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Construction without Theory: Oblique Reflections on Walter Benjamin’s Goethe

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In Benjamin’s First Sketches of his monumental work The Arcades Project (Paris Arcades <£>, 1927–1930), there is an ambiguous reference to the methodology of the project: ‘Formula: construction out of facts. Construction with the complete elimination of theory. What only Goethe in his morphological writings has attempted’ (Benjamin, 1999a, p. 864, <O³, 73>). Benjamin’s reference to morphology is regarded in what follows here as a guide to the complex interplay of literature and philosophy in his work, where ‘philosophy’ is another word for ‘metaphysics’ in this case as mapped out by Jacobson:

it [metaphysics] is a highly speculative philosophy of fundamental questions regarding politics and theology, drawing on a near scholastic aptitude for categorical analysis and Talmudic rigor within a conception of divine continuity of meaning. In this way it is in fact a philosophy of divine as well as profane questions. ‘Metaphysics,’ Schollem once remarks [sc] in his Swiss notebook, ‘is a legitimate theory in the subjunctive form’. [Jacobson, p. 5]

Just as we can ask of Goethe ‘Is this (morphological method) scientific?’ we can also ask of Benjamin’s project ‘Is this philosophy?’ (Buck-Morss, p. 216). Oswald Spengler regarded Goethe’s morphological writing as not only highly efficacious but also a model approach for the revealing of ‘destiny’: ‘The two concepts, Goethe’s form-fulfilment and Darwin’s evolution, are in as complete opposition as destiny to causality...’ (Spengler, Vol. II, p. 32), and: ‘If the reader examines Goethe’s writings in natural science, he will be astounded to find how “living nature” can be set forth without formulae, without laws, almost without a trace of the cause!’ (Spengler, Vol. I, p. 154). Of course Spengler’s main target here is Kant, whose concept of a reduced or restricted ‘experience’ was also a serious problem for Benjamin. The potentially confusing constellation here of proper names inside and outside of parentheses – Benjamin, Buck-Morss, Darwin, Goethe, Kant, Spengler – is indicative and mimetic of the critical mass of intertexts (sacred and profane), allusions, objects, and proper names that are found across Benjamin’s work as a whole.

Adding another proper name to the above list – in relation to the morphological approach and the desire for ‘Construction with the complete elimination of theory’ – brings Wittgenstein into the constellation. As Monk asserts, ‘Again and again in his lectures Wittgenstein tried to explain that he was not offering any philosophical theory; he was offering only the means to escape any need of such a theory’ (Monk, p. 301). In literary-critical terms, Wittgenstein shifts in his own project from telling to showing, a narrational transition that wayne c. Booth found in general disturbing because of the concomitant destabilizing of the reliable narrator (in many respects, Booth’s classic The Rhetoric of Fiction is a defence of authorial ‘telling’). Wittgenstein’s shift or turn was decisive: ‘... the really decisive moment came when he began to take literally the idea of the Tractatus that the philosopher has nothing to say, but only something to show, and applied that idea with complete rigour, abandoning altogether the attempt to say something with “pseudo-propositions”’ (Monk, p. 302). The shift or turn here reveals further links throughout the constellation of proper names and interrelated concepts:

This emphasis on seeing connections links Wittgenstein’s later philosophy with Spengler’s Decline of the West, and at the same time provides the key to understanding the connection between his cultural pessimism and the themes of his later work. In The Decline of the West Spengler distinguishes between the Principle of Form (Gestalt) and the Principle of Law: with the former went history, poetry and life; with the latter went physics, mathematics and death. [...] [Spengler] argued for a conception of history that saw the historian’s job, not as gathering facts and providing explanations, but as perceiving the significance of events by seeing the morphological (or, as Spengler preferred to say, physiognomic) relations between them.

