Walter Benjamin on the French Exile of German Men of Letters

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The Paris Refuge of Walter Benjamin

Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) was one among the cohort of German Jewish intellectuals who during the interwar years endured prejudice in their native land and eventually fled Nazi persecution. Shunned by German universities in his candidacy for a faculty position despite brilliant scholarly achievement, he had an opportunity in the late 1920s to immigrate to Palestine, where his friend Gershom Scholem had established himself as a founding member of the faculty of Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Scholem arranged a meeting for Benjamin with the chancellor in 1927 about a possible faculty position. At the time Benjamin voiced enthusiasm about that prospect, and he expressed a willingness to learn Hebrew in preparation. But in the end Benjamin chose Paris as his place of refuge. The role of a cosmopolitan European man of letters was too deeply embedded in his sense of identity to abandon for the Zionist experiment, with its expectations of a different kind of intellectual life. He lived his last seven years in Paris in poverty and isolation. As Nazi aggression became more menacing in the

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late 1930s, he applied for French citizenship, and, that failing, for a visa for the United States. Benjamin never made it to the safety of foreign shores. He took his own life on the French-Spanish frontier in September 1940 in what he believed to have been a failed attempt to escape the Nazi dragnet. Interest in his scholarship, therefore, has come to be intermingled with a popular fascination with his life—his travels, his love affairs, and finally the story of his diminishing fortunes during his years in France. His final resting place, a cemetery at Port-Bou on the Spanish frontier where he died, is the site of a monument to his memory and a place of pilgrimage for his admirers.

A scholar marginalized in his own day, Benjamin has since become an intellectual celebrity. Whether out of survivor guilt or sadness over his unfulfilled promise, his closest scholarly friends, Scholem and Theodor Adorno, dedicated themselves to giving him an intellectual afterlife worthy of his accomplishments and the new theoretical directions in the humanities that his research augured. Every essay that he penned, whether published or unpublished, every surviving letter that he wrote, has since been carefully situated in critical editions, a project begun in the 1950s and, in its reediting in a variety of formats, still underway. In our own day, he has come to be lionized by his admirers as a prophet of a coming

which re-imagines his journey through life toward the sad destiny he seems to have anticipated.

Benjamin's colleagues at the Frankfurt Institute, by then relocated in New York City, had secured one for him. But he had no exit visa from France.


postmodern temper. He has appealed especially to latter-day Marxist intellectuals who saw in his writings a refuge for a doctrine that had otherwise become obsolete by the 1970s.

Here is a view of Benjamin closer to his experience as an exile in Paris from 1933 until 1940. Despite the new intellectual directions he pioneered, he continued to think of himself as an old-fashioned man of letters. As his personal fortunes declined with those of France, he came to view his life’s work less in terms of present possibilities and more in terms of some future redemption of the intellectual labors of his Paris years. The purpose of this essay is not to rehearse the highlights of Benjamin’s exile, but rather to consider the meaning exile held for him as revealed in his reflections on letters written by German intellectuals who in other times and places had shared his plight, particularly those who had found their way to France during the era of the French Revolution. Such an inquiry sheds light on his ideas about memory’s redemptive power, which may be his most enduring intellectual legacy.

On the Theme of Letters from Exile

Why letters? Benjamin himself was a great letter writer, a pastime that sustained him during his years of exile. He liked


\footnote{Nearly all of Benjamin’s letters from that epoch have been collected in critical editions, comprehensively in Walter Benjamin, \textit{Briefe}, two volumes, eds. Gershom Scholem and Theodor Adorno (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1966). See Scholem’s comment on Benjamin as letter writer in his forward to this collection, 1:7-13. Collections of Benjamin’s exchange of
letters as a genre of intellectual communication because they embedded his thoughts in the immediacy of everyday experience. For his admirers, his letters emulated the high art form of nineteenth-century letter writing among the German bourgeoisie. Adorno noted that by Benjamin's day, letter writing as understood in that tradition had been superseded by more direct and speedier forms of communication. But Benjamin clung to this fading literary tradition, his letters reminders of his self-conception as the "last European." As Adorno put it, "letters were for Benjamin natural-history illustrations of what survives the ruin of time."

