

THE LEO BAECK
MEMORIAL LECTURE 8

WALTER BENJAMIN
BY GERSHOM SCHOLEM

LEO BAECK INSTITUTE / NEW YORK / 1965

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The Leo Baeck Institute was founded by representative organizations of Jews from Germany for the purpose of collecting material on and sponsoring research into the history of the Jewish community in Germany and in other German-speaking countries from the Emancipation to its dispersion. The Institute is named in honour of the man who was the last representative figure of German Jewry in Germany during the Nazi period.

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Walter Benjamin

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I

In 1965 it will be 25 years since Walter Benjamin — for as many years a close friend of mine — took his own life when, on his flight from the Germans, he had crossed the Pyrenees into Spain with a group of refugees, and the local official at Port Bou threatened to turn them back and extradite them to France. He was 48 years old at the time. A life lived entirely beyond the footlights of the public scene, though linked with it through his literary activities, passed into complete oblivion, except for the few who had received an unforgettable impression from him. During over twenty years, from the start of the Nazi era in Germany to the publication of a collection of the majority of his most important writings in 1955, his name was as thoroughly forgotten as any in the intellectual world. At best he was the subject of an esoteric whispering campaign which some of us assiduously promoted. It is due largely to the intense efforts of Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno that this has changed in the German-speaking region. Adorno never tired of pointing out Benjamin's towering stature; moreover, at a time when it was by no means easy to find a publisher for a venture of that kind, he succeeded in winning over the Suhrkamp Verlag for the publication of a two-volume edition of Benjamin's writings (*Schriften*). In the generation of authors as well as readers now coming into its own he is greatly respected as the most eminent literary critic of his time; some of his writings have come out in new editions, the large volume of selected writings *Illuminationen* was published conspicuously and in a substantial edition, and in the course of the current year we can expect the publication of a fairly comprehensive selection of his letters — some of them very important — edited by Adorno and myself. They will present a picture of his life and work.

I first set eyes on Walter Benjamin late in the autumn of 1913 at a discussion between the Zionist youth, and Jewish members both of Wynecken's "Anfang" group and the Free German Student Association, which he attended as the main spokesman of the latter group. I have forgotten what he said but I have the most vivid memory of his bearing as a speaker. This left a lasting impression because of his way of speaking extempore without so much as a glance at his audience, staring with a fixed gaze at a remote corner of the ceiling which he harangued with much intensity, in a style incidentally that was, as far as I remember, ready for print. I noticed the same behaviour on some later

occasions. At the time he was considered the best mind in that circle in which he was fairly active during the two years before the First World War, for a while as President of the Free Student Association at Berlin University. By the time I made his acquaintance — one day in Spring 1915 during my first term, when we were following up a discussion on a lecture by Kurt Hiller who had treated us to a passionate rationalist debunking of history — he had completely withdrawn from his former circle. In the years 1915 to 1923 when, living in almost complete seclusion, he followed his studies and took the first steps to launch out beyond them I was on very close terms with him and spent much of that time, especially 1918 and 1919 in Switzerland, together with him. The problem of Judaism and its discussion occupied a central place in our relationship in those years. Between 1916 and 1930 Benjamin considered again and again, on various occasions and in the most different situations, whether he should not leave Europe and go to Palestine. Actually he never got beyond the initial efforts and preparations, and this, I am convinced, was not by accident. Late in summer 1923 I went myself to Jerusalem. In the following years he embarked — hesitantly at first, afterwards, especially from about 1930, with growing determination — on the attempt to absorb historical materialism into his mental system and make it the basis of his literary production. During that period there were only two occasions, in Paris and Berlin, when I spent days or even weeks in his company and we had lively, indeed at times tempestuous discussions about the new turn in his thinking, which I was unable to approve and considered a denial of his true philosophic mission. Until his death we conducted a correspondence which was very intense at times, and his letters belong to my most cherished possessions. Thus my picture of Walter Benjamin, though authentic in its way, has always been determined by personal decisions.