Spengler’s notion of a physiognomic method of history was, as he acknowledges, inspired by Goethe’s notion of a morphological study of nature, as exemplified in Goethe’s poem Die Metamorphose der Pflanze, which follows the development of the plant-form from the leaf through a series of intermediate forms. (Monk, pp. 302–303)

Philosophy (with the shift from telling to showing) becomes an activity that is performed, as with a Beckett play, such as Quad, the players completing their courses, producing patterns, or meanings as events and
shapes. But even the 'showing', stripped of the unnecessary supplement of metanarrative or commentary (Wittgenstein's dreaded 'logical analysis' of a proposition or statement of fact), can construct an interiority, which is precisely what happened with Quad, and the 'supposed danger zone' 'E' (Beckett, p. 453), the central intersecting point which needs the 'deviation' of a mimetically reproduced square, to avoid the collision of the players.

Wittgenstein pictures the lack of metanarrative or commentary in another way: no 'fundamental' explanation (of an activity, a rule, etc.) is necessary (Monk, p. 302). In fact the logical conclusion for this anti-theory line is Wittgenstein's infamous 'silence'. But in making a comparison with Goethe, the simplicity and beauty of silence is disturbed by F. Waismann's wider claim (in collaboration with Wittgenstein): 'That [Goethe's morphology] is precisely what we are doing here. We are collating one form of language with its environment, or transforming it in imagination so as to gain a view of the whole of space in which the structure of language has its being' (Monk, p. 304). Language, which simply functions within its context, or environment, can be examined as such (revealed would perhaps be a better word), there is a sequence of words, they function in a particular way, and that is the end of it. Or, that would be the end of it without Waismann's phrase 'transforming it in imagination so as to gain a view of the whole of space in which the structure of language has its being'. The collation is, in this supplementary phrase, a gathering or assemblage which enables an overarching perspective, transcending the specific instance of language-use (the event) not to see some separate 'grammar' at work, but rather, the architectonic of the space in which language exists. Is this overarching perspective always attained? Not necessarily, since thought can be a torment, disordered, and a squandering of energy: 'I squander [verschwende] an unspeakable amount of effort making an arrangement of my thoughts which may have no value at all!' (Wittgenstein, 1980, p. 28). Interestingly, in the preceding statement, Wittgenstein separates thoughts and writing; in thought, the natural sequence is one which is disordered, whereas rearrangement into the ordered sequence (writing) is a torment. The collation does not engage with the extravagant waste of energy that occurs in the process of creating a particular sequence of words.

How tenuous are the connections here between Benjamin and Wittgenstein? Are there really strong 'signals and affinities' as Stanley Cavell puts it? The family resemblances are reasonably strong, especially Cavell's brief exploration of 'The conjunction of melancholy with... ennui or boredom' (Cavell, p. 238):

The conjunction of melancholy with, let me call it, ennui or boredom, speaks to one of the guiding forces of Wittgenstein's thoughts in the 
Investigations, the recognition that his mode of philosophizing seems to 'destroy everything interesting (all that is great and important)' (PI, §118). Wittgenstein voices this recognition explicitly just once (and once more

Cavell goes on to explore connections between certain 'preoccupations' found in Benjamin's Trauerspiel book and Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations, namely the 'emblems of melancholy', here 'the dog, the stone, and the sphere' (Cavell, p. 239). This raises another question, perhaps the most important one for this essay, as to whether these emblems as found in Wittgenstein have anything to do with philosophy: '... such considerations would, at best, be responded to as curiosities by more representative members of my field, and at worst, without proper impatience, as an avoidance or betrayal of philosophy (as if I perversely emphasize the aspect of the Investigations that is itself a betrayal of philosophy)' (Cavell, p. 239). Cavell's amusing 'negative dialectic' that follows this statement should be read in full, especially the tracing of animals, stones, and angels to Hanssen's book 
Walter Benjamin's Other History, and Heidegger's 'articulation of Dasein's historicity' (Cavell, p. 240). In tracing, also, the ways in which analytical philosophers might wish to strip Wittgenstein of 'the occasional animals and the odd flarings of pathos, perverseness, suffocation, lostness' (Cavell, p. 241), Cavell suggests that a core uncontaminated 'doctrine' is presumably felt to survive. While Cavell — by this point in his essay — has already provided a number of methodological models that argue the complete opposite, it is also possible that such a central 'doctrine' would in itself be incredibly boring. The melancholic philosopher, waking up to such a core doctrine stripped of all its aside, labyrinthine byways, animals, stones, and even angels, would, like the splenetic Englishman waking up to the rain, shoot himself (Benjamin, 1999a, p. 102, D1,3).

