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Re: Richard Sieburth on Walter Benjamin

By Michael W. Jennings

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It is no accident that no text is named in the title of Richard Sieburth's elegant and insightful essay on Walter Benjamin (*Assemblage* 6): he is of two minds about the textual status of the volume published by Suhrkamp Verlag under the title of *Das Passagen-Werk* (the arcades project). On the one hand, it is for him "in no sense a finished work"; he can thus castigate Rolf Tiedemann, Benjamin's editor, for "reifying" notes for the project, making them into a text. On the other hand, and this is the understanding that predominates in his essay, we have a text that allows of descriptions such as these: the *Arcades Project* is a "monumental ruin *meticulously constructed*" (my emphasis), something that "widens into an encyclopedia," a "montage of disconnected citations." So there are really two texts here. One a "fragmentary work in progress" that is "radically processual, open ended"; one a highly structured if unfinished text that is, as published, susceptible to the most rigorous analysis of its structural principles. If this ambiguous presentation of Benjamin's project were merely a question of loose philology, it would hardly merit a response, but it is more, much more: Richard Sieburth exploits this apparent textual indeterminacy so as to suppress the political impact of one of this century's most important artifacts of political criticism.

First, the philology. Is the textual status of the *Arcades Project* really so unclear? Benjamin began collecting material for his massive sociocultural history of mid-nineteenth-century Paris in 1927; only his death at the Spanish border in 1940, in flight before the Nazi death machine, brought his work on the project to a standstill. The edition published by Tiedemann in 1981 consists of Benjamin's massive accumulation of citations from nineteenth-century sources, commentary on those sources, and a highly developed theoretical model that he hoped to apply to them. As Benjamin copied down source material or composed commentary or theory, he placed the resultant script into an appropriate folder; these folders bore titles such as "Arcades, magasins de nouveautés, calicots"; "Baudelaire"; and "Saint-Simon, railroads." *Das Passagen-Werk* as published reproduces, then, Benjamin's *research* at that stage at which his death arrested the work's progress. We know from his work habits, and above all his preparations for *Origin of German Tragic Drama* and the planned book on Baudelaire that was to have grown out of the Arcades folders, that this material was to have been selected, reordered, and absorbed into a structure including commentary and theoretical utterances. We have strong evidence, in fact, of the precise shape Benjamin intended for his major work: his essay "The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire," conceived as the second of three parts of the book *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Age of High Capitalism*, was written as a "miniature model," "a very exact model" of the structure of the unfinished book on the arcades.[1]

Sieburth insists, however, upon a structure for the project totally at odds with the one found in the essay on Baudelaire; he goes to considerable lengths, in fact, to undermine the strong evidence in Benjamin's correspondence that ties the *Arcades* to the Baudelaire essay. For Sieburth, the structural principle of the Benjamin montage is parataxis. He states unambiguously that Benjamin's book "will maintain as its basic structural and heuristic device the form of a list, a paratactic mapping of cultural traffic." There is a sense here and throughout the essay that Benjamin found the simple replication of his object sufficient to its criticism. For Sieburth, Benjamin dispenses with description, with narration, in short,

with *criticism* of his material. By merely showing it, by bringing about a "willing, ascetic submission" to it, he will also somehow achieve redemption into "classless Utopia." Sieburth's reading radically underestimates the mixed character of the historical material — the products of commodity capitalism — with which Benjamin, and indeed any historian, deals. Sieburth refers, to be sure, to the necessity of destroying the *Schein* (glimmering, seductive appearance) of the commodity. Yet the structural principle he attributes to Benjamin's project would have the opposite effect: parataxis would instantiate and preserve that seduction.

Montage was indeed to be the structural principle of the book; both the notes for the *Arcades Project* and the Baudelaire book show that clearly enough. But Benjamin's montage is not the crude "repetition of the same, a reduplication of identity" attributed to it by Sieburth. The thrust of Benjamin's criticism, early and late, was precisely to *repudiate* that material. Benjaminian criticism "mortifies" its object by ripping it out of its original context, fragmenting it, and reinserting it into a new critical constellation. One of the central methodological reflections to the *Arcades* — it would have stood as the first paragraph of the book on Baudelaire — reads as follows:

"In the context of a [new concept of history], one could speak of the increasing density (integration) of reality, in which everything that was past can attain a higher degree of actuality than it had at the moment of its existence. How it develops as a higher actuality is determined by the image as which and through which it is understood."[2]

It is finally the structure of that constellation (referred to here as an "image") and not the identity or essence of any of its constituent parts that brings about the envisioned redemption. The critic is thus anything but a "modest recording device." He or she must enable, through critical intervention, the release of critical energy that arises from the reading process.

The ordering principle of the Benjaminian montage thus cannot be parataxis, with its connotations of equivalence and lack of hierarchical structure. Sieburth takes pains to disqualify that structural principle which offers itself more obviously in the pages of the *Arcades Project*: dialectics. Compare, for example, the circumlocutionary rhetoric of his formulations on historical materialism with the bold elegance that characterizes much of the essay: "it would appear that Benjamin had now been (temporarily) convinced that only a rigorous application of dialectical materialism could mediate the gap . . . " or "although he wants to claim it as a modernist version of dialectics, Benjamin's science of thresholds is actually closer to. . . . " The reader is clearly to infer from this that dialectics — regardless of Walter Benjamin's intermittent "understanding" or "misunderstanding" of it — could not and would not have informed the final, theorized shape of the *Arcades Project*.