In his youth his character was marked by a profound sadness. I remember a postcard to him from Kurt Hiller who took him to task for his “unserene cast of mind”. I would assume that his profound understanding of the nature of sorrow and its literary manifestations which dominates so many of his works is related to this trait. At the same time he had in his earlier years an element of personal radicalism, even personal ruthlessness, strangely contrasting with the almost Chinese courtesy that generally characterised his social intercourse. When I first came to know him he had with utter harshness and lack of compunction severed nearly all relations with his friends of the youth movement, because they had ceased to mean anything to him. In the process he deeply hurt some of his former friends. In conversation he hardly ever mentioned such matters. That conversation of his — a meeting place of wit and gravity — was of rare intensity. In it his passionate logic was probing depth after depth, and straining after ever greater precision of utterance. What thinking really means I have experienced through his living example. At the same time he had an

effortless command of felicitous metaphors and striking images saturated with meaning yet always direct and to the point. Faced with unexpected views he was utterly free of prejudice and sought to illuminate their sense or their place in a wider context from no less unexpected angles. This undogmatic manner of thinking contrasted with his pronounced firmness in judging people.

His most enduring personal passion was the collecting of books. In him the author and the collector were combined in rare perfection, and this passion added an admixture of gaiety to his somewhat melancholy nature. An essay published in his *Schriften* — “Unpacking my Library” — beautifully displays that gaiety. We read there the sentence inspired by Jean Paul: “Of all the methods of acquiring books the one considered most reputable is to write them”, whereas “among the customary means of acquisition the most genteel for collectors [is] that of borrowing with subsequent non-return”. His own library, which I knew quite well, clearly mirrored his complex character. The great works which meant much to him were placed in highly baroque patterns next to the most out-of-the-way writings and oddities, of which — both as an antiquarian and as a philosopher — he was no less fond. Two sections of this collection have remained most vividly in my memory: books by mentally deranged authors, and children’s books. The “world systems” of the mentally deranged, which he had brought together from I do not know what sources, provided him with material for the most profound philosophical reflections on the architecture of systems in general and on the nature of the associations that nourish the thinking and imagination of the mentally sound and unsound alike.

But the world of the children’s book meant more to him. It is one of Benjamin’s most important characteristics that throughout his life he was attracted with almost magical force by the child’s world and ways. This world was one of the persistent and recurring themes of his cogitations, and indeed, his writings on this subject belong to his most perfect pieces. (Only some of them are included in the *Schriften*). There are the entrancing pages on the subject in his volume of aphorisms “One-Way Street” (Einbahn-Strasse) which include what must be the most beautiful passages ever written about postage stamps; there are no less outstanding essays about exhibitions of children’s books and related topics, works dedicated to the as yet undistorted world of the child and its creative imagination, which the metaphysician describes with reverent wonder and at the same time seeks conceptually to penetrate. Further passages on this subject occur very frequently in his other writings. To Benjamin the work of Proust marks the point where the worlds of the adult and the child are most perfectly interfused, and accordingly one of the cardinal points of his philosophical interest. Lastly, this fascination found an outlet in the records of his own childhood which he wrote down in the early nineteen

thirties under the title "A Berlin Childhood around 1900". Much of this appeared at the time in the "Frankfurter Zeitung" in the form of separate pieces, but it was not published as a complete work, in the form originally conceived, until after the Second World War. Here poetry and reality have become one. It has often been asserted that Schelling, the philosopher, at the height of his creative powers wrote "Nachtwachen" (Night Vigils), one of the most important romantic prose works, under the pseudonym of "Bonaventura". It is by no means certain whether this is correct. If it were it would be the most exact parallel to Benjamin's book, written as it is in a prose that combines crystal limpidity with continual pervasive movement and appears relaxed as well as thoroughly tough, a prose that could only have been conceived in the mind of a philosopher turned story-teller. "Narrative philosophy" was Schelling's ideal. In this book by Benjamin it has been achieved in an undreamt-of manner. The philosopher and his outlook is present behind every one of these pieces, but under the gaze of memory his philosophy is transmuted into poetry. Though lacking in all the attributes of a German patriot, Benjamin had a deep affection for Berlin. It was as a Jewish child whose forefathers had been settled in the regions of Mark Brandenburg, Mecklenburg and West Prussia that he experienced his native city. In his description the city's flagstones and its hidden corners which open themselves up before the child's eye, are transformed back into a provincial island in the heart of the metropolis. "In my childhood I was a prisoner of the old and the new West, the two city quarters my clan inhabited at the time in an attitude of defiance mingled with self-conceit. This attitude turned the two districts into a ghetto upon which the clan looked as its fief". How a child of that golden ghetto explores its length and breadth, how he shines the light of his imagination into all its corners as if were the child's universe, was brought vividly to life by Benjamin thirty years later in his recollections.