In The Arcades Project, Benjamin speaks of boredom as 'the external surface of unconscious events' (Benjamin, 1999a, p. 106, D2a,2) or as 'a warm gray fabric lined on the inside with the most lustrous and colorful of silks' with which 'we wrap ourselves when we dream' (Benjamin, 1999a, p. 105, D2a,1). He extends the analogy even further in a brief meditation on the Paris arcades:

the sleeper looks bored and gray within his sheath. And when he later wakes and wants to tell of what he dreamed, he communicates by and
large only this boredom. For who would be able at one stroke to turn the
lining of time to the outside? Yet to narrate dreams signifies nothing else.
And in no other way can one deal with the arcades — structures in which
we relive, as in a dream, the life of our parents and grandparents, as the
embryo in the womb relives the life of animals. Existence in these spaces
flows then without accent, like the events in dreams. (Benjamin, 1999a,
p. 106, D2a,1)

Is Benjamin proffering a theory here? Or is he eliminating theory? Turning
‘the lining of time to the outside’ may be another description of the expected
or longed-for result of the dialectical images that Benjamin constructs
throughout the Arcades Project, the ‘image flashing up in the now of its
recognizability’ (Benjamin, 1999a, p. 473, N9,7). This messianic hope is also
a radical switching, forging otherwise less well explored links in Benjamin’s
work, such as that between his concept of origin and Franz Rosenzweig’s
such linkages created via stylistic manipulation?

Elsewhere, I have discussed some analogies between The Arcades Project
and the British experimental writer B.S. Johnson (Lane, 2005), in partic-
ular Johnson’s book-in-a-box called The Unfortunates. The Unfortunates has
unnumbered chapters (except for the first and last), and the chapters are
not bound together, so that they can be shuffled into different orders.
Re-shuffling the chapters creates new and striking juxtapositions between blocks
of text, memories, and descriptions; memories are produced in a pseudo-
random order that mimics human frailty and subjectivity. Of most interest
here is the way in which a ‘morphological’ reading of the text is not only
possible, but necessary; stylistic manipulation of the binding also creates
a process that can be thought of, via catachresis, as a theological concept
(which may also bind Benjamin and Kierkegaard [Sussman, p. 175]), or, in
the secular realm, as analogous to the Duchampian transparent ‘bindings’
or boxes: Duchamp’s showcases ‘with sliding glass panes’ (Duchamp, p. 7:
Lane, 2005, p. 231). What I have avoided saying here so far is that this
potential elimination of theory is a stylistic choice or fashion statement that
reveals the language-games or actions of the modern philosopher:

Familiar words [in The Arcades Project] such as boredom, collector, and
panorama replace technical terms such as subjectivity, transcendental, and
speculative… Presenting oneself as something other than a philosopher
is a fashion ‘must,’ in other words, for anyone who wishes to be a philo-
sopher. Not to be one at all, to be other than one — this is considerably
more difficult, especially if, as the transcendental philosophy of the schol-
astics proposes, unum and ens, ‘one’ and ‘being’, are convertible terms. Not
to be one is the same as not being at all. Being so would be possible — if it is
possible — only for a constitutively inconsistent plurality, which, by virtue

of its inconsistency, cannot be made into a unit of ordered elements. The
fashion of the philosopher is, for this reason, the de-fashioning fashion
kat exochê: It consists in forever going out of fashion. (Fenves, p. 81)

Does the morphological function or work here ‘better’ than the theoretical? The
presentation of ‘facts’ about, say, boredom, the collector, and the panorama
approaches the ideal of Goethe or the later Wittgenstein. Morphology can be
thought of here as theory or philosophy ‘in a different key’, just as literature
can be perceived as doing philosophy ‘better than philosophy does’ (see
Eaglestone, pp. 43–4).

