

David Ferris



The Cambridge **Introduction** to  
Walter Benjamin

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For students of modern criticism and theory, Walter Benjamin's writings have become essential reading. His analyses of photography, film, language, material culture, and the poet Charles Baudelaire, and his vast examination of the social, political, and historical significance of the Arcades of nineteenth-century Paris have left an enduring and important critical legacy. This volume examines in detail a substantial selection of his important critical writings on these topics from 1916 to 1940 and outlines his life in pre-war Germany, his association with the Frankfurt School, and the dissemination of his ideas and methodologies into a variety of academic disciplines since his death. David Ferris traces the development of Benjamin's key critical concepts and provides students with an accessible overview of the life, work, and thought of one of the twentieth century's most important literary and cultural critics.

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# The Cambridge Introduction to Walter Benjamin

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DAVID S. FERRIS

 **CAMBRIDGE**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9780521864589](http://www.cambridge.org/9780521864589)

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First published in print format 2008

ISBN-13 978-0-511-42679-7 eBook (Adobe Reader)

ISBN-13 978-0-521-86458-9 hardback

ISBN-13 978-0-521-68308-1 paperback

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*“Images – my great, my primitive passion.”*

Walter Benjamin



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## Preface

To present the work of Walter Benjamin in the form of an introduction requires a willingness to face the challenge posed by a body of work recognized for its range and the difficulty of its concepts, as well as this critic's recursive and frequently elliptical writing style. But these are not the only reasons that an introduction to Benjamin is challenging. Another, potentially more important reason is given by Benjamin in a note he writes for himself in 1930–31:

Examine the sense in which “Outlines,” “Guides” and so on are touchstones for the state of a discipline. Show that they are the most demanding of all, and how clearly their phrasing betrays every half-measure.

In many respects, any introduction to Benjamin will now be a reflection of the state of the discipline since his work has found its way into so many corners of the humanities and social sciences. At the same time, an introduction makes demands that the professionalization of critical writing happily ignores. These demands increase greatly when the subject is Walter Benjamin. Faced with a critic who had the clear-sightedness to see his own work as “a contradictory and mobile whole,” the task of grasping the nature of that whole, its contradictions, its mobility, almost ensures that every phrase betrays a measure not yet achieved. Yet, there is some justice – of a Benjaminian kind – in such a betrayal. If an introduction has a story to tell, it should be such a story. Only then can its most important task be fulfilled: to point beyond itself while laying the paths that lead towards the challenges posed by Benjamin's work.

Today, foremost among these challenges is the sheer amount of material that has been made available by the collected editions of his writings and letters published in Germany. Recently, the publication in English of Benjamin's *Selected Writings* has provided access to the many additional texts, fragments, and notes that were only available in German. Despite the amount of this material, many of the works available before the appearance of the *Selected Writings* still claim the attention of an introduction since it is with these works that many students have their first experience of Benjamin. Accordingly, most

of the works that make up the canon of Benjamin's *œuvre* are presented here. Within these works, emphasis has been placed on the writings that allow a sense of Benjamin's critical development to appear. Because of the desire to keep this series of introductions to a reasonable length, it was, unfortunately, not possible to present some works that might otherwise have been included, such as, for example, the essays "Unpacking My Library," "Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian," and "Problems in the Sociology of Language." Other works are mentioned only in passing whenever they have direct relevance to another topic or concept. Throughout, the organizing principle has emphasized those works that map the ways in which Benjamin's thinking evolves from the metaphysical tendencies of his university years through to the dialectical and materialist analyses of his last years. Almost everywhere, the mobility of this evolution is tempered by the contradictions it produced – contradictions that propelled much of Benjamin's best work even if many of them were to remain unresolved if not unresolvable.

## *Acknowledgments*

Special thanks are due to Graham Oddie, Associate Dean of Arts and Sciences at the University of Colorado, Boulder – his support helped the writing of this introduction at a crucial stage; to Hannah Blanning and Tonja van Helden who served as research assistants in spring and fall 2007; to Patricia Paige who zealously protected my time with her superlative administrative skills and tact; to the students who participated in my seminars on Benjamin in New York and Colorado; and to colleagues whose writing on Benjamin has informed, questioned and, at times, ran parallel to my own: Andrew Benjamin, Eduardo Cadava, Howard Caygill, Rebecca Comay, Peter Fenves, Rodolphe Gasché, Werner Hamacher, Carol Jacobs, Michael Jennings, Rainer Nägele, Henry Sussman, and Samuel Weber.