It was the small things that attracted him most. To create, or discover, perfection on the small and very smallest scale was one of his strongest urges. Authors like Johann Peter Hebel or the Hebrew writer S. J. Agnon, who achieved perfection in stories of the smallest compass, enchanted him time after time. That the greatest is revealed in the smallest, that — as Aby Warburg used to say — "The Lord God dwells in the detail": these were fundamental truths to him in many ways. This inclination lends a special note to his volume "One-Way Street". For what matters here is not the aphoristic form but the underlying intention: to present in the briefest literary utterance something complete in itself. The same trait was manifest in his handwriting which reflected that extreme bent towards smallness, yet without the slightest sacrifice of definition or accuracy in his minutely shaped characters. It was his never realised ambition to get a hundred lines onto an ordinary sheet of notepaper. In August 1927 he

dragged me to the Musée Cluny in Paris, where, in a collection of Jewish ritual objects, he showed me with true rapture two grains of wheat on which a kindred soul had inscribed the complete *Shema Israel*.

II

In the years which have passed since the publication of his *Schriften* a good deal has been written about Benjamin, much of it silly or petty. He had too strong an element of the enigmatic and unfathomable in his mental make-up not to provoke that sort of thing. And his critics' misunderstandings would surely have been a source of amusement to him who even in his brightest hours never abandoned the esoteric thinker's stance. As Adorno said very aptly about him: "What Benjamin said and wrote sounded as if born of mystery, yet its force derived from cogency". The peculiar aura of authority emanating from his thought, though never explicitly invoked, tended to challenge contradiction, while the rejection of any systematic approach in all his work published after 1922 — a rejection which he himself proclaimed boldly from the hoardings — screened the centre of his personality from the view of many.

That centre can be clearly defined: Benjamin was a philosopher. He was one through all the phases and in all the fields of his activity. On the face of it he wrote mostly about subjects of literature and art, sometimes also about topics on the borderline between literature and politics, but only rarely about matters conventionally considered and accepted as themes of pure philosophy. Yet in all these domains he derives his impulse always from the philosopher's experience. Philosophical experience of the world and its reality — that is how we can sum up the meaning of the term "metaphysics", and that is certainly the sense in which it is used by Benjamin. He was a metaphysician; indeed, I would say, a metaphysician pure and simple. But it was borne in on him that in his generation the genius of a pure metaphysician could express itself more readily in other spheres, any other sphere rather than in those traditionally assigned to metaphysics, and this was precisely one of the experiences that helped to mould his distinctive individuality and originality. He was attracted more and more — in a fashion strangely reminiscent of Simmel with whom otherwise he had little in common — by subjects which would seem to have little or no bearing on metaphysics. It is a special mark of his genius that under his gaze every one of these subjects discloses a dignity, a philosophic aura of its own which he sets out to describe.

His metaphysical genius flowed from the quality of his relevant experience, its abounding richness pregnant with symbolism. It was this latter aspect of his experience, I believe, which invests many of his most luminous statements with the character of the occult. Nor is this surprising. Benjamin was a man to whom occult experiences were not foreign, rarely though — if ever

— they appear in his work in their immediate unprocessed form. (This is presumably why he was able to recapture the occult character of Proust's decisive experience with unsurpassed precision). In his personal life, incidentally, this trait found expression in an almost uncanny graphological gift of which I witnessed a good many instances. (Later on he tended to conceal this gift.)

