Walter Benjamin Re-Situated

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The study of Walter Benjamin is currently poised to enter a new phase. A recent, comprehensive English-language biography by Michael Jennings and Howard Eiland (2014); an ongoing new critical edition of Benjamin's writings overseen by Christoph Gödde and Henri Lonitz, two further volumes of which came out in 2017; and older resources, such as the encyclopaedic *Benjamin Handbuch* [Benjamin Handbook] published in 2006 have prepared the way for an historically informed, critical re-thinking of Benjamin's legacy.[1] Taking the Eiland/Jennings biography as my point of departure, I want in this essay to explore the questions that their account opens up, to show the fundamental methodological significance of these questions, and to illustrate how the details made available—and usable—by the new edition contribute to a reassessment of some of the dominant tropes of Benjaminian theory. The trope I will particularly focus on is the 'now of recognizability.' A moment from the past, for Benjamin, only becomes properly legible at a particular later time, forging links across the continuum of history between past situations and present moments: 'each "now" is the now of a particular recognisability.'[2] As I hope to demonstrate: our 'now' seems to be a moment in which new aspects of Benjamin's work have become startlingly recognizable.

Michael Jennings was the general editor of the major English-language edition of Benjamin's *Selected Writings* published by Harvard University Press from 1996 to 2003, for which he collaborated, among others, with Howard Eiland. In 2014, Eiland and Jennings then published their gripping, wide-ranging

and even-handed biography, *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life*. The biography builds on the ground-plan of the *Selected Writings*, which proceeded chronologically, in contrast to the organization by genre of the two major German editions (of which more later).[3] To give an example: the more familiar works, such as Benjamin's 1934 essay on Kafka (SW 2, pp. 794-818) with its theologically inflected reflections on creaturely life, were nested alongside other works of the same year: the equally famous, but much more uncompromising 'The Author as Producer' (SW 2, 768-782) which insisted on the inseparability of formal and political radicalism (SW 2, p. 770); Benjamin's first essay commissioned for the official journal of the Frankfurt School, *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, 'The Present Social Situation of the French Writer,' which adopts a more measured tone appropriate to that organ, asking 'Is there a genuine revolutionary literature without didacticism?' (SW 2, pp. 744-767); and his prescient note, not on established authors like Kafka, Brecht, Gide, and Malraux, but on the similarities between Hitler and Charlie Chaplin's popular clown persona six years before Chaplin's own direct parody of Hitler in *The Great Dictator* (1940) (SW 2, pp. 792-793). The *Selected Works* thus already gave English readers access to what Eiland and Jennings in the biography call the 'mobile and contradictory whole' of Benjamin's convictions (*Critical Life*, p. 3, p. 42, p. 118, p. 321, p. 679), using a phrase coined by Benjamin himself in a draft letter to Gershom Scholem—again in 1934 (*Critical Life*, p. 448).

The biography makes brilliantly explicit what was implicit in the organization of the *Selected Writings*: the way Benjamin's thought was inseparable from the contexts and conversations from which it emerged: his pre-First World War engagement with Gustav Wyneken and the Youth Movement;

the conversations with the theologically interested and Zionistically-inclined Scholem in the 1910s and early 1920s; with the conservative Lutheran ex-pastor Florens Christian Rang, who after his death in 1924 was succeeded in Benjamin's intellectual world —again in 1934—by the historian and theologian Karl Thieme (*Critical Life*, p. 471); the support from writers such as Hugo von Hofmannsthal, or Hermann Hesse, who in 1934 made efforts to help Benjamin publish the autobiographical *Berlin Childhood around 1900* (*Critical Life*, pp. 437-438); the engagement with the contemporary avant-garde mediated by the Dadaist Hugo Ball; the exchanges and rivalries with Siegfried Kracauer, Ernst Bloch, Theodor Adorno, Asja Lacis, Bertolt Brecht, Hannah Arendt, Georges Bataille, Michel Leiris, and so the list goes on. There seems to be almost no-one in the conflict-ridden intellectual life of Germany and France during the early twentieth century whom Benjamin didn't either know well, correspond with (such as Erich Auerbach, who would go to write *Mimesis*, one of the *Ur*-texts of Comparative Literature) or actively avoid, as he did Heidegger. Benjamin and Heidegger took the same seminar on Bergson with the neo-Kantian professor Heinrich Rickert in Freiburg in 1913 (*Critical Life*, pp. 33-34) but these shared beginnings did nothing to soften Benjamin's acerbic dismissals (*Critical Life*, p. 91, p. 118) of the philosopher with whom, in retrospect, Hannah Arendt at least, would suggest he had most in common.[4]