## *List of abbreviations*

The following abbreviations and short titles refer to works listed below. In each case, the abbreviation will be followed by a page number (e.g. C, 21), or in the case of the German edition of Benjamin's writings, by volume, part, and page number (e.g., GS 7.2, 532). On occasion, some of the translations used in this volume have been modified from the published versions. Full bibliographical information for the volumes listed below is included in the Guide to Further Reading.

<i>AB</i>	<i>Adorno and Benjamin: The Complete Correspondence 1928–1940</i>
<i>AP</i>	<i>The Arcades Project</i>
<i>C</i>	<i>The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin 1920–1940</i>
<i>Chronicle</i>	<i>A Berlin Chronicle</i>
<i>Friendship</i>	<i>Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship</i>
<i>GB</i>	<i>Gesammelte Briefe</i>
<i>GS</i>	<i>Gesammelte Schriften</i>
<i>OGT</i>	<i>Origin of the German Tragic Drama</i>
<i>SW</i>	<i>Selected Writings 1913–1940</i>

## Chapter 1

# Life

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## A life displaced

An account of Benjamin's life is in many ways an account of the financial and intellectual obstacles Benjamin faced during the twenty years he became the foremost cultural critic of his generation. It is also an account of someone who traveled widely through Europe, from Capri to Spain to Moscow to the Arctic Circle and, above all, to the one place that kept such a hold on his critical imagination, Paris; it is an account of the person who came to know and correspond with most of the leading intellectuals and writers of his time – Rainer Maria Rilke, André Gide, Hugo von Hofmannstahl, Georges Bataille, Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Ernst Robert Curtius, Florens Christian Rang, Ernst Bloch, Bertolt Brecht, Gershom Scholem, Hannah Arendt, Paul Valéry, Hermann Hesse, André Malraux, the photographer Germaine Krull, among many others; of the person who translated Proust and Baudelaire; of the person who used a series of pseudonyms for publishing out of personal choice and political necessity – Ardor, C. Conrad, K. A. Stempflinger, Detlev Holz, Hans Fellner, J. E. Mabinn (an anagram of Benjamin), and O. E. Tal (an anagram of *lateo*: I am concealed); of the person who wrote for newspapers and journals, performed radio broadcasts; of the person whose writing spanned the autobiographical, the critical, the academic thesis, poetry, the short story, and radio plays for children; and finally of the person who collected toys and children's books in addition to his own extensive literary and philosophical library.

As this list indicates, Benjamin's life is the intellectual life of a generation and its cultural and historical contexts. The merely personal pales in comparison. Perhaps, we should expect no less from someone who famously declared his avoidance of the word "I" except in letters. For this reason, a biography of Benjamin is dominated by the history of his intellectual engagements and their intersection with the geographical displacements that defined his life as well as his friendships.

## **1892–1912 Berlin: childhood and school years**

My thinking always has Wyneken, my first teacher, as its starting point and always returns to him.

Walter Benjamin is born in Berlin on July 15, 1892, the first of Emil and Pauline Benjamin's three children – his brother Georg is born in 1895 and his sister Dora in 1901. His early years provide the privileges of an upper-middle-class childhood (a governess, schooled at home) at a time when Berlin is emerging as one of Europe's principal metropolitan centers. During his childhood, the family moves several times but remains within the upper-middle-class neighborhoods that arose to the west of central Berlin. Benjamin's childhood excursions out of these neighborhoods are always under the wing of his mother or governess with the result that he lacks the freedom to explore the city without constraint or oversight – a situation he draws attention to in his *Berlin Chronicle* when he looks back at these years as a time when he was "enclosed" in "the old and new West End" (*Chronicle*, SW 2, 599–600).

Benjamin's first move out of this sheltered situation occurs when, just before his ninth birthday, he is enrolled in one of Berlin's better secondary schools, the Kaiser Friedrich School. Prior to this Benjamin has only received private tutoring. His recollections of the Kaiser Friedrich School are not fond. When Benjamin recalls its classrooms, he writes that "little . . . has remained in my memory except those perfect emblems of imprisonment: the frosted windows and infamous carved wooden embattlements over the doors" (*Chronicle*, SW 2, 602). Indeed, the little he does remember takes the form of "catastrophic encounters." In addition, his time there is punctuated by illnesses resulting in the 1904 decision by his parents to withdraw him from the school.

In 1905, after several months without formal instruction, Benjamin is sent to a country boarding school in the town of Haubinda, several hundred miles southwest of Berlin. His parents see this country setting as an opportunity to improve his health. For Benjamin, it came to offer a far different opportunity.