Even where he takes up controversial topics of literary and general history or politics as his starting point, the metaphysician's eye penetrates deep below the surface, and reveals in the objects of his discourse fresh layers bathed in a light of strange radiance. In his earlier works he seems to describe the configuration of such layers as if writing under dictation, while later on this immediacy gives way to an increasingly precise understanding of the tension and the dialectic motion astir in his subjects. He proceeds from the simplest elements, and entirely unexpected vistas open themselves up to him; the hidden inner life of his subjects is manifest to him. His discursive thinking commands great trenchancy, as displayed, for instance, in his paper on the concept of art-criticism among the early German Romantics. In most of his work, however, this discursive element of strict conceptual exposition takes second place to a descriptive method by which he seeks to let his experience speak. It is this descriptive method which seems so strangely to open his subjects up to him, and which invests even short papers and essays of his with a character at the same time fragmentary and final.

To say that Benjamin is a difficult author would be an understatement. His major works demand an unusual degree of concentration from the reader. His thought was greatly compressed and inexorable in the often excessive brevity of exposition. Accordingly, his works — if I may say so — need to be meditated upon. At the same time they are written in a masterly prose of rare incandescence. His essay on Goethe's Elective Affinities (*Wahlverwandtschaften*), which moved Hofmannsthal to enthusiasm, combines in a manner unique in aesthetics the highest elevation of style with the deepest thought. The same applies to the last section of his book on the *Trauerspiel*. By contrast many of his smaller and smallest pieces — especially the essays in *Die Literarische Welt*, *Die Gesellschaft* and *Frankfurter Zeitung* — are written with a gusto and facility of expression that seems to veil the profundity of interpretation. As his masterpiece in this genre I would rate the essay on Gottfried Keller, although others — for instance those on Johann Peter Hebel, Paul Scheerbarth, Robert Walser, Nikolay Leskov and Max Kommerell — come close to it. No wonder that the combination came off, sprang into life spontaneously as it were, where he was able to pay homage. Among the scholars of his own generation in the field of German literary history there was but one whom Benjamin recognised without reservation, “notwithstanding the decisive difference of his own views [as a Marxist?] from the author's”. Yet, this was not a Marxist like

Georg Lukacs, or some other “Left” author, but a man from the opposite camp. It was Max Kommerell, younger by several years, who had broken free from Stefan George's school and who, later on, by a stroke of irony, was granted the “*venia legendi*” in German literature at Frankfurt University which had been denied to Benjamin on his one and only bid for an academic position. He admired in him the very qualities which he himself so conspicuously possessed, although he used them very differently: “The mastery of physiognomic description and the dynamic range of his understanding which assessed not only the characters, but also, and above all, the historical constellations in which they encountered one another”.

His metaphysical genius dominates his writings, from the unpublished “*Metaphysics of Youth*” which he wrote in 1913 at the age of 21, to the “*Theses on the Philosophy of History*” of 1940, his latest extant piece of writing. It is manifested especially in two spheres which increasingly interpenetrate in his work: the philosophy of language and the philosophy of history. The one bent led to a growing preoccupation with literary critical analysis, the other similarly to social critical analysis. But throughout it was always the philosopher speaking, unambiguous, an unmistakable voice. For about ten years he upheld the concept of the philosophic system as the form proper to philosophy, after which he himself was groping. Kant exerted a lasting influence on him, even where — as in the recently published “*Programme of the Coming Philosophy*” — he passionately challenges the validity of the experience expressed in that philosophy. He expected that an experience of infinitely greater richness would still have to be fitted into what was basically Kant's frame of reference, however great the necessary modifications. But this ideal of the system, reflecting the traditional canons of philosophy, was corroded and eventually destroyed in his mind by a scepticism which stemmed in equal proportions from his study of neo-Kantian systems and from his own specific experience. Margarete Susman has referred to an “*exodus from philosophy*” said to have occurred in Germany after the First World War and to have ushered in a completely new mode of thinking. What she meant, to judge from her examples, was the tendency to turn from idealism to existentialism and theology. Few men can have provided more drastic an illustration of this exodus than Walter Benjamin who forsook systematic philosophy to dedicate himself to the task of commenting the great works, a task which at that time — with his prime interests still belonging to theology — he considered preliminary to commenting sacred texts. This goal, though clearly envisaged, he never reached; the provisional, half-way stage remained the ever-changing and yet enduring field for his productivity, and the form of his philosophy was determined by the method of the commentary. After the liquidation of the driving force of system, a dialectic opens out in his commentaries that seeks to record the intrinsic movement of each object of contemplation at its specific historical locus.

