

THE EARLY LITERARY CRITICISM OF WALTER BENJAMIN

by René Wellek

In 1968, with an essay first published in *The New Yorker*, Hannah Arendt stimulated American interest in Walter Benjamin. He had been almost totally forgotten in Germany until Theodor W. Adorno literally unearthed him with the publication of a two-volume collection of *Schriften* (Frankfurt, 1955). A selection of Benjamin's essays, *Illuminations*, translated by Harry Zohn with Hannah Arendt's introduction, gave occasion to a fine article by Robert Alter (in *Commentary*, 49 [1970], 86-93) which disputed Hannah Arendt's emphasis. This is about all that is worth reading about Benjamin in English. In French a different selection of Benjamin's essays published in 1959, also called *Illuminations*, excited little interest except for a cloudy essay by Pierre Missac in *Critique* (23 [1969], 692-710). In German there is now a large body of comment, partly collected in a little Suhrkamp volume, *Über Walter Benjamin* (1968). An elaborate thesis by Rolf Tiedemann, *Studien zur Philosophie Walter Benjamins* (1965), remains the most useful contribution to a study of Benjamin also because of its detailed bibliography. A two-volume collection of his *Briefe* (1966) made his intellectual development much more comprehensible and we are promised a new much fuller edition of his writings containing many unpublished manuscripts. One article, Manfred Durzak's "Walter Benjamin und die Literaturwissenschaft" (in *Monatshefte*, 58 [1966], 217-231) overlaps with the theme of this paper though it limits itself mainly to an exposition of Benjamin's only booksize publication, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*.

Hannah Arendt and Robert Alter focus, understandably, on the later phases of Benjamin's career: Hannah Arendt telling the story of his life, making much of the ill luck which pursued Benjamin even in his death, discussing the conflict between his Jewishness and his later Marxism. Robert Alter pursues the same topic of the German Jew before and after Hitler's rise to power, exiled but unable to accept the condition of exile, torn between the call of the Jewish tradition and the new-found faith in Marxism, either as messianic hope or, as he said on occasion, as "the lesser evil" (*Br. I*, 605) compared to the horror of Nazism.

Both authors—and the same is true of almost all comment in German

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and French I know—treat Benjamin as a philosopher, or at least as a *Kulturphilosoph*, and are preoccupied with his later writings. The English translation contains only one piece, “Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers” (1923), which belongs to Benjamin’s early stage before his conversion to Marxism, and they both deny explicitly that Benjamin can or should be considered a literary critic or historian. Hannah Arendt goes so far as to say that he was “no scholar, no literary critic, no historian, literary or otherwise” (*Men in Dark Times* [New York, 1968], p. 156) though she recognizes that Benjamin aspired to be “the only true critic of German literature.” She quotes a description he gave of the task of criticism but returns soon to the question of Jewishness and ends her essay with the hackneyed scholar’s metaphor about “sea-change”: the pearl-diver who will bring up something “rich and strange” (*ibid.*, p. 206). Robert Alter in comparing Benjamin and Lionel Trilling brings out the contrast between a man steeped in the English tradition and Benjamin, “never fully part of an indigenous stream of European culture” though paradoxically serene in his ultimate theological nostalgia (*loc. cit.*, p. 93).

All this, however true if we look at Benjamin’s later writings and consider his cruel fate, is still remote from the actual texts and the issues raised by Benjamin’s early writings. Benjamin met a Latvian Communist woman, Asja Lacis, on Capri in 1924, followed her to Riga in 1925, and spent the winter of 1926-27 in Moscow. By that time he had been impressed by Georg Lukács’s *Geschichte und Klassenbewußtsein* and even contemplated joining the Communist party (see letter, May 1925, *Br. I*, 382) though he never took the step. But before 1925 we cannot speak of any demonstrable use or even knowledge of Marxism. Nor can one say that in these early years Benjamin had more than a nodding acquaintance with Judaism though he was inevitably conscious of his Jewishness and was constantly brought face to face with the problem particularly in the correspondence with his Zionist friend and Cabbala scholar Gerhard (or Gershom) Scholem. He met Martin Buber (whom he did not care for) and he admired greatly Franz Rosenzweig’s *Stern der Erlösung* (1921), a Jewish theology by a man who was steeped in Hegel and German idealism. But even these contacts, documented by the correspondence which survived in the hands of the recipient, Gershom Scholem in Jerusalem, give a distorted picture of Benjamin’s early intellectual concerns and ambitions. At least in his published writings they are those of a student of Kant and the German philosophical tradition and those of a *Germanist* deeply read in German baroque, classical, and romantic literature. To ignore this is to falsify the image of Benjamin. It obscures any attempt to locate him properly in intellectual history and to judge his early criticism. It is true, however, that Benjamin’s early ambitions were frustrated, partly by external circumstances: the inflation

