

monuments of a historical consciousness of which not the slightest trace has been apparent in Europe in the past hundred years. In the July revolution an incident occurred which showed this consciousness still alive. On the first evening of fighting it turned out that the clocks in towers were being fired on simultaneously and independently from several places in Paris. An eye-witness, who may have owed his insight to the rhyme, wrote as follows:

Qui le croirait! on dit, qu'irrités contre l'heure  
De nouveaux Josués au pied de chaque tour,  
Tiraient sur les cadrans pour arrêter le jour.\*

XVI

A historical materialist cannot do without the notion of a present which is not a transition, but in which time stands still and has come to a stop. For this notion defines the present in which he himself is writing history. Historicism gives the "eternal" image of the past; historical materialism supplies a unique experience with the past. The historical materialist leaves it to others to be drained by the whore called "Once upon a time" in historicism's bordello. He remains in control of his powers, man enough to blast open the continuum of history.

XVII

Historicism rightly culminates in universal history. Materialistic historiography differs from it as to method more clearly than from any other kind. Universal history has no theoretical armature. Its method is additive; it musters a mass of data to fill the homogeneous, empty time. Materialistic historiography, on the other hand, is based on a constructive principle. Thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well. Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock, by which it crystal-

\* Who would have believed it! we are told that new Joshuas at the foot of every tower, as though irritated with time itself, fired at the dials in order to stop the day.

lizes into a monad. A historical materialist approaches a historical subject only where he encounters it as a monad. In this structure he recognizes the sign of a Messianic cessation of happening, or, put differently, a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past. He takes cognizance of it in order to blast a specific era out of the homogeneous course of history—blasting a specific life out of the era or a specific work out of the lifework. As a result of this method the lifework is preserved in this work and at the same time canceled\*; in the lifework, the era; and in the era, the entire course of history. The nourishing fruit of the historically understood contains time as a precious but tasteless seed.

XVIII

"In relation to the history of organic life on earth," writes a modern biologist, "the paltry fifty millennia of *homo sapiens* constitute something like two seconds at the close of a twenty-four-hour day. On this scale, the history of civilized mankind would fill one-fifth of the last second of the last hour." The present, which, as a model of Messianic time, comprises the entire history of mankind in an enormous abridgment, coincides exactly with the stature which the history of mankind has in the universe.

A

Historicism contents itself with establishing a causal connection between various moments in history. But no fact that is a cause is for that very reason historical. It became historical post-humously, as it were, through events that may be separated from it by thousands of years. A historian who takes this as his point of departure stops telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary. Instead, he grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one. Thus he establishes a conception of the present as the "time of the now" which is shot through with chips of Messianic time.

\* The Hegelian term *aufheben* in its threefold meaning: to preserve, to elevate, to cancel.

Benjamin,  
"Theses on the  
Philosophy of  
History"  
(Spring, 1940)

## B

The soothsayers who found out from time what it had in store certainly did not experience time as either homogeneous or empty. Anyone who keeps this in mind will perhaps get an idea of how past times were experienced in remembrance—namely, in just the same way. We know that the Jews were prohibited from investigating the future. The Torah and the prayers instruct them in remembrance, however. This stripped the future of its magic, to which all those succumb who turn to the soothsayers for enlightenment. This does not imply, however, that for the Jews the future turned into homogeneous, empty time. For every second of time was the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter.



## Editor's Note

Benjamin's work consists of two books on German literature—his dissertation on "The Concept of Art Criticism in German Romanticism" (*Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik*, Bern, 1920) and "The Origin of German Tragedy" (*Der Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, Berlin, 1928)—of two books of general reflections in the form of short essays or aphorisms—"One-Way Street" (*Einbahnstrasse*, Berlin, 1928) and "A Berlin Childhood around 1900" (*Berliner Kindheit um Neunzehnhundert*, written during the late thirties and published posthumously, Frankfurt, 1950)—and of a great number of literary and critical essays, book reviews, and commentaries.