of thinking — constructive even where applied to destructive facts or phenomena — also conditions his style. Meticulously pointed, shining with a contemplative lustre that refuses the slightest concession to the fashionable expressionist prose of those years, this style is deeply embedded in the processes of a mind striving after order and cohesion. Benjamin's "texts" really are what the word says: "woven tissues". Although in his youth he was in close personal contact with the rising expressionism which celebrated its first triumphs in Berlin at that time, he never surrendered to it. In his best works the German language has achieved a perfection that takes the reader's breath away. It owes this perfection to the rare achievement of blending highest abstraction with sensuous richness and presentation in the round, and thus bears the hallmark of his notion of metaphysical cognition. In a wonderful fashion his language, without abandoning depth of insight, closely and snugly fits the subject it covers and at the same time strives in competition with the subject's own language from which it keeps its accurate distance. I know very few authors of this century whose writings include a comparable numbers of pages of sheer perfection. The tension between the language of Benjamin's analyses or interpretations and the texts on which they are based is often stupendous. The reader — if I may use a mathematical simile — finds himself between two transfinite classes reciprocally related, though not by a one-one correspondence. The perfection of language in Goethe's "Elective Affinities" or in Karl Kraus's polemical pages is matched in Benjamin's treatment of those works by the new beauty of the interpreter's language, which seems to descend from the language of a recording angel. Small wonder, then, that Hofmannsthal was overwhelmed by the long essay on the "Elective Affinities": small wonder, too, that Kraus, while acknowledging that the essay devoted to him was "well meant", did not understand a word of it.

In his finest works, philosophy in a converted form, transfigured as it were and pellucid, recedes into a wonderfully concentrated language of humanity. In the flow of periods it becomes visible only as an aura. Benjamin's greatest achievements in this direction are "A Berlin Childhood around 1900" and his introductions to letters from the century 1783—1883 which he had collected and published under the pseudonym of Detlev Holz at the end of 1936 during the Hitler era in the volume *Deutsche Menschen* which, in dedications to friends, he described as "an ark I built when the fascist deluge began to rise". This volume owed its utter anonymity — its shining brilliance radiating inwards and never penetrating to the public — to the grotesque circumstances of its publication by a forgotten Swiss publisher who soon after went bankrupt. For many years collectors paid high prices for second-hand copies of the allegedly lost book until — not untypical of the fate of Benjamin's work in general — the bulk of the original edition was found stored in the cellar of a Lucerne bookseller, just when the book had been reprinted in Germany in 1962.

III

For more than two years Benjamin worked to attain habilitation as a *Dozent* (lecturer) in modern German literature at Frankfurt University, encouraged at first by the Head of the Department, Professor Franz Schultz who promptly backed out as soon as he received the thesis, covering his retreat with polite manoeuvres. He and the Head of the Aesthetics Department, Professor Hans Cornelius, complained in private that they did not understand a word of the paper. Yielding to strong pressure, Benjamin unfortunately agreed to withdraw the thesis which was sure to be rejected. He had already lost his rapport with the university and with the university way of organising the pursuit of learning. Having felt obliged to undertake the attempt, its failure in circumstances bound to arouse bitterness nevertheless moved him to a sigh of relief, clearly expressed in his letters. He was all too well aware of the kind of game that was being played in the academic disciplines of philosophy and literary history. Yet, by withdrawing the paper as a thesis, he lost the opportunity of publishing it with a foreword that would have placed on record the ignominy of the university that turned the thesis down. The foreword he had actually written and it is still in my possession. Indeed it may be said that this paper — published in 1928 under the title *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (Origin of German Tragic Drama), is one of the most eminent and epoch-making habilitation theses ever submitted to a philosophical faculty. Its rejection, which set Benjamin finally on the road of the free-lance writer — or more aptly of the *homme de lettres* — compelled to earn his living by his pen, was a symbol of the state of literary scholarship and the mentality of the scholars during that Weimar period that has lately been the subject of so much praise. Even when it was all over, long after the Second World War, a highly equipped representative of that branch of learning was capable of dismissing the failure of Benjamin's academic bid with the nefarious and insolent phrase that "you cannot habilitate *Geist*". It was in keeping with that state of affairs that the book, when published, encountered a profound silence, and that in the years before Hitler not a single specialised journal deigned to review it.

