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**Introduction (to Dossier on Walter Benjamin and Education)**

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## **Introduction**

**Matthew Charles and Howard Eiland**

Who can still speak of youth today?

--Franz Kafka, "Investigations of a Dog"

It is well known that Walter Benjamin played a leading role in the antebellum German Youth Movement, publishing articles on school reform and youth culture, attending and organizing lectures and conferences on these two closely related issues, and serving as president of the radical Berlin chapter of the Independent Students Association under the aegis of his mentor, the educational theorist Gustav Wyneken. It is not often asked, however, whether this intensive involvement with the youth movement had any bearing on Benjamin's subsequent philosophical and literary activity. What happened to his idea of education and of youth after he turned away from student activism with the onset of war and pursued what he considered a more invisible radicalism? Was his educational ideal effectively aborted? Or was it absorbed in his later historical-materialist concerns, and, if so, in what form? And what, in particular, became of the vision of a community of learning after his much-prolonged student days were over and he had failed—rather spectacularly—to gain a teaching position in the German academy?

As early as July 1914, a month before the declaration of war and the double suicide of his comrades Fritz Heinle and Rika Seligson in a meeting room of the Wynekenians, Benjamin had

written to a close friend that “the university is simply not the place to study,” and in October of that year, having given up the presidency of the Berlin independent students to which he had been reelected in July, he referred to the contemporary academy as a “swamp,” adding that “no one is equal to this situation.” He would, in fact, continue his formal academic studies until the withdrawal of his habilitation thesis on the German *Trauerspiel* in the summer of 1925 at Frankfurt; but, in a 1917 essay on Dostoevsky’s *The Idiot*, he adverts to “the failure of the youth movement” (whose life—youth’s, the movement’s—nonetheless remains “immortal”), and by 1922, in a prospectus for an ultimately unrealized journal project, he could write that this journal, to have been named *Angelus Novus* after the Klee aquarelle, should “proclaim through the mutual alienness [*wechselseitige Fremdheit*] of [its authors’] contributions how impossible it is in our day to give voice to any communality [*wie unaussprechlich in diesen Tagen jede Gemeinsamkeit...bleibt*].” Thus with the fading of faith in the mission of youth, as well as in the prospect of a “new university” and the viability of any expression of authentic community save that of mutual otherness, the specific contents of a radical commitment to reform seemingly lose themselves (as Benjamin puts it in the Dostoevsky essay) in their own light. The space would have thereby been cleared for what he calls, soon after the war, a politics of “pure means,” involving an educative power operating beyond the paradigm of obedience to an external law.

This special issue of *boundary 2* proposes to investigate the significance of both Benjamin’s engagement with educational reform in his early writings and the afterlife of that engagement in his later work, where the university as platform for cultural renewal has given way to various new possibilities of dissemination, including radio and the stage of the Brechtian epic theater and of the proletarian children’s theater, and where the theme of youth has in general

been transposed to that of childhood and the theme of pedagogy to that of study and studious play.

Already in the culminating statement of his school-reform writings, “The Life of Students” of 1914-1915 (an essay discussed in more detail by several of the contributors to this special issue), Benjamin decries the “perversion of the creative spirit into the vocational spirit,” a development that over time has taken possession of the universities and consolidated that “hostile and uncomprehending estrangement of the academy from the life that art requires.” He calls on students to become aware of the crisis of metaphysical and moral uncertainty underlying modern society, to get over their fear of solitude and fear of surrender in preparation for the struggle against conformism and dogmatism, and to work toward a form of life (*Lebensform*) that, while making the highest demands on the individual person and maintaining concern for humanity as a whole, would put into practice that “expansive friendship of the creative which is oriented toward infinity.” Such a practice is at the basis of “philosophical community.” The latter, understood not as a circle of shared assumptions but as a confrontation and colloquy of free individual consciences—that is, as a peculiar kind of unity in dispersion—would by its very existence militate against the massification and rigidification of study. The educational community is philosophical, in the young Benjamin’s view, not only by virtue of its reading—from grammar school onward—philosophical texts of all kinds (preeminently in works of art), but just as importantly through its embrace of “the peril of spiritual life” and its fostering of “permanent spiritual revolution” in the form of new expansive ways of questioning.