of the twenties which deprived him of financial security and drove him into journalism and translating from the French, and by the rejection (or rather enforced withdrawal) of his *Habilitation* in Frankfurt. But this ultimate failure and the shift of interest and change in philosophical allegiance should not minimize the significance of his early writings. Their topics will be obvious if we enumerate the main articles and books written before 1926. If we ignore, mercifully, Benjamin's early involvement in the Youth Movement before World War I we must consider his paper "Zwei Gedichte von Friedrich Hölderlin" (1914-15, in *T*, 22-46), a paper "Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen" (*A*, 9-26), his Bern dissertation, *Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik* (1919, published 1920), a long essay on Goethe's *Wahlverwandtschaften* (written in 1922, published in 1924), an introduction to a translation from Baudelaire, "Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers" (1923), and finally a book, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (written in 1925, published in 1928). To these should be added reflections "Über das Programm der kommenden Philosophie" (1918), on "Schicksal und Charakter" (1921), and an excursion into abstract political philosophy, "Zur Kritik der Gewalt" (1921). An eccentric, slight review of Dostoevsky's *Idiot* which considers it as Dostoevsky's "great lament on the failure of the movement of youth" (*A*, 188) belongs to this period (published in 1920).

Like most intelligent students at that time Benjamin was uninterested in the conventional literary scholarship which is, somewhat inaccurately, labeled "positivism" or *Scherer-Schule*. He rather studied philosophy, first with Heinrich Rickert in Freiburg im Breisgau before the War and then in Bern. He was steeped in the Neo-Kantianism of the Marburg school, particularly of Hermann Cohen, and read Husserl, Scheler, Simmel, and later Jaspers and the early Heidegger. As the "Programm der kommenden Philosophie" shows, Benjamin felt that Kant, for whom he had the greatest admiration, was limited by the Enlightenment and his scientific concept of experience. The program proposes a correction of the Kantian concept of knowledge, which seemed to Benjamin oriented exclusively toward mathematics and mechanics, in favor of a concept of knowledge which would include religion and theology and would be at the same time "linguistic." "Linguistic" means for Benjamin a concept of language he derives from Hamann and Novalis and possibly from Jewish Gnosticism. The paper "Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen" (1918) expounds the view that everything, even things and animals, have a language and that language is the only thing communicable in a being. Man, however, differs from animals and things by his ability of naming. "In the name the spiritual being of man communicates with God" (*A*, 13). Thus language is not *thesei*, by convention, but *physei*, by nature: a primitive, paradisiacal language is assumed of which all existing languages

are only translations. Man, Benjamin believes, is fallen and so is nature. If nature could speak it would mourn but its sadness makes it fall silent (*A*, 24). The whole of nature is permeated by a nameless silent language. Language is thus the symbol of the incommunicable. *Logos*, the word of God, is the unity of this language movement (*A*, 25-26).

Benjamin would have rejected the view that this concept of language is mystical as he considered mystical only the view that the word is the essence of the thing. This seems to him mistaken, "as a thing in itself has no word: it is created out of the word of God and known by its name according to the word of man" (*A*, 19). Still, the view would seem today neither scientific nor properly speculative, even though the idea of an original language has been revived by Noam Chomsky in very different, rationalistic terms. "Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers" (1923) assumes that there is this original language and that translation is an expression of the inner relationship between languages. The integration of many languages into a single true one inspires the translator. In practice Benjamin recommends a translation which would "turn German into Hindi, Greek, or English," quoting Rudolf Pannwitz. Benjamin praises Hölderlin's translations from Sophocles and Pindar (surely extravagant distortions of their originals) and concludes by saying, "The interlinear version of the Scriptures is the prototype or ideal of all translation" (*I*, 69). Nabokov might approve on other grounds but a theory of translation which first and last wants a genuine poem in the language of the translation makes much more sense from an aesthetic point of view.

