

## BOOK REVIEW

Walter Benjamin, *Einbahnstraße* (Berlin: Ernst Rowohlt Verlag, 1928).<sup>1</sup>

There is great talk of revolution—  
And a great chance of despotism—  
P. B. Shelley, *Peter Bell the Third*  
(quoted in Walter Benjamin, *Das Passagen-Werk*)

The happiness of the next twenty-four hours depends on our ability, on waking, to pick it up.

Walter Benjamin, “Madame Ariane: Second Courtyard on the Right”

This street, this one-way street, is familiar, at least insofar as the assumption of continuity that defines familiarity is underwritten by the law’s demand—enacted with signs posted at regular intervals—to proceed forward, with one’s back primly turned to the source of its progress. So, too, at the various intersections on this street, where the safety-minded adage to look both ways before crossing ironically disciplines the inclination to do precisely that, to turn around in irresponsible ways, in ways that strike responsible adults as tempting fate. Such youthful spirit was desperately important to Walter Benjamin, which is partly to say that he composed *Einbahnstraße* (*One-Way Street*) while working under the gaze of *Angelus Novus*, the painting by Paul Klee that he purchased in 1921. If it was not yet the moment for the angel to come to voice, then *One-Way Street* reflects its aura, a breath that sounds the question of language with which Benjamin struggled from beginning to end.

The street is familiar, so long as there is no question about the name that opens its way, a dedication that expresses the sadness of a “one-way” word, a lament that abides in the desire to name and the urge to name a desire. It is easy not to ask. Here, on “Asja-Lacis-Strasse,” the question of how the unrequited ideal (which includes *eros*) appears in the very midst of its consummation is easily obscured by the excellent recommendation of its addresses—a line of aphorisms turned *topoi*, a set of commonplaces like Benjamin’s rendering of Klee’s angel, which have been collected and woven into the fabric of contemporary critical theory.<sup>2</sup> In moments of profound frustration, the leftist knows well the value of turning to *One-Way Street* and professing something of its wisdom to the method-bound mass: “Strength lies in improvisation. All the decisive blows are struck left-handed” (447). So, too, the critic’s impulse finds footing in a recitation of Benjamin’s warning that “the freedom of conversation is being lost” and that “warmth is ebbing from things” (453). There are others, including sage advice to remember the musical, architectonic, and textile phases of “good prose” (455). Opened to any page, Benjamin’s proto-passages disclose an “expressive character,” a capacity to unfurl an idea from dream work, swing a mood into an arc, and discern a beginning in the midst of a staid origin.

Today, the recognizability of *One-Way Street* rests heavily on its recurring appropriation and the more or less scattershot deployment of its pieces. Full readings of the text are relatively rare, a fact that testifies to how its constitutive aphorisms, codicils, and warrants resist constellation and obscure the source of their allure, a prophetic voice that Benjamin himself resisted with a critical-theoretical commitment to the revolutionary potential that abides in the flash of surprise: “Quotations in my work are like wayside robbers who leap out, armed, and

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relieve the idle stroller of his conviction” (481). There is no denying the violence here. *One-Way Street* is a mugging, a redistribution event that relieves us of our interpretive tools in the name of teaching a lesson about the moral risk of their accumulation. Having turned out our pockets and rendered us unsure of which way to turn, Benjamin demands that we read the street’s signs as moving fragments and not as the fifty-two constitutive elements of his first book, a work that was published in early 1928 and which cannot, try though it might, conceal its underlying architecture.

Benjamin begins by calling out the “pretentious, universal gesture of the book,” a critique that speaks directly to his thorough-going commitment to “literary montage” and the use of aphorism to disclose “figures of thought” (*denkbild*) (444).<sup>3</sup> Equally important, this opening hints at why Benjamin originally conceived the work as one that would circulate only within a very small group, titled *Plaquette for Friends*. An emblem then, a memorial form that evokes the British “death penny” minted after the war and which links and links the “blocks” of Benjamin’s street, the stretches in which he discerns the need for criticism, locates its materials, and gathers the possibility of critical expression in the midst of what cannot be said. Far more than an attempt to diagnose the condition of modernity—an interpretation that now suffers from the over-determination of its myriad formulations—*One-Way Street* reflects Benjamin’s struggle to “come to terms” with the language that lets loose war and the loss of language that echoes through its aftermath. Composed largely between 1923 and 1926, *One-Way Street* bustles with the ruin of 1914. Its throughway echoes with the catastrophe that led Benjamin to conclude that effective criticism entails the work of tender destruction, a reading that refuses “every golden mean” and blurs the line between commentary and translation in the name of cutting through a work’s material content for a glimpse of its truth content (449).<sup>4</sup>