In other words, a notion of play (one indebted to the classical tradition of thought on the subject from Plato through Schiller to Nietzsche) is decisively at work in Benjamin’s educational theory from the beginning. The child retains not what is learned by rote but only what is learned

in a spirit of play or adventure. At issue, once again, is not an accumulation and application of knowledge as an end in itself, let alone as a means of power over others, but an awakening of spirit at once intellectual and political: a transformation and revolution (Plato's *periagōgē*) of personal and collective experience by means of the rigorous interrogation of received opinion. Such education in the root sense of a drawing-out and critical turnaround of each individual self—"Each person will discover his or her own imperatives"—would open up a true culture of conversation throughout the social arena, thereby infusing everyday modernity with metaphysical seriousness—this was the hope of the new worldly religiosity of the movement—and making it possible, through the expansive concentration of historical remembrance, to "liberate the future from its deformation in the present."

It follows from this fundamental critique and reconception of student experience—and one can glimpse here a cornerstone of Benjamin's whole multifaceted lifework—that genuinely productive, emancipatory learning necessitates before all else a meticulous and continually renewed excavation of that precipitous ground of "the present," conditioned and encompassed as it always is by processes of language and history. Revolution begins in the situation of the self.

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Four of the ten papers collected in this special issue of *boundary 2*—those by Antonia Birnbaum, Matthew Charles, Elise Derroitte and Howard Eiland—were given as talks for a conference on "Walter Benjamin, Pedagogy and the Politics of Youth," co-hosted by the Institute for Modern and Contemporary Culture (University of Westminster, London) and the Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy (Kinston University, London) in May 31-June 1,

2013. The conference was organized in response to a conjunction of two moments considered significant for the contemporary reception of Benjamin's thought.

First, the publication in 2011 of Benjamin's *Early Writings* on educational reform. (Although the first volume of the *Selected Writings*, published in 1996, included a number of Benjamin's early essays on youth, only two—"Experience" and "The Metaphysics of Youth"—date from the period prior to his disillusionment with Wyneken). The conference sought to anticipate the different ways in which these early articles and addresses on school reform might provoke a renewed interest in Benjamin's philosophy of education and its significance for the more familiar political writings contained in his later work. The subsequent availability in English of his surviving radio scripts (*Radio Benjamin*) from the late 1920s and early 1930s, some of which were written for children, should only intensify this interest in the pedagogical underpinnings of Benjamin's practices.

Second, the translations—a century later—of these writings from the youth movement happened to coincide with a wave of student protests and occupations against education cuts, tuition fee increases, and what is typically described as the neoliberal transformation of formal systems of education that was erupting across the Americas and Europe between 2009 and 2013, phenomena including—but not limited to—Vienna's Academy of Refusal in 2009, Occupy California in 2009-2010, the Puerto Rico strikes of 2010-2011, the UK demonstrations of 2010-2012, the Chilean Winter of 2011-2013, and the Quebec protests of 2012. Indeed, a number of the articles contained in this collection arose from versions of talks given to students in occupied universities during this period. Without wishing to suggest any simplistic identity between the educational reform movements of the 1910s and the educational resistance movements of the 2010s, the conference nonetheless sought to ask whether or not this contemporary context might

open up a moment of retrospective illumination—a “now of recognizability”—in which a fundamental pedagogical dimension of Benjamin’s work might be simultaneously revealed and rethought.

The articles in this special issue are therefore meant to construct something of the prehistory and afterlife of Benjamin’s early writings. As Élise Derriotte demonstrates in “Brushing Education Against the Grain,” these writings are to be situated within a tradition of late-nineteenth-century *Reformpädagogie* that, influenced by Dilthey and Nietzsche, had come to dominate debates on educational reform in the early twentieth century. Opposing the moribund intellectualism of the German educational system with the lived experience of learning, Benjamin’s early concept of education promotes a *will* to learn intimately connected to a mission of broader cultural transformation. Accordingly, the early writings “offer no manual for teachers,” Derriotte writes, but rather provoke crucial questions about the purpose of education, questions that resist tendencies both to instrumentalized vocationalism and to a narrow academicism disconnected from the future lives of its students.

Derriotte suggests that “Benjamin’s early pedagogical writings ...contain *in nuce* practically all the elements of Benjamin’s later critical method,” and she sees these as clustered around four central themes—tradition, history, experience and freedom—which are explored further in the other contributions to this issue. In “Pedagogy as ‘Cryptic Politics’,” Matthew Charles takes up the theme of tradition in terms of Benjamin’s critique of a moral education understood as teaching by example and his alternative conception of *transmissibility*. This involves not the reproduction of teachings but, for each generation, their preparation into a form capable of being received by individual learners. The significance attached to instruction here already represents, Charles argues, a break from the solitude of learning in Benjamin’s earlier

writings, one that bears the traces of his turn away from the tragic nihilism of his early Nietzscheanism and provides the pedagogical foundations for the “cryptic politics” of his later anti-Nietzscheanism.