Admittedly, Benjamin did not make things easy for his readers. He prefaced his book with a chapter on epistemology in which the guiding philosophical ideas underlying his interpretation were flaunted as a warning to the reader rather than explained. The secret motto behind it — he used to say — was the nursery rhyme's injunction: "Hurtle over root and stone, ware the boulder, break no bone". This introduction has always frightened off many readers. It stands forbiddingly in front of the book — an angel with the flaming sword of abstract reason by the gates of a paradise of the written word. Benjamin held in reserve the advice to

contrast there stand two great pieces from the last five years of his life which embody the most valuable results of his attempt to commit his thought with utter intensity to the materialist categories and establish the affinity, or indeed identity, of the two worlds. They are: "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility" (Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit), and "On some Motives in Baudelaire" (Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire). The former was for a long time only available in a French translation which presented formidable hurdles to understanding, until the German text became accessible at last in 1955. This essay — on which André Malraux drew amply for his philosophy of art — is one of the most important contributions of the last generation of the philosophy of art and can be confidently expected to remain a potent influence. And yet, even in the magnificent design of what Benjamin considered the first serious materialist theory of art, the reader is struck by a glaring discrepancy between the two parts. The first part offers a metaphysical-philosophical interpretation hinging on the concept of the *aura* of a work of art — defined by him as "unique revelation of a distance, however close" — and its loss in the photo-mechanical process of reproduction. This part is packed with exciting discoveries and illuminations of problems in the philosophy of art which he was the first to perceive. It rests on a purely metaphysical concept. In the contrasting second part, on the other hand, Benjamin attempted to develop from Marxian categories what I am inclined to describe as an enchantingly wrong-headed philosophy of the film as the one true revolutionary form of art. Against the background of Chaplin's art he analyses the reality and the utopian potential of the film, with its promise of infinite happiness. Benjamin pinned the highest historical hopes on the cinema as the art form proper and congenial to the proletariat on the threshold of its rule. In a long passionate conversation about this work in 1938 he said in answer to my objections: "The missing philosophic link between the two parts of my essay, about which you complain, will be supplied more effectively by the Revolution than by me". I would say his Marxian faith had an element of naivety that was utterly alien to his thinking. This thinking once more emerges in its full stature in his paper on one of his favourite authors, Baudelaire. In its most superb section, where he uses philosophical-historical analysis to deduce Baudelaire's situation, that inherent contradiction which we have discussed here is all but completely laid bare.

Even as an historical materialist Benjamin, apart from one exception, is preoccupied only with so-called "reactionary" authors such as Proust, Julien Green, Jouhandeau, Gide, Baudelaire, George. The exception is Brecht who for years held Benjamin spellbound and fascinated. Brecht, indeed, was the only author in whom he was able to observe the creative processes of a great poet at close quarters. Also he had much in common

IV

There is a profound difference between the main body of Jewish authors who have become famous in German literature and one group among them that is very small though of the highest rank. Those in the former group — including in the last generation such writers as Arthur Schnitzler, Jakob Wassermann, Franz Werfel, Stefan Zweig — unquestioningly look upon themselves as forming part of German culture and tradition, as belonging to the German people. It was a lurid and tragic illusion. Berthold Auerbach, one of the first authors of that type, at the end of his life and at the beginning of Stoecker's antisemitic movement, summed it up in words which have become famous, though, alas, they were spoken into the void: "In vain have I lived, in vain have I suffered". Only very few among the first-rate minds of German-speaking Jewry did not succumb to that illusion. Freud, Kafka and Benjamin belong to those few. Almost throughout their productive lives they shunned German phraseology, even the phrase "we Germans", and they wrote in full awareness of the distance separating them from their German readers. They are the most distinguished among the so-called German-Jewish authors and it is as much their lives that bear witness to that distance, its pathos and its creative quality or potentiality as their writings in which things Jewish figure rarely if at all. They did not fool themselves. They knew that they were German writers — but not Germans. They never cut loose from that experience and the clear awareness of being aliens, even exiles, that most other authors from among the German-Jewish elite laboured with so much earnest ardour and yet with utter lack of success to evade or repudiate. Closely as they knew themselves tied to the German language and its intellectual world, they never succumbed to the illusion of being at home — an illusion, it is true, against which they were forearmed by specific personal experiences (though these availed nothing in other cases). I do not know whether these men would have been at home in the land of Israel. I doubt it very much. They truly came from foreign parts and knew it.

