolutionary insight and energies that promote emotional, imaginative, intellectual and perceptual development. Crucially, for Benjamin, as Wolin notes:

34. Richard Wolin, *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption*, rev. ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), xv.

35. Wolin, *Walter Benjamin*, 59. Wolin's italics.

36. Wolin, *Walter Benjamin*, 159.

37. Wolin, *Walter Benjamin*, 195.

The foremost danger of modernity is that its radical disrespect for tradition runs the grave risk of totally eradicating our links with the past, thus squandering that invaluable ‘temporal index of redemption’ which tradition contains. An *authentic* sublation of the past would necessarily *preserve* the promise of redemption that has been sedimented in the artifacts and ruins of traditional life.³⁸

This also reveals some cultural and historical effects of Benjamin’s insightfulness and cult status over and against the trendoids that go in for the latest item on the menu of intellectual commodities for scholarly consumption.

Our last adduced critical scholar of Benjamin, Leo Bersani, writes in a highly critical way that

The disease of modernity (more profoundly, of history) that Benjamin analyzes is first of all . . . the disease of his perception of modernity. The redemptive need in Benjamin’s critique of the modern condemns that critique to a kind of mystified morbidity; it always has to be a question of ‘truth’ breaking in upon, or being made to emerge from, degraded phenomena—degraded by virtue of their very phenomenality. It is tempting to see Benjamin’s great popularity today as a sign of our complicity in such mystifications. It is perhaps, more pointedly, a sign of the extraordinary hold on our thought of the culture of redemption. For in Benjamin we find the traits that are most deeply characteristic of this culture: the scrupulous registering of experience in order to annihilate it, and the magical and nihilistic belief that immersion in the most minute details of a material content will not only reduce that content but simultaneously unveil its hidden redemptive double.³⁹

This is dense material that provokes one to think of Benjamin afresh amidst the wildly enthusiastic chorus of applause that he is now wont to receive in moderately self-selective quarters. Yet the remark that “It is tempting to see Benjamin’s great popularity today as a sign of our complicity in such mystifications. It is perhaps, more pointedly, a sign of the extraordinary hold on our thought of the culture of redemption” misses the point that the sort of redemption Bersani critiques in his *The Culture of Redemption* has rather more to do with American positivity and the cultural politics of William J. Bennett and cultural conservatives than with Walter Benjamin; in a word, Bersani essays rather too hard to pigeonhole Benjamin for the sake of his overall argument, although a scholar as extremely subtle and forceful as Bersani would not typically be likely to do so. Still, some contours of this criticism by Bersani of Benjamin remain to be thought of again and again as a sort of vigilant safeguarding of Benjamin’s legacy, which is, after all, on balance, a good form of cult status instead of a rather retrograde version in which one may find more to do with the name of the figure being adduced than with the qualities of the work produced.

In the final tally, given the foregoing explosion of discourses (many of them book-length) regarding Benjamin within academia in just the past few decades, it would seem that the true social, political, aesthetic, moral/ethical and cultural effects of Benjamin’s status have only just begun to be filtered

38. Wolin, *Walter Benjamin*, 217–18.

39. Leo Bersani, *The Culture of Redemption* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 54.

and registered, even as the wind in Benjamin's sails continues to gain in magical force.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ARTICLES

Erik S. Roraback

Heretical Capital: Walter Benjamin's Cult Status in Cultural
and Theoretical History 5

James Grove

To State the Problem Correctly: Facing the Black Tickets
in Jayne Anne Phillips's *Machine Dreams* 19

Beata Zawadka

Ideal Carer: The Contemporary Southern White Elite Matron
in Peter Taylor's Short Stories 29

Martina Vránová

Peter Ackroyd's *First Light*: Not Altogether Barren Ancestry 47

Jaroslav Peprník

The Myth of King Arthur and its Czech Reception 69

Marianne Kongerslev

Queering the Family: Kinship, Blood Relations and Marriage
in Showtime's *Queer as Folk* 81

BOOK REVIEWS

A Historical Guide to James Fenimore Cooper, edited by

Leland S. Person (reviewed by Michal Peprník) 93

Edgar G. Ulmer: Essays on the King of the B's, edited by

Bernd Herzogenrath (reviewed by Martina Knápková) 98

*The Return of Král Majáles: Prague's International Literary
Renaissance 1990–2010; An Anthology*, edited by Louis Armand

(reviewed by Matthew Sweney) 102