A strange thing occurs in The Arcades Project, as Fenves points out, whereby
the avoidance of ‘… the technical terms of philosophical discourse, comes
to revolve around the word monad’ (Fenves, p. 83). In other words, the plain
style of description, the collation of objects, words, images found in the
Paris arcades, all intersect or are bound together by this most technical and
unusual word ‘monad’. And the monad is the remainder, the residuum, par
excellence, after the dialectical upheavals have taken place:

What remains of the word monad, for its part, is the original spin from
which it sprang: It names that which remains unaffected. The image
of this paradisal condition, as Leibniz famously notes, is the absence
of windows — an absence that materializes itself in nineteenth-century Paris
in panoramas, theatres, and arcades, the windows of which, as Benjamin
notes, look upward but not outward. (Fenves, p. 86)

How does the plain style, the absence of theory, the descriptive showing
rather than philosophical telling, find itself in The Arcades Project in
confluence with a monadology? Is there a folding at work here, of the sort
identified by Deleuze? Or should the key phrase be — given that this essay is
commenting obliquely on Benjamin’s readings of Goethe — ‘elective affinity’
(Wahlverwandtschaft)? It is important here to be wary of the various English
translations of this term, as Löwy warns, ‘The concept [Wahlverwandtschaft]
allows us to understand processes of interaction which arise neither from
direct causality nor from the “expressive” relationship between form and
content (where, for example, the religious form is the “expression” of a
political or social content)’ (Löwy, p. 12). Löwy goes on to situate Benjamin
historically in a force-field of correspondences:

there had to appear a certain constellation of historical, social and cultural
factors. Only then could a process of attractio electiva or ‘cultural symbi-
osti’ develop between messianism and revolutionary utopia within the
Weltanschauung of a large group of German-speaking Jewish intellectuals,
involving mutual stimulation and nourishment and, in certain cases, even
combination or fusion of the two spiritual figures. (Löwy, p. 21)
Waismann’s statement, addressed earlier – ‘That [Goethe’s morphology] is precisely what we are doing here. We are collating one form of language with its environment, or transforming it in imagination so as to gain a view of the whole of space in which the structure of language has its being’ (Monk, p. 304) – can be reworked via the cultural Wahlverwandtschaft recognized by Löwy and others, where ‘the whole space’ is viewed not in some neutral fashion, but in the light of anticipation. Thus every moment must be prepared to assume or accept the plenitude of utopia or eternity, to loosely paraphrase Rosenzweig in light of the Wahlverwandtschaft (Rosenzweig, p. 228). The question asked of Benjamin’s highly creative texts, ‘is this philosophy?’ now becomes: is this elective affinity, between messianism and revolutionary utopianism, a theological mode? The latter question has long been debated among Benjamin scholars, but what is of immediate concern here is the way in which a contrapuntal mode of thinking, and writing (rather than selecting one particular approach), can be said to be at work across Benjamin’s entire oeuvre. Any convolute, draft, or fragment from The Arcades Project bears this latter statement out, and a cursory paraphrase and analysis of two sections from the ‘Materials for the Exposé of 1935’ – Sections 8 and 9 (Benjamin, 1999a, pp. 907–8) – will suffice.