Howard Eiland’s “Education as Awakening” invokes the challenging complementarity of the legacies of Nietzsche and Marx, as constituting a fundamental tension within Benjamin’s work as a whole, before going on to explicate in a series of his early texts an historicized (Marxian and Nietzschean) version of the old messianic motif of awakening in its interplay with the motifs of experience and learning. Benjamin’s participation in the youth movement is seen to center on educational reform as the catalyst of a more general reform of consciousness: the “protest against school and family” is a protest against the instrumentalization of thought and language. Eiland shows how the idea of an awakening youth (in young people and in people generally), an awakening predicated on a certain historical dialectic, is for Benjamin instantiated in the productivity of students and to a thematic complex of Nietzsche and Marx, suggesting that the philosophy of history that emerges out of the tension between these thinkers is constructed from a concept of experience that, in his early thought, concurrently gives rise to a theory of education. The historical dialectic given expression, a decade before the *Arcade Project’s* intertwining of dream and awakening, in Benjamin’s 1917 poem “On Seeing the Morning Light,” therefore answers the question of how awakening “could ... take its own measure” through the elaboration of a dialectical understanding of learning: “the varied ramification of his idea of the individuated collectivity of study.

Eli Friedlander, in “Learning from the Colors of Fantasy,” asks whether it would be possible to learn in a world in which (positively) there are no obstacles to our endeavors or alternatively (negatively) no possible consistency to our successes, and consequently no



experience to learn from. Under such conditions, he suggests, it would first be necessary to learn what fear or pain are. Previously, tradition and imagination could serve as the conduits by which a lifetime of experiences might be passed on to future generations, but the “sickness of tradition” manifested under capitalist modernity now demands not the creative capacity of the imagination but the deformative power of *Phantasie*. This is prominently exemplified, for Benjamin, in the childhood experience of colors, which are formless, ephemeral and inimitable. *Phantasie* turns spatiotemporal phenomena inside out and so, Friedlander concludes, recovers one possible way of learning from modern experience.

Two articles, by Sami R. Khatib and Antonia Birnbaum, take up the relationship between education and freedom in Benjamin’s thought. Khatib’s “Practice Makes Perfect” investigates Benjamin’s “enduring intellectual interest in pedagogy” from the perspective of a “proto-deconstructive” project for undoing bourgeois education, the latter exemplified in the Kantian distinction between physical and practical pedagogy. Kant’s physical pedagogy entails a conservative disciplining of our childish or animal instincts; practical pedagogy, on the other hand, is concerned with the liberal cultivation of human freedom. While Benjamin’s early philosophy radicalizes the former (no longer a freedom in accordance with duty but a permanent revolutionizing of values), his later—more Marxist—response to Kantian pedagogy suspends the very difference between the two, Khatib argues, by appealing to an understanding of “freedom *with*.” The latter is manifest in a different kind of bodily will and learning through practice—Benjamin adduces proletarian children’s theater as a model—and in an encounter with the savagery of the childlike or creaturely, which is no longer to be overcome but rather dialectically worked through in relation to a more integral practice.

Antonia Birnbaum's "Beyond Autonomy" similarly addresses and reworks Kant's fundamental question of freedom: "what must I do?" Using Benjamin's essay "The Life of Students" reflect on a series of provocations about the life of creative thought within and without the academy, Birnbaum answers these questions by reconceiving the practice of studying so as "to stop putting off learning." Benjamin's "will to study" suggests a freedom that "rips life out of being 'only life,'" she suggests, and in doing so fundamentally interrupts the continual postponement of thinking within the rhythms of everyday life. This kind of study is not "a reality apart" from the world, but a part of the world inquired into. To continue the life of thinking today, Birnbaum concludes, it may be better to cling to the variable practice of study itself than to the autonomy of institutions within which it has traditionally been sheltered, but which, as we know, provided no shelter for Walter Benjamin.

Investigations of Benjamin's political thought quite rightly tend to concentrate on the period at the beginning of the 1920s when he undertook what he envisioned would be a large-scale study in politics, but of which only the essay "The Critique of Violence" survives intact. If one of the intentions of this special issue is to frame this political project of the early 1920s in relation to what Irving Wohlfarth has called the "politics of Youth" that preceded it, and in relation to the more or less explicit resurfacing of these educational interests in the later writings on "communist pedagogy" and the "crisis of transmissibility," James Martel's article draws attention to one strand of this broader frame running through the difficult argument of the "The Critique of Violence."