The sort of claim that Arendt made for Benjamin is exactly what the pain-staking work of Eiland and Jennings, over the past twenty or so years, is intended to relativize. But, as we will see at the end of my argument, the new biography and the new critical edition disclose a truth to Arendt's remark that she perhaps little suspected. Arendt and Benjamin knew each other from Berlin—Benjamin

was a distant cousin of Arendt's first husband, Günther Stern (*Critical Life*, p. 580)— and the friendship continued in Parisian exile. Arendt helped to ensure Benjamin's legacy, editing the English-language edition of the collection of essays *Illuminations* in 1968, with a long introductory essay on Benjamin that had first appeared in the *New Yorker*. In addition to this advocacy, conversations with Arendt and her partner Heinrich Blücher contributed to the development of Benjamin's thought in the late 1930s. In 1940, Arendt, Blücher and Benjamin discussed a draft of Scholem's *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* while Benjamin was composing the aphorisms 'On the Concept of History' which combine messianic tropes with an unflinching, and explicitly materialist, critique of ideas of progress (*Critical Life*, p. 659). Benjamin left a draft of the text, written on cast-off wrappers from the *Schweizer Zeitung am Sonntag*, with Arendt and she passed it on to Adorno in 1941 when he was preparing the first edition of the text.[5] As well as contributing to the conversations that fed into the last developments in Benjamin's thought, discussions with Arendt and Blücher left other traces. The *Selected Writings* include a note on Brecht from 1938 or 1939 that Benjamin wrote in response to a comment by Blücher. In the note, Benjamin acknowledges his own failure to point up the parallels between attitudes expressed in Brecht's poetry of the later 1920s and the threatening practices of the GPU, the Soviet secret police: 'At any rate, the commentary, in the form I gave it, is a pious falsification which obscures the extent to which Brecht is implicated in the development in question' (SW 4, p. 159). In the biography, too, Eiland and Jennings track Benjamin's dismay at the increasingly authoritarian developments in the Soviet Union in the 1930s (*Critical Life*, p. 535). They thus give the background that explains why Arendt was right in her attempts to distance

Benjamin's thought from 'from the intellectual subtleties of his Marxist friends', but also why she was wrong.[6] For the biography explores the importance of the relationship with Brecht, of the reading of Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness* in the wake of Ernst Bloch's review of the book in 1924 (*Critical Life*, pp. 206-207) and, in parallel with his reading of a monograph by Karl Thieme on Christian eschatology, of the close study of Karl Korsch's *Karl Marx* in 1939. Indeed, the biography suggests: 'This "riveting" book was in many ways Benjamin's most extensive encounter with Marx's own ideas; Korsch is cited in *The Arcades Project* more frequently than Marx himself' (*Critical Life*, p. 640).

Eiland and Jennings paint a sympathetic portrait of Benjamin's complexity, and of the ways his voracious, omnivorous and risk-taking cultural appetite was misunderstood even by figures to whom he was intellectually very close, such as Scholem or Adorno: 'Benjamin was as ready as his friends were unready for the juxtaposition of "extreme positions" in his thought. It is in part this very instability, this resistance to the fixed and doctrinaire, that gives his writing the exciting, "living" quality that has engaged several generations of readers' (*Critical Life*, p. 431). They show how this creativity and experimentation is in part the result of Benjamin's nihilism, or what they call: 'the experience of the utter groundlessness of modern existence' (*Critical Life*, p. 618). Where all forms of cultural, political and intellectual endeavour seem flawed and partial, it makes sense to cleave to none even as one longs for the overthrow of all, meanwhile jealously preserving intellectual independence. Eiland and Jennings carefully document the different directions Benjamin explored and the successive attempts by his colleagues, mentors and peers to instrumentalize his thought, culminating in Adorno's 'astonishingly intrusive'

demands for the re-writing—in his own image—of Benjamin's 1938 essay on 'The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire' (*Critical Life*, p. 628). A portrait of Hugo von Hofmannsthal that Benjamin sketched in a letter to Adorno written May 7 1940, three days before the German invasion of France, reads to Eiland and Jennings as 'a moving tribute to the one major figure who recognized and supported Benjamin's talent without trying to bend it to his own purposes' (*Critical Life*, p. 667). The Benjamin they present is intellectually courageous in his exploration of competing lines of inquiry. At the same time, he was from the 1910s, subject to attempts to curtail the heteroclite mix to which his method of using contingent tools to analyse hidden layers of experience committed him.