In this respect, friendly letters were a literary genre well-suited for giving expression to ideas about memory that Benjamin was simultaneously developing in critical essays on Marcel Proust and Charles Baudelaire. For Benjamin, memory was a channel into the labyrinth of past experience in which one might suddenly happen upon a moment that unleashed what he characterized as "profane illumination," a kind of recognition that overcomes the divide between past and present set by linear time. Here he was indebted to Proust's ideas about the workings of involuntary memory through which a chance encounter can awaken an entire field of remembrance. Benjamin, however, wanted to give this conception of personal memory a wider application by linking it with another about the workings of the collective memory of tradition. He recognized that collective memory tends to idealize the past and eventually fades into letters with his closest friends, Scholem and Adorno, have been published separately.

10 Walter Benjamin, "Auf der Spur alter Briefe" (ca. 1931), Gesammelte Schriften, 4:942-45.
11 Theodor Adorno, Preface to Benjamin, Briefe, 1:14-21.
12 Walter Benjamin, "Zum Bilde Prousts" (1934), Gesammelte Schriften, 2:310-24; "Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire" (1940), Gesammelte Schriften, 1:605-53.
13 Walter Benjamin, "Ausgraben und Erinnern" (1932), Gesammelte Schriften, 4: 400-01. See also David Gross, Lost Time: On Remembering and Forgetting in Late Modern Culture (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000), 45-47.
oblivion. But he wondered whether a tradition as worthy as that of the German Enlightenment might be spared such a fate. Herein lay his interest in the letters of the German exiles that this literary tradition had inspired throughout the nineteenth century. In their transparency, these missives were its bright and shining residues, authentic sources of a tradition that might still be recovered to inspire posterity. To this end, he was interested in the way personal memory in the present can time travel into the past to tap the wellsprings of tradition. To revisit the thought of like-minded individuals in other times and places, he argued, is to awaken their memory in one's own. Armed with such insight, one is able to gain access to a tradition in all of its original immediacy, and so to partake in its renewal in creative ways.

Benjamin embarked on this venture of recovering old letters of German intellectuals in the early 1930s. It began as a publishing opportunity that a newspaper editor had suggested to him. But in his Paris refuge, the project came closer to his personal predicament. He saw these letters, written in one form or another of exile during an earlier age, as testimony of an enlightened German culture now obscured by the rise of National Socialism. As he expressed his thought metaphorically, the Germany he remembered was a "mountain covered by a glacier." Benjamin nonetheless believed that these letters possessed a potentially liberating power. They preserved personal memories of a secret Germany whose literary tradition had been silenced by Nazi intimidation. His faith was that this tradition might eventually be rescued and restored.

Benjamin's sources for this venture consisted of two collections of letters: the first drawn from German intellectuals in exile during the era 1783–1883, which he identified with the influence of the Enlightenment on the German bourgeoisie; the second concentrated on German intellectuals whose predicament

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15 See Benjamin's unpublished fragment, "Deutsche Briefe" (ca. 1931), *Gesammelte Schriften*, 4:945-47, which anticipated his essay on letters of the era of the French Revolution.
was in some way shaped by their witness of the French Revolution. These collections serve as bookends to his Paris years.

_Deutsche Menschen (1936)_

Benjamin published the first set of letters in two formats. Initially they appeared serially with his anonymous commentary in the daily issues of the newspaper *Frankfurter Zeitung* between April 1931 and May 1932. In 1936 they were republished collectively, with a new preface and one additional letter, in Switzerland as a short book, *Deutsche Menschen* (German Men and Women), under the pseudonym Detlef Holtz. The book had good sales given its high-minded content, and it circulated in the German speaking world without attracting the censor's attention until 1938, when it was put on the German index of banned books.

This collection consists of twenty-eight letters culled from across the century inspired by the German Enlightenment. The letters are arranged sequentially. There are a few celebrities among the letter writers Benjamin chose to include—Johann von Goethe, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, Immanuel Kant, and Friedrich Hölderlin. But most were scholars, writers, and artists of more modest reputation, even professional people who personified ideals that Benjamin associated with the middle-class culture of that era. Benjamin's commentaries rarely analyzed the content of the letters, but rather provided background about the circumstances in which they were composed. As testimony, he believed, the letters spoke for themselves.

On the surface, each letter that Benjamin selected revealed a different virtue of the citizens of an imagined German republic of letters, drawn out under conditions of separation, loss, isolation, and poverty. The letter writers addressed such issues as friendship sustained or reestablished through correspondence, the pleasures of reading great literature, the consolation of religious piety, and the emotional impact of the death of the great
figures of the German world of letters. This collection served as Benjamin's apostrophe to his countrymen, testimony of a German cultural identity that valued modesty, tact, and toleration, one strikingly at odds with the strident chauvinism of Germany's Nazi leaders.