Sections 8 and 9 of the ‘Materials’ provide a schematic draft for the completed Exposé, an architectonic blueprint that begins with ‘dialectical stages’, and proceeds through definitions of awakening, collecting, and dreaming with reference to Freud and Aragon (No. 8), then exploring notions of ‘dream-variation-image’, false redemption (Jugendsstil), and theories of awakening and perspective (No. 9). Comments on the dialectical stages (in the Paris arcades) – of splendour transmuted into decay, and unconscious experience transmuted into a force-field consciously penetrated – are followed in Section 8 by a framing of ‘the collective’ as possessing ‘Not-yet-conscious knowledge’: awakening is a schema whereby insight brings into consciousness this knowledge. It is not the case that ‘the collective’ needs to be told something, guided, educated, and so on; rather ‘they’ need to be woken up from a state of ongoing dreaming. The schema of awakening, however, is also a recognition of the messianic relationship of present and future; again, it is not the case that some supplementary (or ‘progressive’) force, group, or cause will awaken ‘the collective’, rather ‘they’ wake to the explosive possibilities of Today (Rosenzweig, p. 234). The contrapuntal mode here is foregrounded by Benjamin’s remark that ‘what Proust intends with the experimental rearrangement of furniture is no different from what Bloch tries to grasp as darkness of the lived moment’ (Benjamin, 1999a, p. 907). Rearrangement is awakening; it is also the rearrangement that becomes or recovers the configuration of the ‘moment’ (that overdetermined philosophical and theological term in Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Bloch, etc.) via imitation ‘in the realm of language’ (Benjamin, 1999a, p. 907). Benjamin charts here the physiological triggering of remembrance via the linguistic construction of a ‘theoretical’ awakening – this, of course, is analogous to Scholm’s notion of a ‘legitimate theory in the subjunctive form’. Remembrance is a mode of resistance here, in the sense that ‘the collective’ needs to shed the notion that it has always been ‘created’ in the sense of worked upon, leading to a permanently passive, somnambulistic being. The ‘lived moment’ of awakening is thus a ‘momentariness’, to use Rosenzweig’s word, whereby ‘existence as such challenges the constant renewal of becoming created’ (Rosenzweig, p. 121). The constant renewal – surely what the subject strives for – is a vacuity, a hyperreality, that can only be perceived as such via the awareness of dialectical transformation (for Benjamin, an awareness triggered by the Paris arcades). Benjamin completes his contrapuntal schema by asking what sort of ‘compartment… is adequate to true waking being?’ (Benjamin, 1999a, p. 907). The ‘Materials’ continue in relation to this question in the following section where Benjamin shifts from linguistic imitation to the ‘dream-variation-image’; partly a repetition of the ‘moment’ reached in Section 8, partly its amplification and intensification, the shift to a particular description of a dialectical image opens up the vista of the ‘dream vision’ that penetrates the waking world. This apparently opposing force (i.e., instead of the unconscious ‘consciously penetrated’) is a dialectical reversal, a mechanism that Benjamin sets to work across multiple realms in his monumental text. Benjamin crosses out a marginal aside, a reminder to himself of Aragon’s cryptic remark that ‘the arcades are what they are for us here through the fact that they no longer are (in themselves)’ (Benjamin, 1999a, p. 909). This slightly ridiculous comment – no doubt better removed or placed under erasure – nonetheless adds one final component to the ‘stationary’ moment of the dream-variation-image: that it is not a sequential accumulation of historical events or forces, rather it engenders a radical reversal through a ‘re-commencement’ (Rosenzweig, p. 290).

In conclusion, this sequence from The Arcades Project, that makes up one small part of the ‘Materials for the Exposé of 1935’, reveals the anticipatory space of the morphological method, as adapted and (partially) adopted by Benjamin, a space where anarchic and messianic configurations (conceptual, linguistic, imaged) are deployed not just to awaken ‘the collective’ but also as a cognition of immediate experience. The latter is no longer the nineteenth-century world of ‘adventure’ but the far more unstable compartment towards ‘fate’; the gathering storm in Benjamin’s time, and the chaotic conditions of post First World War Europe, pointed towards war as its ‘unsurpassed prefiguration’ (Benjamin, 1999a, p. 801, m1a,5). Fate, for Benjamin, conceals the concept of ‘total experience’ which humanity is qualified for via a new found ‘empathy with exchange value’ (Benjamin, 1999a, p. 801, m1a,5 and m1a,6). The monodrama of The Arcades Project, that rock upon which founders any purely perspectival or postmodernist reading of the text, is given an architectonic form with the study of those nineteenth-century houses and passages that, like a dream, have no outside (Benjamin, 1999a,
'First Sketches', p. 839, <P>, 9>]. Thus Benjamin writes, 'The true has no windows. Nowhere does the true look out to the universe. And the interest of the panorama is in seeing the true city'. (Benjamin, 1999a, 'First Sketches', p. 840, <P>, 24>). Benjamin's 'construction out of facts' disrupts the fate that not only awaits the subject but becomes essential to his or her perceptual training; intermittence is now the tempo of the new that 'never alters' (Benjamin, 1999a, 'First Sketches', p. 843, <G>, 17> and <G>, 19), yet the monodology is a residuum that still forces the question, 'is this philosophy?'.

Works cited


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