The biography has been well-received. As David Ferris, editor of *The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin* (2004) summarized: 'This achievement will remain not only a standard and resource-full account of Benjamin but in its comprehensiveness as well as its acute accounts of Benjamin's thought across the whole range of that thinking it will continue to provide the foundation for the fuller understanding of his place and contribution to the critical, cultural, political, and historical present we have inherited from the twentieth century.'[7] Nevertheless, the book's undogmatic attention to multiplicity challenges further readings of Benjamin to explain any partiality they might exhibit, even as the authors generously imagine that: 'Coming generations of readers will undoubtedly find their own Benjamins in the encounter with that "mobile and contradictory whole" that is his lifework' (*Critical Life*, p. 679). How do we read Benjamin now without falling back into the old habits of an instrumentalizing misreading that jeopardizes the insight that

Eiland and Jennings make so clear: that, for Benjamin, no single approach or vocabulary will be adequate in the pursuit of truth?

To help answer this question, Nitzan Lebovic commissioned a series of reflections by established younger scholars. These were published, with a response by Eiland and Jennings, on the MLA Commons website in December 2015.[8] The essays by Udi Greenberg, Brian Britt, Ilit Ferber, Daniel Weidner, Annika Thiem, Galili Shahar and Carolin Duttlinger return again and again to the question of contextualization. Udi Greenberg's contribution noted the ambiguous effect of Eiland's and Jennings's nuanced historicizing. The authors, he argues, reveal a Benjamin who understands both politics and nihilism with the tools of his own era: 'By doing so, they seek to strip his biography of contemporary meanings and instead reframe him as an interwar thinker. […] By situating Benjamin so deeply in the world of interwar Europe, *A Critical Life* also raises significant questions about Benjamin's ability to provide ideas and terminologies that are helpful for thinking about the contemporary world.'[9] Brian Britt and Ilit Ferber respond to the ambiguity by suggesting that Benjamin's engagement with his own context still contains unexplored resources for thinking in the 21st-century. Britt argues that Benjamin's reflections on Jewishness allow us to move from models of Jewishness as a set of beliefs, or an inheritance, to that of Jewishness as a displaced but still palpable tradition: 'For Benjamin as for more recent "postsecular" thinkers like Talal Asad, tradition never just goes away; even the most iconoclastic modernisms bear the afterlife and traces of the past. The inversions, paradoxes, and formal experiments of Benjamin's thought identify the displacements of tradition in ways that open space for critical thought, and, I would argue, agency.'[10] Where, for Britt, Benjamin helps us

reconceive the continuing if oblique presence of past traditions in present practices—the entangled, multi-layered structure of temporal experience to which Eiland and Jennings draw attention with a phrase from Benjamin's 1929 essay on Proust: 'intertwined time (*verschränkte Zeit*)' (*Critical Life*, p. 291, p. 327, p. 383)— for Ferber, Benjamin's thought also provides the conceptual resources for a radical re-thinking of affect and emotion that parallels, without being reducible to, Heidegger's discussions of moods in *Being and Time*. Benjamin 'provides us with a suggestive alternative to Heidegger's *Dasein*', exploring the affectivity that is the very condition of the emergence of both subject and object.[11]

Working in a different tradition, Giovanna Colombetti has recently explored the comparable idea of 'primordial affectivity,' drawing, like Ferber, on aspects of the early twentieth-century phenomenology.[12] The striking difference from Ferber's account is the way Colombetti combines her interest in the philosophy of the 1920s or 1940s with current empirical work on the structure and functioning of our situated affective life, modelling the dynamic interaction of brain, body and environment. Colombetti's response to the promise and the limitations of early twentieth century reflection is, thus, to stand back from their vocabularies and to test their claims against more recent empirical work, which is itself tested by the methodological insights of philosophical tradition. Of course, as Daniel Weidner points out, any such re-appropriation of Benjamin, or other figures (in Colombetti's case, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty) will need to be clear about its own interests, and indeed its reasons for appealing to historical figures in the first place: 'Why do we need such "big-name intellectuals"? And what does Benjamin do for us?'[13] Nevertheless, as Carolin Duttlinger argues, it is

productive to move beyond the internal perspective of individual texts so as to continue the work, enabled so compellingly by the *Selected Writings* and the new biography, of 'thinking in earnest about [Benjamin's] thought as part of a network of ideas both internal and external to his texts.'[14]