How then to proceed? Reading *One-Way Street* today involves a tension between heeding a call to read in fragments and taking Benjamin’s vision of criticism seriously, where the latter steps back from the work of (re)citation in order to look across and gather the autobiographical, documentary, speculative, and esoteric pieces of Benjamin’s collage, a view that risks precisely what the work deems tragic—the production of a narrative that fails to ask after its own historical relationship to language. The tension is deepened by the call of an anniversary to which this review responds, an altogether appreciated invitation to take up a book that delineates a path to the future. Through the lens of the messianism already evident in *One-Way Street*, Benjamin thought a great deal and very little about such promises and their compulsion to foreclose *jetztzeit* (now-time) (467, 482). What about this twenty-four hours, particularly in light of the adversarial element held in the concept of an anniversary? Why wait for the next speech (act), at least if such deferral risks relegating the field of rhetoric to a subfield of history, as if that is enough to slip the role of handmaiden for the instrumental folly of political science?<sup>5</sup>

A review of *One-Way Street* may easily beg Benjamin’s question at the same time that it begs the question at hand. But perhaps this quandary is a clue. Perhaps, from the midst of Benjamin’s imagined correspondence between publisher (“*My expectations have been most rudely disappointed.*”) and author (“*Sir, why did you become a publisher?*”), *One-Way Street* beckons the question of the book review as such, a form of expression that occupied a good bit of Benjamin’s time and which increasingly amounts to the obligatory casting of a poorly designed trinket (481–82). The latter is not news, although it may turn out that that the shortcomings of the contemporary book review have far more to do with the presumptions of institutional-disciplinary culture than the wile of Google Books or the efforts of book review editors (save perhaps for one, with whom I am rather well acquainted), who wage a gallant struggle to incite interest (and prose) above and beyond the machinations of a self-replicating economy that readily trades imagination for slavish obedience to a rote form—summary followed by hedged reservation culminating in greater or lesser embrace.<sup>6</sup> Backed frequently by a notion of inclusivity that borders on a speech code, the standardized “academic book review” takes pains to avoid clash over the particulars of a work and more often than not declines to promote

directed debate over the general (in)significance of a work. As a form, it reflects an unwillingness to theorize how the review might move beyond the functional in order to take up its own presuppositions, not least the question of the book's "necessity"—which remains a relatively new problem for the field—and what gestures might productively trouble the *ethos* of a Midwestern founding in the name of writing books that appear outside the walls and actually bother those who would prefer that rhetoric remain in its proper place.

Looking across *One-Way Street*, from "How to write fat books" to "Thirteen theses on snobs" to "The critic's technique in thirteen theses," Benjamin holds out the problem of how the book review might amount to more than the performance of due diligence with diminishing return. In his terms, such a possibility demands reflection on the power of a "genuine polemic," a critical expression that asks the field to both concede that it is one of the many public spheres in which it so freely trades and consider how the art of the review may take shape in the idea that "the public must be always be proved wrong, yet always feel represented by the critic" (460). This path is not the course of least resistance. It risks more than a little, not least the comfort of a deeply entrenched "comedic" perspective that obscures the problem of (rhetoric's) self-certainty with ratios that risk the conflation of clash and hubris. Indeed, for Benjamin, the problem of tragedy lies elsewhere, which is to say that his thoroughfare neither runs in one direction nor holds room to paint a long yellow (dialogic) line down its middle.