But aesthetics did not interest Benjamin. His theory and practice of criticism grew out of his engagement with Romantic criticism. His thesis *Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik* (1919, published 1920) is at first sight a school-work which keeps within the limits of a historical exposition and interpretation. Still, the way Benjamin anchors the concept of criticism of the Romantics (in practice, only of Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis) in the concept of reflexion, derived from Fichte, and how he elaborates the contrast between the Romantic conception and that of Goethe is not only original but helps, at least by exclusion, to define his own position. Benjamin thinks that Goethe accepted the ultimate impossibility of criticism while Friedrich Schlegel consistently exalted criticism over creation (*Ku.*, 99). In Schlegel, Benjamin formulates, "the totality of works fulfills itself in the infinity of art; in Goethe, on the contrary, the multitude of works always rediscovers the unity of art" (*Ku.*, 105). The romantic infinity is one of pure form, the unity of Goethe's idea is one of pure concept (*Ku.*, 106). A further contrast between Schlegel's ideal and Goethe's ideal is construed. Goethe's ideal appears as "style," as "a subtle naturalism" (*Ku.*, 106), while Schlegel does not postulate a

specific content of art but only an idea of poetry as form and a theory of the novel as the acme of poetry. The contrast as drawn by Benjamin seems oversharpe. The documentation is narrowly limited to a few texts from Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis (which do not always agree). Many motifs in Schlegel's thought are ignored or dismissed, such as his concept of evolution in art history or of "Charakteristik," wrongly disparaged in a note (*Ku.*, 60n). Still, whatever allowances one must make, the thesis makes Benjamin's own somewhat later concept of criticism stand out more clearly.

It is impossible to misunderstand it. Criticism searches for the truth-content of a work of art (*I*, 70), or, phrased differently, it "looks for the sisters of a work of art which must be found in the realm of philosophy" (*I*, 118). Works of art have a deep affinity with the ideal of a philosophical problem. All beauty is related to truth. But Benjamin insists that this relationship must not be thought of as truth being somehow concealed within a work of art. Benjamin expressly disapproves of the Hegelian "sensual semblance of the Idea." Beauty is not a cloak, not a wrapper, not appearance but essence (*Wesen*). Criticism must respect the veil: it must not attempt to lift it (*I*, 141). The critic can only define an analogon of a work of art. The sublime power of truth appears precisely in the inexpressive, a truth which is discovered in the nature of language (*I*, 140-41). Something like phenomenological "Wesensschau" seems envisaged and one might be struck with the similarity to Heidegger.

But this is somewhat deceptive if we examine the negations and rejections in Benjamin's concept and the concrete procedure of his interpretations. Benjamin strongly rejects the biographical or simply the expressive approach to a work of art. A work cannot be derived from life (*I*, 101). Nor does *Erlebnis* define a work of art. Benjamin argues even that this concept is "devised by Philistines to make poetry harmless, to rob it of its relation to truth" (*I*, 112), hardly a fair description of the motivation of Dilthey. Nor can Benjamin ascribe a decisive importance to the professed intentions of the poet. His pronouncements need not prescribe to the critic (*I*, 86), nor may the poet be clearly conscious of the truth-content of his own work (*I*, 91). Thus Benjamin must criticize Gundolf's book on Goethe as it is ultimately, in spite of contrary professions, biographical. The glorification of the "figure" of Goethe, a hybrid of hero and creator, amounts to an exaltation of the life of the poet at the expense of the work. The dogma of the Goethe cult: that Goethe's life is his greatest work, accepted by Gundolf, leads to an abdication of criticism. Benjamin does not believe that a human life can be treated as a work of art. Gundolf creates a type of a shapeless hero-poet, "a mendacious monumentality" (*I*, 109).