Duttlinger cites Frederic J. Schwartz's *Blind Spots: Critical Theory and the History of Art* (2005) as a model for this earnest thinking.[15] Schwartz reconstructs the early twentieth-century interest in psychotechnics (*Psychotechnik*), a branch of applied psychology that, as Duttlinger summarizes, 'tried to maximize the effectiveness of human perception at the workplace and in commodity culture.' Benjamin's interest in the effects of the filmic image, which, in his arguments, shocks the viewer out of a contemplative attitude into a distracted and collective form of self-transcendence, can be read in the context of comparable empirical investigations of attention and distraction in the 1920s and 1930s. His leftist, avant-garde excitement about forms of distraction that herald the socialisation of vision contrasts with the psychologists' study of a distraction 'which isolated the individual from the environment, making him or her unable to respond to the challenges of modern life.'[16] For Duttlinger, Benjamin's argument thus 'ignores empirical research into cognition and its rootedness in the body, research that was not, in fact, driven solely by employers' interests—the maximization of efficiency and profit—but also by a concern for the worker and the project of adapting working conditions in ways best suited to the individual.'[17] Following Schwartz, therefore, Duttlinger suggests that a contextualizing and sympathetic reading of Benjamin can nevertheless modulate the claims of Benjamin's own vocabulary. We can continue his pluralistic project of finding tools for re-energizing occluded layers of experience without having to

endorse his every choice. There may be some choices that in retrospect no longer seem compelling.

For a critic such as Eli Friedlander, this cherry-picking approach doesn't properly acknowledge the 'single physiognomy of [Benjamin's] thought'; indeed, a piecemeal approach suggests, for Friedlander, 'the reluctance to engage the rigor of Benjamin's thought.'[18] His review of Eiland's and Jennings's book was accordingly concerned that their focus on the 'mobile and contradictory whole' might lead us to mistake the conflicting, ordinary moral dilemmas to which Benjamin the man was subject for an insight into the disunity of the philosophical project. Such a method, for Friedlander, would disregard 'what Benjamin calls the nonderivable character of the poetic work.'[19]

However, we don't in fact need to choose between, on the one hand, the premise that apparently disparate aspects in fact belong together, and, on the other, the assumption that forms of difference cannot be assimilated to a common core. Following William James, in his discussion of the problem of the One and the Many in his lectures on *Pragmatism* (1907), we can see both as useful tools which, in different contexts, can make a difference to our inquiry. James's own inclinations are towards pluralism, but he can see that the idea of unity is a powerful heuristic device, since it is often useful to group things together, or to assume that, if nothing else, things are unified by their susceptibility to being known by us.[20] The premise of the *Selected Writings* is precisely that we can meaningfully connect the dizzying range of topics and forms to which Benjamin, at any one moment, turned his attention: his second impression of hashish, reviews of a cultural history of toys or a play by Hofmannsthal, an account of the Berlin Food Exhibition, or a thirty-page essay on

Goethe, to pick some of the things Benjamin worked on in 1928, the same year he published *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, and the book of aphorisms *One-Way Street*. At the same time, it's important, as we open-mindedly search for connections, to consider how aspects might be irreconcilable, or how cultural habits age at different rates, so that some of the lines of thought Benjamin pursued might be embroiled with practices we now consider differently. Moreover, following the argument made in Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self* (1989), a culture might inherit habits and assumptions which conflict with each other fundamentally and yet are ineradicable parts of the culture's ways of conceiving a human being. The 'package' to which we are the historical inheritors might be irrevocably plural in a way which theoretical ingenuity can do no more than disguise.[21] The layers of past experience which, in Benjaminian fashion, reveal themselves to our present, as it unlocks them and is itself transformed by them, might be a disunified aggregate of forces.

Eiland and Jennings clearly prepare the way for questioning the wholeness of the 'mobile and contradictory whole' in the scrupulous way they reconstruct even the less palatable aspects of Benjamin's work. A case in point is their discussion of the biting and misogynist review written in 1928 of a book by Eva Fiesel on German Romantic philosophy of language, the same topic on which Benjamin himself had completed his PhD dissertation in 1919 (*Critical Life*, pp. 304-305). The review is not included in the *Selected Writings*. But it's a testament to Eiland and Jennings dispassionate account of their subject that they dwell for a moment on this unsettling episode.