The chief purpose of this collection is to convey the importance of Benjamin as a literary critic. It contains the full-length essays with two very regrettable exceptions—the study of "Goethe's *Elective Affinities*" (published in Hugo von Hofmannsthal's *Neue Deutsche Beiträge* in two instalments, 1924 and 1925) and the article on "Karl Kraus" (in the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, 1931). Since Karl Kraus is still practically unknown in English-speaking countries and since the Goethe essay consists to a large extent of a polemic against Friedrich Gundolf's *Goethe*, equally unknown, these two essays would have needed so many explanatory notes that the thrust of the text itself would have been ruined.

The translation of the text follows the two-volume German edition of Benjamin's writings which, under the title *Schriften*, was edited and introduced by Theodor W. Adorno and published by the Suhrkamp Verlag in 1955. The title of the present collection, but not its content, is identical with the title of a selection from the *Schriften*, published by Suhrkamp in 1961; Benjamin himself had approved this title for an earlier selection of some of his works. The German text is chiefly drawn from the published texts in various magazines and newspapers. Professor Adorno points out in his Introduction that it is not definitive: in the few instances where the original manuscripts could be consulted, it turned out that Benjamin's handwriting was difficult to read, and as for the typescripts and printed newspaper or magazine copies, they "unquestionably contain numerous errors." In the only case in which I was able to compare the original manuscript



share in the murder of the totemic father. Guilt therefore is never to be doubted, but only because we are all of us more or less ill, all plagued by our discomfort with culture. Freudian and Kafkan guilt like is known only under the sign of negation, rather than as emotion. Joseph K. has no consciousness of having done wrong, but just as Freudian man nurtures the desire to destroy authority of the father, so even Joseph K. has his own unfulfilled wishes against the mage of the Law.

The process that Joseph K. undergoes is hopeless, since the Law is essentially a closed Kabbalah; its books are not available to the accused. If traditional questers suffered an ordeal by landscape, Joseph K.'s ordeal is by nearly everything and everyone he encounters. The representatives of the Law, and their camp followers, are so unsavory that Joseph K. seems sympathetic by contrast, yet he is actually a poor fellow in himself, and would be as nasty as the keepers of the Law, if only he could. *The Trial* is a very unpleasant book, and Kafka's own judgment of it may have been spiritually wiser than anything its critics have enunciated. Would there be any process for us to undergo if we were not both lazy and frightened? Nietzsche's motive for metaphor was the desire to be different, the desire to be elsewhere, but Kafka's sense of our motive is that we want to rest, even if just for a moment. The world is our Gnostic catastrophe creation, being broken into existence by the guilt of our repose. Yet this is creation, and can be visibly beautiful, even as the accused are beautiful in the gaze of the camp followers of the Law.

I do not think that the process Joseph K. undergoes can be called "interpretation," which is the judgment of Ernst Pawel, who follows Jewish tradition in supposing that the Law is language. *The Trial*, like the rest of Kafka's writings, is a parable not of interpretation, but of the necessary failure of interpretation. I would surmise that the Law is not all of language, since the language of *The Trial* is ironic enough to suggest that it is not altogether bound to the Law. If *The Trial* has a center, it is in what Kafka thought worthy of publishing: the famous parable "Before the Law." The dialogue concerning the parable between Joseph K. and the prison chaplain who tells it is remarkable, but less crucial than the parable itself:

Before the Law stands a doorkeeper on guard. To this doorkeeper there comes a man from the country who begs for admittance to the Law. But the doorkeeper says that he

cannot admit the man at the moment. The man, on reflection, asks if he will be allowed, then, to enter later. "It is possible," answers the doorkeeper, "but not at this moment." Since the door leading into the Law stands open as usual and the doorkeeper steps to one side, the man bends down to peer through the entrance. When the doorkeeper sees that, he laughs and says: "If you are so strongly tempted, try to get in without my permission. But note that I am powerful. And I am only the lowest doorkeeper. From hall to hall keepers stand at every door, one more powerful than the other. Even the third of these has an aspect that even I cannot bear to look at." These are difficulties which the man from the country has not expected to meet, the Law, he thinks, should be accessible to every man and at all times, but when he looks more closely at the doorkeeper in his furred robe, with his huge pointed nose and long, thin, Tartar beard, he decides that he had better wait until he gets permission to enter. The doorkeeper gives him a stool and lets him sit down at the side of the door. There he sits waiting for days and years. He makes many attempts to be allowed in and wearies the doorkeeper with his importunity. The doorkeeper often engages him in brief conversation, asking him about his home and about other matters, but the questions are put quite impersonally, as great men put questions, and always conclude with the statement that the man cannot be allowed to enter yet. The man, who has equipped himself with many things for his journey, parts with all he has, however valuable, in the hope of bribing the doorkeeper. The doorkeeper accepts it all, saying, however, as he takes each gift: "I take this only to keep you from feeling that you have left something undone." During all these long years the man watches the doorkeeper almost incessantly. He forgets about the other doorkeepers, and this one seems to him the only barrier between himself and the Law. In the first years he curses his evil fate aloud; later, as he grows old, he only mutters to himself. He grows childish, and since in his prolonged watch he has learned to know even the fleas in the doorkeeper's fur collar, he begs the very fleas to help him and to persuade the doorkeeper to change

Kafka, "Before the Law" (1914?)



his mind. Finally his eyes grow dim and he does not know whether the world is really darkening around him or whether his eyes are only deceiving him. But in the darkness he can now perceive a radiance that streams immortally from the door of the Law. Now his life is drawing to a close. Before he dies, all that he has experienced during the whole time of his sojourn condenses in his mind into one question, which he has never yet put to the doorkeeper. He beckons the doorkeeper, since he can no longer raise his stiffening body. The doorkeeper has to bend far down to hear him, for the difference in size between them has increased very much to the man's disadvantage. "What do you want to know now?" asks the doorkeeper, "you are insatiable." "Everyone strives to attain the Law," answers the man, "how does it come about, then, that in all these years no one has come seeking admittance but me?" The doorkeeper perceives that the man is at the end of his strength and that his hearing is failing, so he bellows in his ear: "No one but you could gain admittance through this door, since this door was intended only for you. I am now going to shut it."

Does he actually perceive a radiance, or are his eyes perhaps still deceiving him? What would admittance to the radiance mean? The Law, I take it, has the same status it has in the later parable "The Problem of Our Laws," where it cannot be Torah, or the Jewish Law, yet Torah flickers uneasily near as a positive analogue to the negation that is playing itself out. Joseph K. then is another jackdaw, another Kafkan crow in a cosmos of crows, waiting for that new Torah that will not be revealed. Does such a waiting allow itself to be represented in or by a novel? No one could judge *The Trial* to be grander as a whole than in its parts, and "Before the Law" bursts out of its narrative shell in the novel. The terrible greatness of Kafka is absolute in the parable but wavering in the novel, too impure a casing for such a fire.

That there should be nothing but a spiritual world, Kafka once wrote, denies us hope but gives us certainty. The certainty would seem to be not so much that a radiance exists, but that all access to it will be barred by petty officials at least countenanced, if not encouraged, by what passes for the radiance itself. This is not paradox,

any more than is the Kafkan principle proper. The parable narrates "Before the Law": accurate interpretations cannot altogether exclude one another. Kafka (can there be such?) in *The Trial* as elsewhere creates a necessity, yet also so as to make it rather than merely difficult.