Martel's "A Divine Pedagogy?" rehearses the essay's more familiar distinction between the mythic violence of the law and a "divine violence" that counteracts this, before proceeding to foreground Benjamin's less well known identification of such divine violence with a form of

education. Martel argues that this invocation of an “educative power, which in its perfected form stands outside the law,” is problematic in ascribing a divine force to human action, and thus apparently going against much of what Benjamin argues in the rest of the essay. Drawing on Benjamin’s “The Life of Students” to resist this identification of human and divine, Martel offers an original interpretation of the concept of educative power as an in-between force, neither fully mythic nor fully divine, through which it becomes possible “to rethink ourselves and our place in the world.” Utilizing Benjamin’s playful “Teaching Aid” in *One-Way Street*, Martel expounds the theme of education as a “pure means” in which the teacher effectively disappears as a central node of authority.

With reference to Benjamin’s scattered writings on Kafka, and to Kafka’s various and persistent depictions of studiers, Brendan Moran’s “Kafkan Study” explores a comparable idea in developing the thesis that study is obliged to *nothing*, which is to say, constrained by nothing and beholden to nothing except the obligation to remain thoughtfully open, to maintain a continually renewed resistance to the the various forms of mythically driven closure in human affairs. For these reified forms disregard the nothing that everywhere calls for study. The “study-act,” argues Moran, is not any sort of job; in its brooding happy asceticism, it is indifferent to worldly measures of success and failure. If it is essentially released from the parameters of possession and everything proprietary and conclusive, it is nevertheless oriented by a sense of justice in all it does. Kafkan study involves attentiveness to the wreckage of human progress and to the untoward redemptive possibilities embedded within the exceptional and the extreme.

Finally, Esther Leslie’s “Playspaces of Anthropological Materialist Pedagogy” and Brian Elliott’s “Beyond Critique” both reflect on a central concern of Benjamin’s later pedagogical-cultural thinking, one not yet crystallized in the earlier writings: technology. As Leslie points

out, Benjamin's expanded sense of the pedagogical comes to include all things which provide an occasion for learning; such things are addressed in terms of "how they might enable the development of new habits or the shattering of old ones." This program of rigorous improvisation is of special relevance for the training of the new collective bodily nature of humanity, something nascent in the epoch of industrial capitalism. Leslie explores the technological possibilities that Benjamin saw opened up by film, radio and toys as playspaces for the liberation of the human eye, ear and hand—spaces in which habit itself is put on display and made conscious, so as to be played with constructively.

Elliott, in "Beyond Critique," claims that the novelty of Benjamin's pedagogical methodology in *One-Way Street* has been largely underestimated and that its development of new practices of socially engaged and politically charged communication should be recognized as involving a rejection of the usual scholarly standpoint of academic critique. Modelled on the lessons of avant-garde art practices and the aesthetics of commodity advertising, this new set of practices, Elliott argues, is primarily concerned with the *somatic* transformation of humanity through technology. The pedagogic basis of this transhumanism, however, is rooted not in "futuristic technical applications" but in "the future which we, the present generation, already are, thanks to our 'arrangement' with the previous generation." Elliott concludes that the historical task *our* generation must respond to is not "the invasion of aesthetic space by the everyday environment" but a comparable technological invasion of pedagogic space, and that Benjamin's thought contains salutary lessons for our response.

The historical and institutional context of Benjamin's early writings is, of course, very different from ours. What does come to light from a reconsideration of these writings is the continuing relevance of a set of radical pedagogical concerns for contemporary critical theories

of education. We say this not because Benjamin's work contains any straightforward solution to our present educational dilemmas, but precisely because his constantly evolving and shifting mode of philosophizing challenges many of our own habits of teaching practice. ~~These involve the theoretical limitations of, for example, the liberal humanist tradition, the dogmatic elements of the Marxist tradition, and the nascent Nietzschean undercurrents of later post-structuralism and post-humanism.~~ If the Benjaminian idea of education is finally not a means to some further end (be it social justice or the conservation of existing order) but the spatiotemporal interruption of all such ends, one that blurs the distinction between the inside and outside of educational spaces, then this idea of learning in itself points to that secret intergenerational agreement that Benjamin elsewhere describes in terms of a "*weak* messianic power." At issue in the present case is the formidable task of clearing the space for a studious and playful reception of what has been lost and of what has not yet arrived.