But Benjamin was after a deeper connection, one that permitted the thought of these intellectual ancestors to live again in his own experience. Their letters, therefore, may also be read on the level of the hidden personal meaning they held for him. In his heart he conceived of each one as a touchstone for his own memory. Each carried the signature of some experience that mattered to him personally. In their ensemble, they contained a mnemonic code to signal moments in his own life. In Benjamin's mind, the letters localized an intellectual tradition in the places of memory that inspired their writing. In conveying the immediacy of the circumstances in which they had been written, they seemed to Benjamin to have anticipated those in which he now found himself, and so enabled him to link their experiences directly to his own.

Without claiming to have decoded all the secrets of personal meaning the letters held for Benjamin, I would mention a few obvious autobiographical associations: Georg Forster on a Paris exile from which he doubted he would return (anticipating Benjamin's own fears); Johann Sueme on a love triangle in which he had lost out (like Benjamin with Asja Lacis in Moscow); Friedrich Hölderlin's reminiscences about his restless travels abroad (like Benjamin in the years before settling in Paris); Clemens Brentano on his lonely isolation (which Benjamin in Paris felt deeply); Johann Ritter on his acceptance of the conditions of his fate (as had Benjamin); Joseph Görres evoking familiar places of his childhood (recalling for Benjamin the beloved Berlin of his own); Justus Liebig on the consolation of communication from a Paris exile with an old friend (like Benjamin with Scholem); Wilhelm Grimm on sophisticated flirting (in which Benjamin indulged in a succession of
evanescent love affairs). Other letters highlighted concepts to which Benjamin was personally committed: Annette von Dros- 

Hülshoff on the revelations of involuntary memory; David Strauss on the "afterlife" of inspiring ideas; Goethe on sublime intellectual insight; Jacob Grimm on the German language as the authentic source of German identity.

The point is that Benjamin, in reflecting on the experiences of these kindred spirits out of the past, imagined them as embodied in his own, and so confirmed his humanist understanding of memory's restorative connections. In his faith in their power, Benjamin conceived of himself as the avatar of sentiments they had once espoused.

"Allemands de quatre-vingt-neuf" (1939)

Momme Brodersen, Benjamin's biographer, points out that Deutsche Menschen had lost its relevance by the time it was published in book form. The letters addressed the dilemma of intellectuals in one venue or another of spiritual exile. They might have appealed to an audience whose hopes had been tied to the fortunes of the Weimar Republic. The coming of the Third Reich had changed all that and turned Benjamin's attention to the crisis conditions of the 1930s and the more radical remedies they

17 Walter Benjamin, ed. [Detlef Holz, pseud.], Deutsche Menschen: Eine Folge von Briefen (1936; repr. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1977): Georg Forster to his wife (1793), 21-24; Johann Sueme to the Husband of His Former Lover (undated), 33-37; Friedrich Hölderlin to Count Böhler (1802), 38-41; Clemens Brentano to the Bookseller Reimer (1806), 42-44; Johann Ritter to Franz von Baader (1808), 45-49; Joseph Görres to Pastor Aloys Vock (1822), 67-69; Justus Liebig to Count August von Platen (1823), 70-74; Wilhelm Grimm to Jenny von Droste-Hülshoff (1825), 75-80.

18 Benjamin, Deutsche Menschen: Annette von Dros-Hülshoff to Anton Matthias Sprickmann (1819), 61-66; David Friedrich Strauss to Christian Märklin (1831), 83-89; Johann. von Goethe to Moritz Seebeck (1832), 90-94; Jacob Grimm to Friedrich Christoph Dahlmann (1858), 101-06.

demanded. In his retreat to the Bibliothèque Nationale during these years, he discovered the revolutionary tradition. The France of the French Revolution, not the Germany of the Enlightenment, spoke to the dilemmas of the present age. For Benjamin, the revolutionary tradition lived on in these remembered connections.