Kafka's permanent centrality to the problem lemma achieves one of its monuments in *The Trial* found in Kafka not only the true continuator of Moses Cordovero, but also the central revelation of an even more archaic splendor, the brother of revelation. Perhaps Scholem was right, for the author troubles us with so strong an impression of what Scholem called: "the strong presence of what Scholem called: 'the strong presence of the perfection that destroys.'"



no longer be the feelings of individuals; every individual among us will feel that he is the people, for he will feel the people within himself. We shall therefore not view Judaism's past as the past of a community to which we belong, but shall behold in it the early history of our lives, and by so doing will discern, in a different way than before, our growth and our direction. By the same token, we shall become aware of the present. Those people out there—the miserable, stooped people dragging their feet, peddling their wares from village to village, not knowing where tomorrow's livelihood will come from nor why they should go on living, and those dull, nearly stupefied masses, being loaded aboard ship, not knowing whereto or why—we shall perceive them, all of them, not merely as our brothers and sisters; rather, made secure within himself, every one of us will feel: these people are part of myself. It is not together with them that I am suffering; I am suffering these tribulations. My soul is not by the side of my people; my people is my soul. And by the same process, every one of us will then become aware of the future of Judaism and feel: I want to go on living; I want my future—a new, total life, a life for my own self, for my people within me, for myself within my people. For Judaism has not only a past; despite all it has already created, it has, above all, not a past but a future. Judaism has, in truth, not yet done its work, and the great forces active in this most tragic and incomprehensible of people have not yet written their very own word into the history of the world.

The self-affirmation of the Jew has its tragic aspects as well as its grandeur. For, as I have already said, along with our self-affirmation we become aware of all the degradation from which we must liberate our future generations. But we also perceive that there still dwell within us things that have not as yet been brought out, that there

are still present within us forces awaiting their day. And to live as a Jew means to absorb this tragic aspect as well as the grandeur of self-affirmation. What matters for the Jew is not his credo, nor his declared adherence to an idea or a movement, but that he absorb his own truth, that he live it, that he purify himself from the dross of foreign rule, and that he find his way from division to unity.

When I was a child I read an old Jewish tale I could not understand. It said no more than this: "Outside the gates of Rome there sits a leprous beggar, waiting. He is the Messiah." Then I came upon an old man whom I asked: "What is he waiting for?" And the old man gave me an answer I did not understand at the time, an answer I learned to understand only much later. He said: "He waits for you."

Sanhedrin 98a:

אמר ליה אימת אתי משיח אמר ליה זיל שייליה לדידיה והיכא יתיב אפיתחא דקרתא ומאי סימניה יתיב  
ביני  
עניי סובלי חלאים וכולן שרו ואסירי בחד זימנא איהו שרי חד ואסיר חד אמר דילמא מבעינא דלא  
איעכב

אזל לגביה אמר ליה שלום עליך רבי ומורי אמר ליה שלום עליך בר ליואי א"ל לאימת אתי מר א"ל  
היום אתא לגבי אליהו א"ל מאי אמר לך א"ל שלום עליך בר ליואי א"ל אבטחך לך ולאבוך לעלמא  
היום אם בקולו תשמעו דאתי א"ל שקורי קא שקר בי דאמר לי היום אתינא ולא אתא א"ל הכי אמר

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said to Elijah: When will the Messiah come? Elijah said to him: Go ask him. He responded: And where is he sitting? Elijah said: At the entrance of Rome. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi asked him: And what is his identifying sign? Elijah answered: He sits among the poor who suffer from illnesses. And all of them untie their bandages and tie them all at once, but the Messiah unties one bandage and ties one at a time. He says: Perhaps I will be needed to help bring about the redemption. Therefore, I will never tie more than one bandage, so that I will not be delayed.