Sieburth's understanding of Benjamin's central concept — the dialectical image — develops directly from his understanding of the *Arcades* as the unmediated replication of its object. In focusing on the ambiguous nature of the arcades, Sieburth conflates ambiguity with the dialectical image itself: "Built as they are on the principle of ambiguity, or *Zweideutigkeit*, arcades are Benjamin's privileged example of the dialectical image." By rendering absolutely indistinguishable the effects of commodities and the dialectical strategies chosen to combat them, Sieburth negates the demystifying, straightforwardly cognitive intention of Benjamin's project. The ambiguity of the arcades derives directly from their status as typical products of capitalism; as Sieburth points out, ambiguity is synonymous with bourgeois ideology. This ambiguity lends to life in the nineteenth century a mad, phantasmagoric quality, and it is Paris as phantasmagoria that is Benjamin's principal target: he wishes to penetrate and banish the madness engendered by the commodity structure. The dialectical image, the constructive principle of his project, is his primary weapon.[3] As the theoretical sections of the *Arcades Project* make clear, dialectical images are made up of isolated historical images — images of the arcades, among other things — torn from their original context and so stripped of that ambiguous, glimmering appearance that clings to commodities.

Perhaps the major innovation of "Benjamin the Scrivener" is its suggestion of a new context for the understanding of Benjamin's late work. In consistently comparing the thrust, scope, and methodology of the project to the work of Mallarmé, Flaubert, Pound, Joyce, and Eliot, Sieburth argues for Benjamin's insertion into that canon of high modernism that has dominated discussion in American departments of comparative literature since the 1950s. No one would deny Benjamin's "elective affinities" to certain authors who fit comfortably within that canon: even if none of the authors above figure in Benjamin's work, we can still point to Proust and Kafka. But this is not what the essay suggests. Instead, we find persistent and exclusive comparisons to a group of authors who strove consciously to create an autonomous sphere for art in the twentieth century, a group of others hardly noted, moreover, for their political commitment. The effect of this contextualization is to

aestheticize and depoliticize Benjamin's work in ways that are deeply problematic. Benjamin emerges in the company suggested here no longer recognizable as the author of "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" as well as studies of novels by servant girls and the insane. Sieburth's revisionist literary history suppresses the democratizing, "popular culture" bias so important to Benjamin's late work; Walter Benjamin was not Theodor Adorno.

The claim that Benjamin's book is *intentionally* incomplete must be seen as part of this same strategy. In arguing for the "provisional character" of the *Arcades Project*, Sieburth wishes to summon up a general image of a Benjamin content never to finish his major work. It is perhaps worth noting at the outset that the series of all-too-brief citations from Benjamin's correspondence adduced in support of this notion make rather the opposite point when restored to their original context. One of these citations dates from 1931, in a lengthy period of depression and near-suicide in which Benjamin had laid the work aside. Neither of the remaining quotations refers to the *Arcades Project* at all; one addresses the first essay on Baudelaire, the other the essay "Eduard Fuchs, The Collector and Historian." Both of these *do* indeed have a "provisional character," but *only* vis-à-vis the larger, ultimately important *Arcades Project*. The attribution to Benjamin of the urge to leave his major work unfinished culminates in the characterization of the book on Baudelaire — the closest Benjamin was to come to completing his project — as the *"mise en abyme"* of the *Arcades* and of Benjamin himself as a latter-day Bouvard or Pécuchet, copying out precursor texts in the attitude of a saint in the Bibliothèque Nationale whose "fate is above all to wait." In other words, Benjamin's politi-

cal commitment should, if remembered at all, be understood within the frame of Flaubert's unfinished late work: Benjamin in willed retreat from the lived world, immersed in the bottomless waters of received knowledge. Walter Benjamin is finally for Richard Sieburth a peculiar mix of high modernist clown and belated romantic dreamer, wholly consumed in (by?) a vast textual web.

How are we to reconcile this picture of Benjamin with what we know of his biography and, indeed, of the *Arcades Project* itself? It must not be forgotten that for Benjamin to continue work on the *Arcades* in the 1930s required uncommon courage. Benjamin remained throughout the decade a peripatetic exile who could "no longer really manage to live in any one place";[4] even in the early days of the exile that began for him in 1933 before all literary employment in Germany had been closed to him, Benjamin wrote to Scholem that "there are places where I can earn a minimal amount, and places where I can live on the basis of a minimal amount, but not a single one in which both of these conditions coincide."[5] In Paris in the late 1930s his situation was all the more precarious. It is hardly plausible that he continued to work toward his book on the arcades driven by a nebulous romantic dream of creating a "permanent catastrophe or great ruin." Benjamin was instead convinced that his work when completed could have a revolutionary impact on the European situation. This was the thrust of Benjamin's development of his theory in the *Arcades Project*. Folio N, entitled "Idea of Progress and Theory of Knowledge," is the primary collection of theoretical pronouncements in the *Arcades*. There, Benjamin returns again and again to the hoped-for effect of his book. He was convinced that it might, "like the method of atomic fission, set free the

monstrous power of history."[6] "The materialist representation of history" was not for Benjamin Flaubertian ascesis or Joycean wit; it was something that "causes the past to place the present in a critical situation."[7] Benjamin was indeed a scrivener, but writing was never for him merely an intransitive verb. Benjamin's writing in the *Arcades Project* sought above all else to liberate "the critical, dangerous impulse that lies at the source of all reading."[8]

Notes

1. Walter Benjamin, *Briefe* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1966), 750, 765. All quotations from Benjamin are in my own translations.

2. Benjamin, *Das Passagen-Werk*, vol. 5 of *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1982), 495.

3. For an interpretation of the concept of the dialectical image, see my *Dialectical Images: Walter Benjamin's Theory of Literary Criticism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 33–39, 205–7.

4. Walter Benjamin, *Berliner Kindheit um Neunzehnhundert* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977), 149.

5. Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem, *Briefwechsel 1933–1940* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1980), 39.

6. Benjamin, *Das Passagen-Werk*, 578.

7. Ibid., 588.

8. Ibid., 578.