Benjamin's second set of letters, therefore, published in French in the journal *Europe* in July 1939 on the occasion of the sesquicentennial of the French Revolution, resonated more closely with the crisis of his times. "Les Allemands de quatre-vingt-neuf" showcased the dilemmas of German exiles caught in the maelstroms of the revolutionary era. While *Deutsche Menschen* had evoked the gentle manners of a republic of letters, this collection spoke to the thoughts of his forbearers in these more dangerous circumstances. Here his strategy of presentation is different. Whereas in the earlier collection he had letters speak for themselves with only limited commentary, here his observations on their meaning predominate. As for the letters themselves, he included only passages germane to his argument, and sometimes the names of the correspondents go unmentioned.  

In his preface, Benjamin underscored how the French Revolution had inspired a living tradition in Germany that animated the revolutions of 1830 and 1848, before being driven into oblivion in the late nineteenth century by Prussian authoritarianism. As an aid to his search, he was particularly taken with the life and thought of the mid-nineteenth century French insurrectionary Auguste Blanqui and his theory of the eternal return to precedents that had inspired revolutionary passion. Benjamin highlighted letters that uncovered this lost tradition.  

Benjamin referenced eight letters, all composed by intellectuals who bore witness to the Revolution, either in France or nearby in cities of the Rhineland sympathetic to its cause. His purpose was to show how deeply committed German intellectuals were to the Revolution, with its emphasis upon human rights as a guide for the liberation of the people in Germany and eastern Europe generally. As in his earlier edited collection, Benjamin identified personally with each of the letter writers, caught in circumstances largely beyond their own control. His comments bespeak his frustration with the predicament in which he found himself, and his longing to rekindle the memory of a past that might point the way towards the renewal of the revolutionary tradition whose beginnings German intellectuals had witnessed.

Most of the letters that Benjamin reproduced present intellectuals resigned to their fate as exiles. There are few hints of personal satisfaction, only expressions of deep commitment to an unfinished cause. For example, he included a letter from Georg Forster, in 1793 a delegate from Mainz to the Convention in Paris, who came to expect the worst as an exile during the Reign of Terror and later died in that city (as Benjamin suspected he would, too). Other letters, such as those by Sueme and Hölderlin, explained how they wandered about


Benjamin was more circumspect about the radical revolution of 1792–94, as he noted in his comments on a letter by Johann Herder (1794) about the Terror as nationalism run amok. Here Benjamin made one of his few open attacks on National Socialism as racial madness that drew forth the terrorist possibilities that nationalism can unleash. "Allemands de quatre-vignt-neuf," Gesammelte Schriften, 4:863.

"I now expect the worst. I strongly doubt whether I shall ever see my personal papers again." Forster stoically observed, a poignant evocation of what Benjamin recognized as his own plight. Letter by Georg Forster (1793), Gesammelte Schriften, 4:868.
Europe as "judicious observers," committed to the revolutionary cause in Germany whose realization they were never to see (like Benjamin in his peregrinations as a self-styled flâneur).24

One exceptional letter, though, suggested another way of understanding their legacy. It had been written by the forgotten literary critic Carl Jochmann during the era of the Bourbon Restoration.25 Jochmann showed Benjamin how his idea about memory's restoring power might be joined to another about memory's role in history, thereby rescuing the meaning of the revolutionary tradition for the present age. "Jochmann was 100 years ahead of his time," Benjamin commented—roughly the interval between Jochmann's prime and his own.26 To signal his importance, he saw to the publication not just of this letter but also Jochmann's essay, "Die Rückschritte der Poesie"(The Regression of Poetry).27

Carl Jochmann on Memory in History

In Jochmann's experiences during the early nineteenth-century, Benjamin saw his own prefigured in so many ways. Jochmann was a traveler, a champion of progressive causes, and a voluntary exile in Paris in a time of political reaction. In the Paris of the Bourbon Restoration, he mingled with German émigrés as well as veterans of the Revolution, who confided to him their memoirs of France's revolutionary days. For Benjamin, Jochmann was a significant yet forgotten bearer of an ongoing

24 Gesammelte Schriften: letter by Johann Sueme (1805), 4:869-72; letters by Friedrich Hölderlin (1792, 1794), 4:874-76.
26 Gesammelte Schriften, 4:878.
tradition of German intellectuals who admired the cause of the French Revolution and bequeathed its memory to their successors in the revolutions of 1830 and 1848 in central Europe. Benjamin took pains to place Jochmann in a genealogy of champions of a cause obliterated by the coming of the Prussian-inspired German Empire in 1871.  