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi went to the Messiah. He said to him: Peace upon you, my rabbi and my teacher. The Messiah said to him: Peace upon you, bar Leva'i. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said to him: When will the Master come? The Messiah said to him: Today. Sometime later, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi came to Elijah. Elijah said to him: What did the Messiah say to you? He said to Elijah that the Messiah said: Peace upon you, you, bar Leva'i. Elijah said to him: He thereby guaranteed that you and your father will enter the World-to-Come. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said to Elijah: The Messiah lied to me. He said to me: I am coming today, and he did not come. Elijah said to him, "This is what he said to you: He said that he will come "Today, if you will listen to his voice" (Psalms 95:7).

Babylonian Talmud: Tractate Sanhedrin

Folio 97b—98a

Rabbi Shmuel bar Nahmani says that Rabbi Yonatan says: May those who calculate the end of days be cursed [*tippah*], as they would say 'once the end of days [that they calculated] arrived and the Messiah did not come, that he will no longer come at all. Rather, the proper behavior is to continue to wait for his coming, as it is stated: "Though it tarry, wait for it." Lest you say we are awaiting the end of days and the Holy One, Blessed be He, is not awaiting the end of days and does not want to redeem His people, the verse states: "And therefore will the Lord wait, to be gracious to you; and therefore will He be exalted, to have mercy upon you" (Isaiah 30:8). Since we are awaiting the end of days and the Holy One, Blessed be He, is also awaiting the end of days, who is preventing the coming of the Messiah? It is the divine attribute of judgment that prevents his coming. [We are not worthy.] ...

Rav says: All the ends of days that were calculated passed, and the matter depends only upon repentance and good deeds. When the Jewish people repent, they will be redeemed. And Shmuel says: It is sufficient for the mourner to endure in his mourning [to bring about the coming of the Messiah. Even without repentance, they will be worthy of redemption due to the suffering they endured during the exile] ...

Ze'iri said in R. Hanina's name: The son of David will not come until there are no conceited men in Israel, as it is written, For then I will take away out of the midst of thee them that rejoice in thy pride:<sup>17</sup> which is followed by, I will also leave in the midst of thee an afflicted and poor people, and they shall take refuge in the name of the Lord.

R. Simlai said in the name of R. Eleazar, son of R. Simeon: The son of David will not come until all judges and officers are gone from Israel, as it is written, And I will turn my hand upon thee, and purely purge away thy dross and take away all thy tin: And I will restore thy judges as at first.

When you see a generation ever dwindling, hope for him [the Messiah], as it is written, And the afflicted people thou wilt save. R. Johanan said: When thou seest a generation overwhelmed by many troubles as by a river, await him, as it is written, when the enemy shall come in like a flood, the Spirit of the Lord shall lift up a standard against him which is followed by, And the Redeemer shall come to Zion.

R. Johanan also said: The son of David will come only in a generation that is either altogether righteous or altogether wicked. 'in a generation that is altogether righteous,' — as it is written, Thy people also shall be all righteous: they shall inherit the land for ever.<sup>20</sup> 'Or altogether wicked,' — as it is written, And he saw that there was no man, and wondered that there was no intercessor;<sup>21</sup> and it is [elsewhere] written, For mine own sake, even for mine own sake, will I do it.

R. Alexandri said: R. Joshua b. Levi pointed out a contradiction. it is written, in its time [will the Messiah come], whilst it is also written, I [the Lord] will hasten it! — if they are worthy, I will hasten it: if not, [he will come] at the due time. R. Alexandri said: R. Joshua opposed two verses: it is written, And behold, one like the son of man came with the clouds of heaven whilst [elsewhere] it is written, [behold, thy king cometh unto thee ... ] lowly, and riding upon an ass!<sup>22</sup> — if they are meritorious, [he will come] with the clouds of heaven;<sup>26</sup> if not, lowly and riding upon an ass. King Shapur [I] said to Samuel, 'Ye maintain that the Messiah will come upon an ass: I will rather send him a

white horse of mine.' He replied, 'Have you a hundred-hued steed?'

R. Joshua b. Levi met Elijah standing by the entrance of R. Simeon b. Yohai's tomb. ...