

WALTER BENJAMIN

Illuminations

TRANSLATED BY HARRY ZOHN

EDITED AND WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY HANNAH ARENDT

PREFACE BY LEON WIESELTIER

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Preface

by Leon Wieseltier

It is hard to imagine a time when Walter Benjamin was not a god (or an idol) of criticism, but I can remember when, in my own student days, not so long ago, he was only an exciting rumor. It was the publication of *Illuminations*, and then a few years later of *Reflections*, these lovingly assembled and beautifully translated volumes, that confirmed the rumor. These were the books that brought the news. I can report that in the bookshops around Columbia in its roiled years, before Broadway became a boulevard of theory, they were snatched up immediately and read with a hushed fascination. No sooner was Benjamin known than he was revered. I encountered Benjamin's name for the first time in the ornate dedication to *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, the masterwork (talk about bringing the news!) of his devoted and disappointed friend Gershom Scholem, which was published a year after Benjamin's refugee suicide: "To the memory of Walter Benjamin (1892–1940), the friend of a lifetime, whose genius united the insight of the Metaphysician, the interpretative power of the Critic, and the erudition of the Scholar—died at Port Bou (Spain) on his way into freedom." This is still the most elementary characterization of Benjamin's dense and elusive mind. It prepared me for the most significant quality of Benjamin's accomplishment, and also of

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his spirit: among the great modern intellectuals, he was the one who least added up.

Benjamin's great dispersal, enacted first by his mentality and then by his history, made him especially attractive. He was a naturally unsystematic man, a hero of fragmentation in the line of Novalis and Schlegel and Nietzsche. And yet he was not an enemy of old philosophy, not at all. To a degree that is still not adequately appreciated, Benjamin was happily steeped in German philosophy, and regarded his critical task as the philosophical analysis of literature and culture. In his restless and scattered way, he was carrying on the work of Hegel's *Aesthetics*, a foundational and unjustly discarded work that may be preposterous in its cosmic ideas but is magnificent in its local ideas. Benjamin had a similar gift for applying abstractions to pleasures. And to his explanatory fervor he added a fervor for observation: he saw more, in books and in places, than other people did, and he saw differently. The strangeness that you encounter upon reading Benjamin for the first time is almost a cognitive strangeness: he makes everything no longer familiar. His incompetence at ordinary living allowed him to see it more sharply. Like many of the insurgent children of the German Jewish bourgeoisie, he believed that banality was the enemy of life; but his anti-banalizing energy, the ferocity with which he mined the most commonplace objects and events for explosive meanings, was almost diabolical. ("The everyday as impenetrable, the impenetrable as everyday.") In his memoirs as in his essays, he seemed to require of every perception that it be a revolution. It was his premise that nothing is what it appears to be, and this made him into a scholar of appearances. He had an unappeasable appetite for the marginal and the idiosyncratic, because deviance looked to him like an epistemological advantage. Nothing that was not neglected could be true. All this led Benjamin into the underground of esoteric interpretation.

In his temperament and in his method, Benjamin was an esotericist. He was modernity's kabbalist. In his turgidly enchanted world there were only mysteries, locked and unlocked. His infatuation with Marxism, the most embarrassing episode of his mental wanderings, the only time that he acquiesced in the regimentation of his own mind, may be understood as merely the most desperate of his exercises in arcane reading. The text, this time, was history; but there was

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nothing that was not a text, for Benjamin. He was the most bookish of the agitator-intellectuals. (He looked ridiculous in the Ibiza sun.) He textualized the universe. This was because he was essentially an exegete, a glossator. Everything he wrote was commentary. The Paris Arcades project is, among other things, a milestone in the history of commentary, an astounding renovation of an old point of regard for a new reality. Like the great medieval commentators, Benjamin demonstrated by example that commentary may be an instrument of originality. And in his case, not only of originality, but also of redemption: in Benjamin's view, interpretation does not so much discover meaning as release it, and loose it upon the world so as to liberate it. Benjamin read messianically. Insight, for him, was a variety of intoxication. Indeed, his quest for delirium in criticism made his political writings finally useless for politics. "The realization of dream elements in waking is the textbook example of dialectical thinking": no government ever trembled before such a dialectic. For all his proclamations of political solidarity, Benjamin finally represented only himself, and his own introverted and inextinguishable hunger for a secret knowledge, an initiation, a revelation. He was a failed mystic living amid failed sanctities, and struggling against the failures.

These volumes may be read almost as a spiritual diary. They give a portrait of a pilgrim. But this pilgrim makes no progress, and his story at some point ceases to be stirring, and becomes alienating, and then crushing. It is not only the evil circumstances of Benjamin's death that leave one with a gathering pity for him. His dispersal comes to seem cunning, vain, frantic, sometimes dilettantish, sometimes animated by an aspiration to cultural power—a dazzling distraction from the possibility that there may have been nothing lasting at the core. Benjamin can be at once overflowing and vacant; a student of hiddenness nervously in hiding; a pilgrim without a shrine. Scholem begged Benjamin to make a choice and a commitment (and to make the choice and the commitment that he himself had made); and whereas it is true that Scholem was almost monstrous in his consistency of purpose over the years, he was right to worry about the spiritual implications of Benjamin's indecisiveness. And this indecisiveness, which may have cost Benjamin his life, was unattractively joined to a weakness for dogmatic certitude. The uncertainty that

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Scholem deplored was really a petrification by certainty, or a series of such petrifications. Benjamin's work was scarred by a high ideological nastiness, as when he mocked "the sclerotic liberal-moral-humanistic ideal of freedom" (as if Europe in his day was suffering from a surfeit of this), and speculated acidly about the belief in "the sacredness of life" (or from a surfeit of this), and responded with perfect diffidence to the censorship and the persecution of writers in the Soviet Union, which he coldly described as "the transfer of the mental means of production into public ownership." The pioneering explorer of memory worshipped history too much. He also wrote too much: he advised writers to "never stop writing because you have run out of ideas," and often he acted on his own advice. I confess that there are many pages in Benjamin that I do not understand, in which the discourse seems to be dictating itself, and no direction is clear. Like many esotericists, he abuses the privilege of obscurity.

And yet Benjamin's writings are uncommonly rich with penetrating and prescient notions: the impoverishment of experience in modern life; the primacy of memory as a mode of consciousness; the aura of the work of art, and its eclipse in the age of mechanical (not to speak of electronic) reproduction; the hope for "profane illumination"; the eternal entanglement of barbarism with civilization; the critical utility of the messianic idea—all these notions are justly celebrated, as are his luminous examinations of Goethe and Baudelaire and Kafka and Kraus. Benjamin's work is evidence of the light that a religious sensibility may shine upon secular existence. There are certainly very few critics who can match his power of suggestiveness: his ideas and intuitions have a way of lingering productively, even when you quarrel with them. In the application of philosophical concepts to cultural and social actualities, his decidedly unmythical friend Adorno was his only peer. Philosophical thinking retained its old role, for Benjamin: it was his best defense against despair. There still is no better one.