Benjamin had been an admirer of Stefan George and even much later

quoted him and wrote gratefully acknowledging George's role in his early life (see *I*, 142, 156, 171). But Benjamin was necessarily more and more repelled by the claims of authority and leadership made by the group, its exclusiveness, snobbery, and bombastic phraseology. Still, as late as 1930 Benjamin reviewed Max Kommerell's book, *Der Dichter als Führer in der deutschen Klassik*, with great admiration mixed with revulsion against the claim that German classicism is a living, life-giving authority (see *A*, 434 ff.).

Benjamin rejects with equal emphasis any approach through the reader or his psychology. He dismisses "empathy" or substitution as a mere cloak for what one must assume to be idle curiosity (*Ur.*, 40). In dramatic theory he disagrees with the whole problem of *katharsis*. Most radically Benjamin formulates: "In the appreciation of a work of art or an art form, consideration of the receiver never proves fruitful. Not only is any reference to a specific public or its representatives misleading, but even the concept of an 'ideal' receiver is detrimental in the theoretical consideration of art since all it assumes is the existence and nature of man as such. Art, in the same way, assumes man's physical and spiritual existence but in none of its works is it concerned with his response. No poem is intended for the reader, no picture for the beholder, no symphony for the listener" (*I*, 56; Zohn's translation slightly changed, p. 69). No "Rezeptionsgeschichte," no Marxism at that time for Benjamin.

Even the historicity of the work of art is rejected in the same year (December 1923). "I consider it as settled that there is no history of art. The work of art is essentially unhistorical: at most one can write a history of themes or forms but not a history of works of art" (*Br. I*, 322-23). The highest reality in art is "an isolated, closed work" (*Ur.*, 42). As late as 1926 Benjamin asks for recognition of "the radical uniqueness of a work of art." "It arises from the creative point of indifference in which insight into the nature of the Beautiful and of art interpenetrates with insight into the absolutely unique work" (*Literaturblatt der Frankfurter Zeitung*, 7. 11. 1926, quoted in Tiedemann, p. 44). Works of art are conceived as Ideas existing in complete isolation, "in perfect independence and inviolability, not only from the phenomena but even more from each other" (*Ur.*, 19). Benjamin believes "in the discontinuous structure of the world of ideas" (*Ur.*, 14) and thus must object to system or any attempt at systematization. On occasion he accepts the Leibnizian ideas of the monad. "We enter into the interior of a work of art like into a monad of which we know that it has no windows but bears within the miniature of the whole" (Tiedemann, 44). Benjamin here seems not so distant from Croce (even though his vocabulary is very different). Croce also refused to believe in the possibility of a history of art, emphasized the uniqueness of the single work and invented a term, *cosmicità*, which tries like Benjamin's monad to suggest

the simultaneous uniqueness and universality of a work of art: the old idea of the reflection of the macrocosmos in the microcosmos.

Benjamin's Platonic world of essences explains the attraction which Proust's essences recalled by involuntary memory had for him. The later idea of an "aura" of a work of art must have evolved from it. Benjamin in his most famous essay, "Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner Reproduzierbarkeit" (1934), seems to welcome, as a democrat and avowed Marxist, the spread of works of art to all manner and conditions of men, the ease of their reproduction, the rise of new popular arts such as the film, and he seems to predict, almost like Marshall McLuhan, the end of the Gutenberg era, the end of contemplative reading, the "liquidation of the traditional value in the cultural heritage" (*I*, 153). But clearly even then Benjamin's attitude is ambivalent: he also deplores the destruction of the aura, the detachment of art from cult and myth. It is an elegy on the past of art and of his own former concept of art which in its early stages centered on myth and the mythical as the acme of art and truth.