To prepare the way for a more detailed analysis of Benjamin's 1928 review, I need to say a bit more about the new critical edition of Benjamin's

published texts and unpublished papers edited by Christoph Gödde and Henri Lonitz: *Werke und Nachlaß*. The guiding premises of the edition are to collect all writings now available and to foreground Benjamin's thinking and writing processes as much as his finished works.[22] The first of 21 projected volumes appeared in 2008. Since then eight volumes have appeared including the edition of Benjamin's radio works and his translations of Baudelaire's *Tableaux Parisiens* which were published in 2017.[23] The volume with Benjamin's critiques and reviews, including the impatient dismissal of Eva Fiesel's book on Romantic philosophies of language, appeared in 2011. In their contributions to the MLA Commons debate, both Daniel Weidner and Annika Thiem drew attention to Benjamin's underexplored journalistic reviews. Much of the material was already available in the older *Gesammelte Schriften* [Collected Writings] which were overseen by Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, including the review of Fiesel.[24] But in the older edition the critical apparatus tells us nothing more than that the review was first published in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* on 26 February 1928 (GS III, p. 625). In contrast, Heinrich Kaulen's 2011 edition fills the background, and so reveals ways in which the 'mobile and contradictory' of Benjamin's oeuvre might begin to disaggregate.

The core of Benjamin's argument in the review of Fiesel's book is that to understand the Romantics' philosophy of language it is not enough to be a neutral observer reporting on past ways of thinking "because the innermost structures of the past are illuminated for each present moment only in the light emanating from the white heat of their changing actuality [weil die innersten Strukturen des Vergangenen sich jeder Gegenwart nur in dem Licht erhellen, das von der Weißglut ihrer Aktualitäten ausgeht]."[25] His reservations about the book

derive from his own methodological commitment to the explosive entanglement of past and present: or, to quote the 1929 Proust essay again: 'intertwined time (*verschränkte Zeit*)' (SW 2, p. 244). The review is startling for the way it genders this dynamic relation to time. For Benjamin, Fiesel's book is careful and well-informed, but lacks sovereignty and a genuine relation to the material: "the typical work of a woman [typische Frauenarbeit]" (WuN 13.1, p. 104). The gendered understanding of the methodological failure returns later when Benjamin diagnoses an "unmanly historicism [einen unmännlichen Historizismus]" (WuN 13.1, p. 104). The historical irony is that Benjamin, who mistakenly took the book to be an 'above average' PhD dissertation (WuN 13.1, p. 103), was dismissing the work of another Jewish intellectual who, like him, had her habilitation rejected (WuN, 13.2, pp. 118-19) and who was forced into exile in 1933 (*Critical Life*, p. 305). Be that as it may: the important point is that a recurring and influential trope of Benjamin's thought (the 'now of recognizability' here figured as the changing actualities linking past and present) turns out to be so readily combinable with the image of manly dynamism as opposed to womanly reserve. Nor is this misogynist outburst the only instance of gender-inflected understanding of the 'now of recognizability' in Benjamin's writing. On the contrary, the review of Fiesel's book turns out to be a tropological preparation of Benjamin's influential final work 'On the Concept of History' (1940), the process of which we can reconstruct following lines of connection made visible by the new critical edition.

In May 1930, Benjamin published another review in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* of Fritz Ernst's *Studien zur europäischen Literatur* [Studies in European Literature]. Here Benjamin finds the manliness he missed in Fiesel's book.

Drawing on Ernest Hemingway's short story collection *Men without Women* (1927) which he read around the same time as Ernst's book (WuN, 13.2, p. 244), Benjamin declares that *Studien zur europäischen Literatur* could also be given the title *Men without Women*: "for what the author is dealing with is that virile quality that either needs no consolation or is inconsolable [es ist das Männliche, das, je nach dem, keines Trostes Bedürftige oder das Untröstbare, worum es dem Autor zu tun war]" (WuN, 13.1, p. 246, my translation). Benjamin is struck by the restrained and manly way the figures Ernst presents—the portrait of Pestalozzi particularly impresses him (WuN 13.1, p. 247)—confront the obstacles and constraints of their situation. The idea of 'having been constrained [dies Bezwungenwordensein],' which we find in the review of Ernst (WuN 13.1, p. 248), returns in a radio review of Hemingway and Thornton Wilder that Benjamin broadcast in December 1929, when he is directly discussing Hemingway's *Men without Women*.[26] Once again, we are dependent on the 2017 edition of the radio works to follow up this connection: the English-language *Radio Benjamin* (2014) doesn't include the broadcast.[27] In the broadcast on Hemingway, the connection between manly constraint, on the one hand, and time, on the other, is explicit. Benjamin draws attention to male characters, "heroically constrained by or constraining time [de~~m~~n heroischen Bezwinger oder Bezwungenen der Zeit]" whom Hemingway denies what Benjamin calls the narcotic of love (WuN 9.1, p. 437).

