$Walter Benjamin's Archive: Image, Text, Sign$

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What to make of this strange book? As a collection of the more esoteric elements of Walter Benjamin's personal archives and archivings, it is quite peculiar. It seems prima facie that those for whom these "remnants" might be useful could only be Benjamin scholars, to whom these materials have already been made available in German. It is perhaps for this reason that the English translation of Walter Benjamin's Archive: Bilder, Texten und Zeichen (Suhrkamp 2006) is designated a "memoir." It is not a memoir in any traditional sense, consisting as it does of reproductions and translations of Benjamin's archival materials, arranged into thirteen chapters by four editors. These groupings are justified by the editors with brief remarks at the beginning of each chapter. This characterization may, however, be fitting insofar as it yields results for those most interested in the "life and works" of Benjamin, as much of the secondary literature is, rather than engaging in the appropriation or critique of his life-work. For those working in the former vein, this beautiful hardcover volume could very well be rewarding. As the editors note, it certainly saves one the trouble of flying to Germany to access the original material or tracking down a copy of the German original.

Each chapter is unified by a theme, which gives one an impression of how Benjamin thought. True to the commonly-held image of Benjamin as the idiosyncratic, melancholic collector, these chapters often seem to imply that the way he thought might serve as a satisfactory explanation for why he thought the things he did. These archival materials are taken to reveal the "points at which topicality flashes up, places that preserve the idiosyncratic registrations of an author, subjective, full of gaps, unofficial" (2). Of course, this citation could describe the work Benjamin managed to publish in his lifetime, not to mention the unpublished fragments and essays already collected in English in the four-volume Selected Writings.

I take this to be a key point for the editors. Benjamin's oeuvre already seems to be so thoroughly idiosyncratic that the most well-known pieces of Benjamin scholarship consist in competing attempts to characterize his thinking: Scholem's mystic, Adorno's dialectician, Arendt's "poetic thinker" and Habermas' redemptive critic. What this volume reveals is that the characteris-
tically ambivalent, probing and obscure aspects of Benjamin’s work are by no means artifice or dissimulation. Rather, these were basic features of his thought, which render futile any attempt to assimilate it to any particular program.

Accordingly, this book is a self-conscious performative exploration of Benjamin’s peculiarities. Setting the entire work in context is an excerpt from “Excavation and Memory.” It suggests that this collection of fragments and scraps is not intended to provide new works of general philosophical interest, but to “yield an image of the person who remembers... the strata from which its findings originate [in this case, Walter Benjamin’s work] but also... the strata which first had to be broken through [in this case, his life and its circumstances].” In attempting to mimic Benjamin’s own archival propensities, while maintaining the “method” of the *Arcades Project* of simply “showing” the pieces, allowing them to speak for themselves without commentary, the hope is to present something like a memoir, a biography as Benjamin might ideally have done it himself.

As mentioned, the biographical aspects of the book could certainly be interesting to someone who already has some knowledge of the basic contours of Benjamin’s life. But, is there anything of particularly philosophical interest in it? A loaded question, yes, but in a volume that includes chapters of Benjamin’s transcriptions of his young son’s words, photographs of Russian toys, and a cryptic final chapter consisting only of sibyl mosaics, a not entirely unjustified one. While explicit theoretical pieces are conspicuously absent from the book—the editors admit to excluding remarks on Kant and drug-influenced experience—the surprising answer is “yes!”

The first two chapters are particularly interesting. The first, with its documentation of Benjamin’s obsessive self-documentation, reveals an image of a thinker attempting to maintain a coherent and complete life-work (even if not an easily classifiable one). The second, “Scrappy Paperwork,” is a collection of Benjamin’s notes written on prescription pads, napkins, etc. The contents of these pieces are interesting unto themselves: notes on aura and types of knowledge (previously unavailable in English), Proust and Kafka. Taken collectively, they give a sense of Benjamin’s—who was normally and extraordinarily particular about his writing materials—circumstances. This chapter also has one of the more interesting editorial introductions. While it has become a commonplace that the *Arcades Project* represents Benjamin’s greatest attempt at a fragmentary “materialist” historiography, the editors make clear that the dispersion and dissemination of his own work were nothing positive. The safe-
guarding of these scraps and remnants is only significant as a strategic response to the situation which prevented Benjamin from achieving the goal made evident in the previous chapter. This raises several questions: what is the goal of fragmentary historiography, and why ought it to be pursued? How does this relate to the concept of the “aura” as the historical testimony or authority of a work? What could it mean to “redeem” an historical life-work?

Regarding the rest of the work, the most interesting ideas are almost all undeveloped fragments, which will be of varying use relative to the purposes of their readers. For example, the third chapter, “From Small to Smallest Details,” is fascinating if only to see a single sheet of Benjamin’s handwriting translate into three typed pages. It also demonstrates Benjamin’s method of writing, his desire to mediate the direct flow of ideas, to delay them in order to focus them, by writing in almost incomprehensibly tiny script. Besides this, there is the tantalizing fragment, previously unavailable in English, entitled “Peace Commodity.” This polemic touches on the themes of Kantian perpetual peace, the difference between worldly- and metaphysically-grounded conceptions of peace, and actually predicts the coming European war as early as 1926 (55).

Again, this is a strange volume. As a memoir it is unorthodox, and while it certainly falls short as a “philosophical text,” it explicitly is not one. Therefore, I suppose that the proper response is to be grateful for the new resources that it gratuitously provides.

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