The early essay, "Zwei Gedichte von Friedrich Hölderlin" (1918), starts with drawing a distinction between the poem and "das Gedichtete." It seems an awkward concept (soon abandoned, I think) which tries to locate a sphere between the poem and life. It is, I presume, a term for what elsewhere is called "inner form." Once it is described as a union of form and content and we are told that "das Gedichtete" differs from the poem by greater definiteness (*I*, 23). But "das Gedichtete" is also related to myth and the distance from myth and the nearness to life is considered a criterion of value: the poem is the poorer the nearer it is to life (*I*, 24). [I do not understand how a few pages later, Benjamin can say that "das Gedichtete" is identical with life ("identisch dem Leben," *I*, 32).] This somewhat murky meditation serves as introduction to a comparison of two of Hölderlin's odes: "Dichtermut" (1800) and "Blödigkeit" (1804). Benjamin decides that these two odes—which overlap verbally at several points—can be discussed in terms of a contrast between the mythological and the mythical. The earlier poem is mythological, the later mythical: mythological apparently implying a purely external reference to ancient mythology while "mythical" refers to Hölderlin's creation of myth as it was then being exalted in the edition and lectures of Norbert von Hellingrath. But the evidence for the contrast between the two poems seems to me forced: the reference to "our ancestor the Sun God" in the earlier poem has no different status than the address to "our Father, the God of Heaven" in the second poem. Benjamin sees there an identification of the living and the celestial being: a fateful link of the living and the poet which is supposedly absent in the earlier poem. But in "Dichtermut" the singers of the people also accept a beautiful death as the sun and the Sun God do in setting into the purple flood. In the third stanza of "Blödig-

keit," in a tortuous sentence, the gods are said like man to be "a lonely beast" and the song and the choir of princes are said to "have brought the Heavenly back to earth." It does not seem necessary to interpret "Einkehr" as death, as Benjamin does, nor is it at all clear why the later poem is superior to the earlier one. Actually the two poems say substantially the same: they assert an identity of all living things and an identity with the gods even in death. They proclaim the poet's acceptance of death and fate and assert that the poet has something to offer to mankind and his nation. They both fit into the scheme of Hölderlin's myth-making as it was, for instance, recently analyzed by Ulrich Gaier ("Hölderlin und der Mythos" in *Terror und Spiel*, ed. Manfred Fuhrmann, Munich, 1971). The distinction between the mythological and the mythic is not convincing.

The long paper on Goethe's *Wahlverwandtschaften* (1922, pub. 1924) also interprets the novel as mythic. Benjamin argues that the novel should not be seen in terms of marriage as a social or moral problem. The famous eulogy of marriage pronounced by Mittler (*Werke*, Jubiläumsausgabe, XXI, 80) is not Goethe's. It is disparaged by the teller when he comments: "So sprach er lebhaft und hätte wohl noch lange fortgesprochen." Rather, Benjamin thinks that Goethe wanted to display the forces of law which arise out of the ruin of the marriage. "In its dissolution the human and the mythic survive" (*I*, 75). Benjamin thus minimizes the social surface of the novel. He dismisses the shallow moralistic opinions of Goethe's contemporaries and also Goethe's own pronouncements about his intentions. Benjamin considers them examples of Goethe's liking for mystification and obliging platitudes. The title metaphor of the book, Elective Affinities, is not as other interpreters have seen it, considered central. It suggests not a deeper harmony between man and nature but only the special harmony of the natural strata of the four persons involved (*I*, 79). Somewhat overingeniously Benjamin argues that even this natural harmony between Eduard and Ottilie is not perfect. Ottilie plays the piano accompanying Eduard's flute but Eduard plays badly. Eduard allows Ottilie to look into his book when reading aloud but this is really bad manners. He calls her amusing but she actually never said a word. The two preserve a feeling for what is proper but they lost it for what is moral. They fall silent (*I*, 80). Oddly enough in view of the interpretation Benjamin will give to Ottilie's final falling silent this silence is here considered an unfavorable judgment. Eduard and Ottilie are "deaf toward man and toward the world" (*I*, 80). The scarcity of proper names in the novel is then regarded, not as it had been interpreted by Richard Moritz Meyer as a "classicist" desire for the typical but as a failure of language, of naming. It is paralleled by the important role of things in the action: the chalice, the chest, the mill, the house on the hilltop.