The school in Haubinda was a progressive counter-cultural institution founded in 1901. While there he comes into contact with an educational reformer, Gustav Wyneken, who was on the teaching staff at that time. Wyneken's ideas on youth culture and the reform of youth education subsequently exert considerable influence on the young Benjamin. Wyneken advocated a curriculum based on what he called the solidarity of youth, an aspect Wyneken found in the drive towards spiritual and intellectual independence that youth naturally possessed. For Wyneken, development of this tendency is part of a larger project that aims at a cultural revolution of society through its youth. While the influence of Wyneken's educational theories is present in the essays Benjamin writes between 1910 and 1915, the major, immediate effect of Benjamin's time at Haubinda is the development of his interest in German literature and philosophy.

In 1907 Benjamin returns to Berlin and again enrolls at the Kaiser Friedrich School. Despite the obvious pressure to conform to the traditional curriculum and manner of instruction at Kaiser Friedrich, Benjamin retains what he learned at Haubinda:

Since my return from Haubinda my philosophical and literary interests developed generally into a specifically aesthetic interest, a natural synthesis. I pursued this through an engagement partly with the theory of drama and partly with great plays, most notably those of Shakespeare, Hebbel and Ibsen; alongside the close study of Hamlet and Tasso I also pursued a thorough engagement with Hölderlin. Above all, these interests expressed themselves in the attempt to form my own judgment on literary issues.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to this study of literature, Benjamin now turns to philosophy "in order to obtain an overview of its problems and the systems of its great thinkers."<sup>2</sup> At the same time, he starts to address a major shortcoming of the classical curriculum at the Kaiser Friedrich School: its exclusion of any serious study of modern literature. As Benjamin recalls in 1913, the most modern writer taught was Kleist (1777–1811) but, perhaps more devastating for Benjamin, this teaching "did not concern itself with a serious relation to works of art."<sup>3</sup> As a result, Benjamin and a small group of friends form a weekly literary evening to discuss works and writers ignored by the school curriculum.

Benjamin's first published writings date from the last years of his secondary schooling. Several poems and some essays appear under the pseudonym "Ardor" in a school magazine entitled *Der Anfang* (The Beginning). The use of a pseudonym is apparently meant to shield Benjamin from reprisals by the school authorities on account of what he has written. At the same time,

the association of the word ardor with fervor, passion, and zeal points to those qualities of youth that Benjamin has learned to value under Wyneken's instruction at Haubinda. While these early writings can be seen as embodying such qualities, subsequent writings for this magazine (published during his early university years) show a willingness to advocate for Wyneken's educational reforms as well as theorize about education itself.

## 1912–1917 University, war, and marriage

The only thing you get out of [Cohn's seminar on the *Critique of Judgment* and Schiller's aesthetics] is that you read the texts.

After completing his final examinations at the Kaiser Friedrich School in March 1912 and after a short trip to Italy, Benjamin enrolls at the Albert Ludwigs University in Freiburg im Breisgau in order to study philosophy. This first semester leaves much to be desired from an intellectual standpoint. Compared to his school years, and in particular to the weekly discussion meetings among his friends, Freiburg offers him little. In a letter from June of this year, Benjamin summarizes his expectations and experience at Freiburg: "it is impossible to harvest while one is plowing" (C, 16). Benjamin's studies at Freiburg clearly lack the engagement with the problems and issues posed by modern experience that have so attracted him during his school years. As a result, he not only takes up the question of school reform advocated by Wyneken but also decides to return to Berlin for the second semester of his university studies.

In October 1912, Benjamin enrolls at the Royal Wilhelm Friedrich University in Berlin. During his first semester there, he attends lectures by Ernst Cassirer, a neo-Kantian best known for his philosophy of symbolic forms, Benno Erdmann, also a Kantian philosopher, Adolph Goldschmidt, the German art critic and historian, Max Erdman, a leading Kantian scholar, and the social and economics philosopher Georg Simmel. He becomes more involved in the school reform movement and renews his contact with Wyneken even to the point of declaring himself his "strict and fanatical disciple" (GB 1, 64). He also secures election as president of the Free Students Association. Despite this commitment to the student movement in Berlin, Benjamin fails to win re-election as president in the spring of 1913 and, as a result, decides to return to Freiburg for the summer semester.

During his second semester in Freiburg, Benjamin attends lectures given by the neo-Kantian philosopher Heinrich Rickert, as does Martin Heidegger. Rickert's lectures do not captivate the young Benjamin, who reports: "I . . . just