Putting together these texts from the late 1920s we can see a connection in Benjamin's thinking between manliness and a certain ability to wrest an experience from time. This same constellation returns in 'On the Concept of History' (1940) when Benjamin is articulating a similar critique of historicism to

that found in his 1928 review of Fiesel's book. The new critical edition of 'On the Concept of History' does not include a final version of the text, since Benjamin did not authorize any one of the drafts that were in circulation at the time of his death. What is striking in comparing the different drafts is that, whilst aspects of the ordering and formulations change, the particular words and images chosen to convey the connection between masculinity and experience do not. Across the different versions Leopold von Ranke's ideal of telling history 'how it actually was' is contrasted with a different approach: 'to seize hold [sich bemächtigen] of a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger' (WuN 19, p. 18/SW 4, p. 391, translation amended). The German verb *bemächtigen* has replaced *bezwingen*, but the sense of actively constrained time remains. In the imaginative world of the text, a complex, multi-layered temporality is personified as a woman pregnant with future events: 'The soothsayers who queried time and learned what she bore in her womb, did not experience her as either homogeneous or empty [Sicher wurde die Zeit von den Wahrsagern, die ihr abfragten, was sie in ihrem Schoße birgt, weder als homogen noch als leer erfahren]' (WuN 19, p. 23/SW 4, p. 397, translation amended). Benjamin thus imagines that, to have a generative experience with time of the sort lacking in Fiesel's disengaged, historicist approach, one needs to be a manly historical materialist: 'Historicism offers the "eternal" image of the past; the historical materialist an experience with the past that stands unique. He leaves it to others to be expend themselves with the whore "Once upon a time" in historicism's bordello. He remains master of his own powers: man enough to blast open the continuum of history [Der Historismus stellt das "ewige" Bild der Vergangenheit, der historische Materialist eine Erfahrung mit ihr, die einzig dasteht. Er überläßt es andern, bei der Hure "Es

war einmal" im Bordell des Historismus sich auszugeben. Er bleibt seiner Kräfte Herr;: Manns genug, das Kontinuum der Geschichte aufzusprengen]' (WuN 19, p. 26/SW 4, p. 396, translation amended).

Following the lead in Eiland's and Jennings biography, and using the resources of the new critical edition to put the review in the context of its composition and of Benjamin's developing writerly imagination, we find a connection to which neither cherry-picking nor the insistence on the philosophical unity of Benjamin's work seem adequate responses. If we cherry-pick and bracket out the misogyny to preserve the exhilarating idea of the 'now of recognisability,' we ignore an important piece of evidence. Yet the deep connection between a powerful virility and wresting a transformative image from the past can't easily be absorbed into a twenty-first century philosophy of history.

Benjamin's tropes can't be neatly extracted from the *Umwelt* in which they originally emerged. They bring something of the soil with them. What should we do with a powerful conceptual topos that is inseparable from the lived dynamism of a male self-understanding we no longer share? Feminist discussions of Benjamin's work have either emphasized elements of his thought, such as the discussions of androgyny, that complexify a simple gender binary, or have pointed out the ways in which Benjamin's tropes reinforce paradigmatic patriarchal structures.[28] The virile experience of intertwined time seems to fall squarely into the latter category, but it is at the same time something more. For Benjamin's choice of figure suggests that the dynamic engagement with time will always and only be experienced by historically situated and embodied human beings, whose relation to temporality will be disclosed (not just mediated) by

whatever flawed habits and techniques of self-relation they happen to have been forged by. There will be no experience of temporal dynamism that doesn't bring the soil with it, and to other generations that soil might seem to soil the purity of the insights.