Benjamin undoubtedly has his quirks. I have sometimes been asked whether his attitude to Judaism was not perhaps one of those quirks to which he clung with all his obstinacy. But this is not the case. On 25th May 1925, shortly after the world of Marxian dialectic had first appeared in his field of vision, he said in a letter that two crucial experiences lay still ahead of him: contact with Marxist politics (he still thought little of the theory of Marxism at the time) and with Hebrew. This statement provides a key to the understanding of Benjamin, for these are precisely the two experiences that never came his way. It is a deeply and authentically revealing statement in a matter where my own personal experience, which in any case is scarcely communicable in a convincing way, might be found inconclusive.

When we inquire after the Jewish element in this man and his production, it is entirely in character with Walter Benjamin's contrariness and complexity that the Jewishness of which he was intensely aware as the root of his being and often also as the ultimate destination of his thought, should be present only in overtones in the bulk of his work, though admittedly in very conspicuous places, for instance in the prospectus for the projected journal *Angelus Novus*, or in the "Theses on the Philosophy of History", his last work. But there is much more behind it.

In the years of withdrawn study and preparation during the First World War and immediately afterwards, the phenomenon of Judaism occupied him a great deal, and he read sporadically but widely about the subject. When I told him in 1916 that "Philosophy of History or Reflections on Tradition" (*Philosophie der Geschichte oder über die Tradition*) — a large four-volume work on the Kabbala by Franz Joseph Molitor, a pupil of Franz von Baader — published sixty to eighty years earlier, was surprisingly still available at the publishers', this was one of the first works on Judaism which he acquired. For many years it occupied a place of honour in his library. In Franz Rosenzweig's "Star of Redemption" (*Stern der Erlösung*) — the most original work of Jewish theology of our generation, of which Benjamin, on the evidence of many of his own writings, was an avid reader — as well as in the Kabbalist writings he experienced that profound attachment of genuine Jewish theological thinking to the medium of language that became so marked a feature of his own work. In letters and conversations both with Jews and gentiles, he returned time after time to Jewish issues, and while going out of his way to emphasise his own factual ignorance, he would yet quite often approach them with his relentless intensity and delve into problems of Judaism as a matter that concerned him personally and fundamentally. Many a letter of his stands as a curious testimony to this interest.

In the autumn of 1916, Benjamin was writing to a correspondent to whom he usually gave his views on literary subjects. In connection with some remarks about the writer Rudolf Borchardt — who had tried so hard to blur his Jewish origin — Benjamin felt impelled to write an enthusiastic epistle in praise of Judaism. He had just read Achad Haam and been profoundly impressed by his essay "The Law in the Heart" (*Die Thora im Herzen*). Benjamin even said it was not certain whether he would not himself go to Palestine after the war. His correspondent, also a Jew, wrote in his reply in December 1916 that he had been amazed by Benjamin's profession of faith in Judaism and found it altogether inexplicable unless there was a woman behind it. I can still see Benjamin's sly winks when he read that letter to me. The correspondent did not know that Benjamin was actually about to marry the daughter of one of the well-known pioneer-members of the Zionist movement, Professor Leon Kellner, the editor of Theodor Herzl's Zionist writings and of his diaries.

This young woman naturally encouraged his Jewish awareness, but was hardly in a position to influence it to any great extent. It is true, on the other hand, that his approach to the second great subject to which he meant to dedicate his experience, to revolutionary Marxist policy, was palpably made under a woman's influence.

Benjamin's "theological thinking" — a marked tendency of his early years that impressed itself on all who came into close contact with him at the time — took its bearings (instinctively, I almost added) from Jewish concepts. Christian ideas never held any attraction for him. Indeed he had an undisguised distaste for the type of neo-Catholicism which, at the time, was much in vogue among Jewish intellectuals in Germany and France.

Two categories above all, and especially in their Jewish versions, assume a central place in his writings: on the one hand Revelation, the idea of the Torah and of sacred texts in general, and on the other hand the Messianic idea and Redemption. Their significance as regulative ideas governing his thought cannot be overrated.