The center of Benjamin's interpretation is the dying and death of Otilie. Her death is a mythical sacrifice. Otilie, however, does not sacrifice herself nor is she a victim of fate (as two reviewers of the time, highly praised by Goethe, Abeken and Solger, stated) but it is a sacrifice for the redemption of the guilty. The atonement has always been the death of the innocent, at least in the mythic world the poet evokes. Hence Otilie dies a martyr's death in spite of her committing slow suicide (*I*, 86). Benjamin rejects the view that *Wahlverwandtschaften* preaches renunciation. There is "no struggle between duty and inclination," there is rather regret for a life of missed opportunities (*I*, 90-91). Benjamin rehearses the evidence for Goethe's fear of death, of his sense of the "demonic" and his cult of self with immortality reserved only for the great. At times he uses biographical explanations: thus he alludes to Goethe's thirty years' struggle against marriage until he capitulated by marrying Christiane (*I*, 110) and he even speaks of all of Goethe's later works as "masked Penitence" (*I*, 111).

Benjamin returns then to the final scenes of Otilie's martyrdom: her complete silence is not due to any decision of hers but is the silence of the moral voice, mere instinct (*I*, 122-23). Benjamin even alludes to the fact that Minna Herzlieb, the supposed model of Otilie, died in a mental institution (*I*, 123), an event that occurred many years after the publication of the book but is somehow considered relevant retrospectively. Benjamin makes much of the beauty of Otilie, her nymph-like quality, her affinity with water (*I*, 129) and the moon (*I*, 132). He insists that there was no true love between Eduard and Otilie (*I*, 133). True love is rather depicted in the inserted story, "Die wunderlichen Nachbarskinder," which is interpreted as an antithesis of Otilie's story. It depicts triumphant redemption compared to Otilie's sacrifice. In the last pages of the paper Benjamin refers to a passage (*Werke*, XXI, 260): "Die Hoffnung fuhr wie ein Stern der vom Himmel fällt, über ihre Häupter weg." Benjamin takes this oddly enough as an expression of hope for redemption, as the central mystery of the whole work (*I*, 147). But the passage seems misinterpreted or at least misused. The sentence occurs quite casually in the meeting of Eduard and Otilie when Eduard finds her with the baby under the oak, when he curses his double adultery just before the drowning of the child. The star that falls from heaven is a shooting star, a delusion. Hope rushes away above their heads. A hope of resurrection and of a reunion of the lovers in afterlife is expressed only in the very last sentence of the novel: "welch ein freundlicher Augenblick wird es sein, wenn sie dereinst wieder zusammen erwachen" (*Werke*, XXI, 302). This sentence seems to me merely a gesture toward an orthodox belief in resurrection, as the whole conclusion of the book must be seen, together with the final scene of the second part of *Faust*, as a Catholic allegory complete with a miracle-working corpse exempt from decay, with angels, Gothic chapels, etc. The whole Nazarene

decoration cannot, to my taste, be saved aesthetically by Benjamin's mythic interpretation.

I am unconvinced by the "distrust of the word and confidence in the power of silence" (to quote Franz Rosenzweig's *Stern der Erlösung* [1921, second ed. 1930, 3rd part, p. 53], who considers this view as "Jewish in the deepest sense") implied in Benjamin's myth. Nor can I see how this is reconcilable with other passages in this dense paper which seem to consider silence or lack of speech as a failure both humanly and artistically, as after all "naming" is the privilege and task of man and of the poet in particular. In both papers, that of Hölderlin and that on the *Wahlverwandtschaften*, Benjamin seems to me failing precisely as a literary critic. His interpretations are governed by a notion of myth which is conceived as a standard of value but is never defended or even explained as such.

Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels (written in 1925, published in 1928) is, no doubt, Benjamin's best early publication. It has an unfortunate organization: the obscure abstract first chapter must have defeated most early readers as it did Max Rychner (see *Über Walter Benjamin*, Frankfurt, 1968, p. 25) (and probably the Professors at Frankfurt, anyhow not inclined to accept a Jew). The title is also misleading unless we understand that "Ursprung" does not mean origin at all but something like the idea of a genre (*Ur.*, 29). It is rather Goethe's *Urphänomen* transferred to history (Tiedemann, p. 60). Moreover "Trauerspiel" does not mean tragedy but is the term in Benjamin for what one would possibly call "lament" or "play of lamentation" (the actual term, first used, I believe, by Philip von Zesen, is simply a Germanization of "tragedy" with no sense of a different connotation. It is surely used so by Novalis in the passage quoted by Benjamin, *Ur.*, 136). This genre is according to Benjamin best exemplified in German seventeenth-century plays though he recognizes that they are often inferior aesthetically. Still, the genre includes not only Calderón but also Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and continues in the plays of *Sturm und Drang* and in the drama of fate, the *Schicksalsdrama* from Schiller to Grillparzer. "Trauerspiel" is not tragedy. It is rather history, the fall of princes or the death of martyrs, two topics which Benjamin considers almost identical, a lament about fate and death. "Fate drives toward death. Death is not punishment but expression of the forfeiting of guilty life to the law of the life of nature" (*Ur.*, 140). The contrast to Greek tragedy based on myth and a flawed hero's revolt against the gods is obvious. "Trauerspiel" is not tragic, but sad. The melancholiac is its protagonist. Allegory is its method.

Benjamin makes an effort (preceding in time the modern defenses of allegory, C. S. Lewis', Honig's, or Angus Fletcher's) to contrast allegory with symbolism and to defend its method. He expounds Goethe's enormously influential distinction between allegory and symbol (which has

been taken over by Coleridge) to dismiss it as "untenable" (*Ur.*, 177). Allegory has for him the advantage over the momentary symbol of a spread in time. It expresses a view of nature as fallen which Benjamin approves of. He connects it correctly enough with emblems, with the old idea of hieroglyphics, with the deanimation and fragmentation of nature. Allegory opposes the symbol as it prefers the thing to the person, the fragment to totality. We are never told why things should be preferred to persons or fragments to a totality (*Ur.*, 208-09). Still, Benjamin brings out the characteristics of a procedure of art which has been revived in the twentieth century. Baudelaire, Benjamin's later preoccupation, constitutes the bridge in the nineteenth century. We might think today of Kafka, Camus, Orwell, Bulgakov and many others.

Benjamin's book shows skill and erudition in quoting German baroque dramas: Gryphius, Lohenstein, Hallmann, and others. He makes frequent references to classical, medieval, and romantic authors and theories. He is steeped in German *Geistesgeschichte*, quoting, mostly with approval, Dilthey, Burdach, Walzel, Hankamer, Cysarz (about whom he voiced misgivings; see *Br.* 354 and *Ur.*, 39), Strich, Hübscher, Borinski and many others. Benjamin, in this book, even succumbs to the lure of *Geistesgeschichte* all too easily. He generalizes loosely about the different periods and does not ask himself often enough the question whether the same phenomena cannot be found in other periods or whether a different interpretation could not be made of identical quotations. The references to Shakespeare seem a case in point. Iago and Polonius cannot be labelled "demonic fools" (*Ur.*, 195); it seems too facile to dismiss Hamlet's death as not tragic because of the chance of the sword play (*Ur.*, 147) and he misinterprets Hamlet's speech:

What is man,
If his chief good and market of his time
Be but to sleep and feed? A beast, no more.
Sure he that made us with such large discourse,
Looking before and after, gave us not
That capability and god-like reason
To fust in us unus'd.

(IV, 4)

Benjamin calls this "Wittenberg philosophy and a revolt against it" (*Ur.* 150), though it seems nothing less than an assertion of man's "god-like reason." It does not propound an "empty world" as Benjamin would want to have it.

But these are details compared to the result of the book and the shift it indicates in Benjamin's thinking. The belief in myth as essential for poetry is abandoned. The static concept of a realm of ideas is loosened. A philosophy of history is implied. Time and history define the concept of

allegory. Though determinism is still rejected (*Ur.*, 138), the later acceptance of a messianic Marxism becomes comprehensible, especially when seen in the context of the times. But this is another story.

NOTE

I quote Benjamin from the two collections *Illuminationen* (Frankfurt, 1961) as *I* and *Angelus Novus* (Frankfurt, 1966) as *A*, as the older *Schriften* (2 volumes, Frankfurt, 1955) is out of print. *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* is quoted from the revised edition by Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt, 1963) as *Ur.*, *Briefe*, 2 volumes, (Frankfurt, 1966), as *Br.* I refer to *Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik* (Berlin, 1920) as *Ku.*