The process of owning and transforming the lived experience of time's layering is what Walter Bryce Gallie has called an 'essentially contested concept' and Ellen Spolsky has called a 'representationally hungry problem,' that is to say, a knot to which cultures return again and again with the contingent tools available in any one epoch without ever solving the problem once and for all.[29] As cultural historians, we are left with the task of reconstructing the necessity of such constellations, and of allowing the unsettling juxtapositions of the past to defamiliarize the concatenations in which we are ourselves embroiled. In this case, that means seeing how time is experienced through a situated, frail, affective and sexual body.

In Benjamin's brief essay on 'Experience and Poverty' (1933), the process of cultural transformation in the early twentieth century seems to leave behind nothing but a vulnerable, naked human being confronting the sky: 'A generation that had gone to school in horse-drawn streetcars now stood in the open air, amid a landscape in which nothing was the same except the clouds and, at its center, in a force field of destructive torrents and explosions, the tiny, fragile human body [der winzige gebrechliche Menschenkörper]' (SW 2, p. 732). Benjamin lived this frailty as a man, using the tools of his era that we find him admiring in Hemingway. The 'primordial affectivity,' to use Colombetti's term, through which the world was disclosed to him in the dynamic exchange between body, brain and cultural environment, was inseparable from a certain virile tone:

sexual self-assertion and emotional self-control promulgated by many at the time. These are not psychological terms, but the cultural modulations through which psychology—our relation to ourselves and others—is experienced in the first place.

For Ilit Ferber, mood is something like a deep ontological structure.[30] But what the discussion of Benjamin's virile tone reveals is, rather, that mood is always disclosed with and by the contingent habits of a particular era: human affective life is ontic all the way down. This is the level at which, it seems to me, Benjamin connects with Heidegger. Like Benjamin, Heidegger's formulations of how *Dasein* appropriates the complex temporality of the human situation are gendered through and through.[31] We find invocations of an 'unwavering discipline' (SuZ, p. 370 [§65]), which includes 'doing violence' to complacent habits (SuZ, p. 359 [§63]); a valuation of reticence over chatter (SuZ, p. 318 [§56], p. 322 [§57]), and of being self-controlled and collected (*gehalten*) in the face of anxiety (SuZ, p 394 [§68]). The gendering of these terms becomes explicit in the letters Heidegger wrote to Hannah Arendt when they were lovers and while he was working on the book that became *Being and Time*, contrasting the manly solitude of his academic work with the gift of a particular kind of togetherness made possible by Arendt's womanliness.[32]

Nevertheless, the connection with Heidegger does not simplify the image of Benjamin that emerges, as Arendt seems to have hoped when she tried to distance him from his 'Marxist friends.'[33] Rather, it discloses our own embodied entanglement with history. Curiously, the image Arendt uses to explain the parallel she perceived, conjures precisely the bodily inhabiting of a contingent aggregate of cultural forms that threatens to pull apart the 'mobile and

contradictory whole' of a human life: 'Without realizing it, Benjamin actually had more in common with Heidegger's remarkable sense for living eyes and living bones that had sea-changed into pearls and coral, and as such could be saved and lifted into the present only by doing violence to their context in interpreting them with 'the deadly impact' of new thoughts.'[34] If the new biography and the new critical edition put us in a position to develop new forms of cultural history, following in Benjamin's footsteps to connect the past with our present contingencies, they challenge us at the same time to confront the embodied disaggregation to which this confrontation with historical human fragility inevitably exposes us.

[1] Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014); Walter Benjamin, *Werke und Nachlaß: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, ed. Christoph Gödde and Henri Lonitz (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2008-); Burkhardt Lindner, ed. *Benjamin Handbuch: Leben - Werk - Wirkung* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2006). Further references to the Eiland/Jennings biography will be given parenthetically in the text.

[2] Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 463 [N3, 1].

[3] *Selected Writings*, ed. Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996-2003). Further references to this edition will be given parenthetically in the text giving the volume number and using the abbreviation SW.

[4] *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Collins-Fontana Books, 1973), pp. 50-51.

[5] Detlev Schöttker and Erdmut Wizisla, eds., *Arendt und Benjamin: Texte, Briefe, Dokumente* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 2006), pp. 101-19; Walter Benjamin, *Über den Begriff der Geschichte*, ed. Gérard Raulet, vol. 19, Werke und Nachlaß: Kritische Gesamtausgabe (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2010), pp. 6-29.

[6] *Illuminations*, p. 50.

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