For Benjamin, what distinguished Jochmann from all other German intellectuals in French exile was his reflection on how the forgotten past is not forever lost. Jochmann had sketched a theory of the relationship between memory and history, or more precisely the dynamics of memory within history. Here Jochmann had borrowed a notion from the eighteenth-century Neapolitan philosopher of history Giambattista Vico, who had developed a theory about the creative role of memory in the civilizing process. Like Vico, Jochmann argued that the maturing of civilization is accompanied by the weakening of the poetical imagination that inspired its beginnings. Jochmann believed that in such circumstances memory's power to connect past and present can renew the imagination's animating role. If history in modern times has come to be conceived as a story moving in a linear direction, he explained, memory may be understood to tap the wellsprings of the imagined past in cycles of forgetting and remembering, and so makes possible tradition's renewal.  

For Benjamin as for Jochmann, the forgotten past continued to live in dormant, not lost, traditions. The crisis conditions of 1939, Benjamin contended, had opened the way to reawakening the experience of German exiles of 1789, and with it recognition of the obligation owed them for their struggles on behalf of a still unfinished cause. Benjamin's portrayal of Jochmann as a seer

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28 Benjamin noted two contexts in which Jochmann's work had been important. The first was the French revolutionary tradition; the second was the liberation of the peasantry of eastern Europe. Gesammelte Schriften, 2:572-77.

29 Gesammelte Schriften, 2:579-80, 584-85.

30 Benjamin contended that the Romantics never understood this. Hence they evinced nostalgia for a lost past that could not be recovered. This led to the Nazi cynicism about manipulating images of the past to advance their own agenda. Gesammelte Schriften, 2:581-82.
Benjamin's faith in the future redemption of the Enlightenment brought out a religious sensibility that had been

On the Significance of German Letters Considered in a Paris Exile

Old letters gave Benjamin the consolation of understanding his role as the personal bearer of the collective memory of two traditions threatened with oblivion by the barbarous politics of his own age: that of the German Enlightenment and that of the French Revolution. As he remarked in his preface to Deutsche Menschen, "We may be the last representatives—with a few others perhaps—of an era that will not easily come again."\(^{32}\)

Benjamin perceived of his exile as a sojourn, and he had few illusions about how it would end. His decided disappointment with the failure of the Popular Front and the German Social Democratic Party as forces of resistance left him with no hope for reviving these traditions in his own day.\(^{33}\) His thoughts turned rather to the prospect of their future redemption as the debt that one day would be paid to those who had championed their righteous cause along the way.\(^{34}\) His friend Scholem believed that Benjamin's faith in the future redemption of the Enlightenment brought out a religious sensibility that had been

\(^{31}\) Note the similarity in Benjamin's depiction of Jochmann as seer in Gesammelte Schriften, 2:577-78, and that of the backward-looking angel of history in his "Über den Begriff der Geschichte" (unpublished, 1940), Gesammelte Schriften, 1:697-98 (Thesis IX).

\(^{32}\) Benjamin, Deutsche Menschen, 10.


there all the while.\textsuperscript{35} Benjamin was not a religious Jew. But in "Über den Begriff der Geschichte," he made a closing reference to a passage in the Torah that called upon Jews to place their hopes for the future not in prophecy but rather in remembrance.\textsuperscript{36} One might characterize his stance as a religious atheism based on his faith in the "profane illumination" the past may bequeath to the present.\textsuperscript{37}

We now come to Benjamin's work in the midst of the intense scholarly interest over the past quarter century in the nature of memory, which one might contend he anticipated. Today's scholarship, however, tends to place memory at a critical remove, as it disassembles mnemonic practices to ascertain how their meanings have been modified over time. Benjamin's purpose was different. Rather than convey the objectivity of the historian's discrimination among moments of remembrance in the past, he sought to recapture the subjectivity of the remembered imagination so as to release its creative possibilities in the present. His work on letters testifies to his trust in the extraordinary power of seemingly fragile memory to bind past and present together in a revealing simultaneity that telescopes vast expanses of historical time.

\textsuperscript{35} Scholem wrote an article about Benjamin's various uses of the "new angel" motif (inspired by the painting by Paul Klee), entitled "Walter Benjamin and His Angel," in his \textit{On Jews and Judaism in Crisis} (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), 198-236.


\textsuperscript{37} Benjamin coined the term in his essay "Der Surrealismus" (1929), \textit{Gesammelte Schriften}, 2:297.