Over and over again one meets in his writings, often indeed in the most unexpected places, instances of a preoccupation with the problem of sacred texts, for instance in most of his papers on the philosophy of language, in the essay "The Translator's Task" (*Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers*), in the book on German tragic drama (*Trauerspiel*), but also in his remarks about the verbal imagination of children, when he says that "sentences formed in play by a child out of words [given in advance] are more akin to the language of sacred texts than to the colloquial language of the grown-ups". For many years he considered the confrontation with the sacred texts of Hebrew tradition as the crucial literary experience of which he stood in need to really come into his own. I shall never forget the superb manner in which he declared his commitment to his coming task as a commentator of Jewish texts in a great discourse — of which I was a witness — with Dr. Judah Magnes, the Chancellor of the nascent Hebrew University of Jerusalem, in Paris in August 1927, when he contemplated the idea of preparing himself for a teaching assignment at the university. Yet, from his pen we have only one example of such a confrontation with the Bible. (Benjamin, incidentally, was no great admirer of Buber's Bible translation but a keen reader of the old translation edited by Leopold Zunz whose austerity deeply impressed him). This one instance is provided by the comments he wrote in 1916 and 1927 about the statements on the nature of language in the first three chapters of Genesis — pages of rare concentration and beauty.

It must be emphasised that later on when he had turned to historical materialism, out of those two categories of Revelation and Redemption only the latter was preserved *expressis verbis*, but not the former, closely though it was bound up with his basic method of commenting on great and authoritative texts. In the process of transformation of his thought

period. It appears again at the end of his seemingly materialist essay of 1931 on Karl Kraus, which ushers in his later production with a Marxist bugle call. Yet, those ever new angels — one of them he found in Paul Klee's painting *Angelus Novus* which he owned and deeply loved — bear the features of the angels of judgment as well as destruction. Their "quickly fading voice" proclaims the anticipation of the apocalypse in history — and it was this that mattered to him.

Jewish inspiration pure and simple, with no adjustment even to the terminology of the materialist dialectic, dominates Benjamin's tireless striving after an understanding of Kafka, whose writings he studied from the first with passionate involvement. This tendency is manifest above all in the great essay of 1934 to which Bertolt Brecht responded with the charge that "it was aiding and abetting Jewish fascism"! It reveals itself also in his formidable letter of 1938, in which he sketched a new portrait of Kafka which he intended to execute in a book if a publisher could be found. The concepts of justice, of the study of scripture and of exegesis are here consciously introduced and developed as Jewish concepts. "Study" — we read here — "is the gate of justice. And yet Kafka dare not attach to study those promises that tradition holds out for the study of the Torah. His acolytes are beadles, but they have lost the house of prayer; his scholars are disciples, but they have lost the scripture". Equally far removed from Max Brod's optimistic interpretation of Kafka and from the existentialist interpretation which has been the fashion in recent years, Benjamin perceived the negative inversion to which the Jewish categories are subjected in Kafka's world; there the teaching no longer conveys a positive message, but offers only an absolutely Utopian — and therefore as yet undefinable — promise of a post-contemporary world. We are left nothing but the procedures of a "Law" that can no longer be deciphered. These procedures became the central feature of Kafka's vision. Benjamin knew that in Kafka we possess the *theologia negativa* of a Judaism not a whit less intense for having lost the Revelation as a positive message.

Benjamin, who was aware of a close affinity with this author — Proust and Kafka were probably the authors truly familiar to him at the deepest level — saw in the exegetic passages so often presented by Kafka the crystallisation of Torah tradition mirrored in itself. The twelve lines on the interpretation of Don Quixote he considered to be the most perfect extant piece of Kafka's writing. Benjamin's commentaries on Brecht, among which the one on the "Legend of the Origin of the Book of Taoteking on Laotse's Way into the Emigration" is perhaps most outstanding, represent the ultimate form assumed by the commentary in Benjamin's hands. He fully realised that he was embarking on a problematic venture when he put this form in the service of interpreting revolutionary rather than archaic and authoritative texts. Indeed these commentaries display a rare and pathetic helplessness — disconcerting in a