Thus appears the far less familiar part of the street. Today, the incentive to read Benjamin in fragments amounts to avoidance, a desire not to spend time on the street's dodgy blocks, the places where society's "human trash" sits and begs under the cultural garbage that fills the shop windows. The very spot from which Benjamin begins his walk, this is precisely where the comfortable ground of tragedy gives way to an altogether discomfoting question of language. The itinerary is intricate, an argument that moves—at times, against itself—and whose energy is gathered in the first three "blocks" of *One-Way Street*, that is, from the opening, "Filling Station," to the end of "Imperial Panorama" (444–55). With a turn away from the sterility (*Unfruchtbarkeit*) of given literary frameworks, Benjamin's first step is a call to "nurture the inconspicuous forms" of a "prompt" speech-language (*Sprache*), a kind of expression that endeavors to recover the grounds of opinion formation in the face of proliferating facts that support no convictions ([7]; 444). The second, which is also a half step back, leads literally to the "breakfast room," a space in which one must take care in coming to voice, aware that the waking inspiration of dreams is equally a warning to remember that our words are not our own and that their hasty narration harbors the risk of calamity (444–45). And then a series of quick steps, all of which circle the war, the assault of "enemy bombs" and the catastrophe of conflict's aftermath, a moment that exposes the foundation on which "the house of our life was erected" and reveals how the assumption of language beckons violence that returns the same. At the center of this circle, a pivot that is set out under the banner "For men," Benjamin places one of the two one-sentence aphorisms in *One-Way Street*: "*Überzeugen ist unfruchtbar*"—The conviction of persuasion is unfruitful; or, in Jephcott's translation, "To convince is to conquer without conception" ([12]; 446).<sup>7</sup> Benjamin pauses, turns, and circles this focal point. It is an opening, a way of speaking to the (im)potential for creativity that abides in the given *and* taken word, a way of asking the question of language, a way of seeing through the gentrification, through the buildings built with unthought money, the houses that evacuate signs of poverty and come kitted with the security of symbolic furnishings, the comfort of a "stock phraseology that nevertheless lays bare the amalgam of stupidity and cowardice" that constitutes the (extra)ordinary "Imperial Panorama" and defines its inflation (450).

Benjamin is relentless. A *flâneur* on the cusp of stalking, he takes stock of the word's appropriation, the taken-for-granted capacity to speak that leaves language to suffer and depletes its experience. Seen on every block and heard in the chatter along the sidewalk, this depreciation amounts to self-denigration that culminates in recoil, a withdrawal in disgust, a desire to wash away the barbarism that inheres in expression that refuses to question the conditions of its

assumption. And if the war exposes this question, then its violence makes it all the harder to ask, all the harder to recall a spirit of youth and its openness to hearing that which language would ask of us—before it is pressed into service. And for Benjamin: never mind the promise of civility held out by the pacifists, a promise that remains naïve to what he discerned in 1916 and then allegorized in *One-Way Street*: “the only form in which human dialogue can appear is that of tragedy.”<sup>8</sup> Far from fating silence, Benjamin is asking what it might mean to silence fate. A glimmer of an answer appears at the end of the street, as he arrives “to the planetarium,” a space from which to look up—whether to the heavens or the cosmos—and recall what we cannot see, not least that we remain between the wars and within the aftermath of their violence, with only a dim grasp of their cost and little understanding of how the desire for the security of secure words strikes against the expression that it claims to protect. Then and there. Here and now. The dialectical image cast by *One-Way Street* throws a shadow, the question of whether rhetoric might yet abandon its (pre)conception by philosophy and take form as an art that gives away its medium in the name of experiencing its creativity, a gift of the word that remains far from given.

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4 August 2014

## Notes

- [1] Benjamin’s book has been reprinted many times. I rely on the 1955 version, which lacks the well-known cover montage created by the Russian photographer, Sasha Stone. See Walter Benjamin, *Einbahnstraße* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1995). Edmund Jephcott undertook the now-standard English translation of *One-Way Street*, only a portion of which appears in Walter Benjamin, *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings* (New York, NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978). The full translation appears in Walter Benjamin, *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 1, 1913–1926*, eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1996), 444–87. Page numbers below refer to this edition. Page numbers in brackets refer to the Suhrkamp Verlag edition.
- [2] Benjamin’s dedication of *One-Way Street*: “This street is named Asja Lacis Street after her who as an engineer cut it through the author.” Lacis was a Latvian theatre director who shaped Benjamin’s Marxism and with whom Benjamin fell into unrequited love over the course of an on-again, off-again affair, a liaison that provoked Dora Benjamin to write of her soon-to-be ex-husband that, “[a]ll he is at this point is brains and sex” (quoted in Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life* [Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2014], 316).
- [3] *One-Way Street*’s publication coincided with the publication of Benjamin’s “failed” Habilitation thesis, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*.
- [4] Eiland and Jennings, *A Critical Life*, 301; *One-Way Street*, 449. In part, this is to say that *One-Way Street* very much embodies Benjamin’s thinking in his 1920 essay, “The Concept of Criticism,” and his magisterial work of 1924, “Goethe’s Elective Affinities.”
- [5] With respect to the latter, it is well worth an afternoon to read an introductory textbook, such as Robert Dahl and Bruce Stinebrickner, *Modern Political Analysis* (6th ed.) (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2002).
- [6] The dynamic “speaks” to the “secret” interests that drive the production of the book review.
- [7] The other aphorism is: “Arc Lamp—The only way of knowing a person is to love that person without hope.” Taken together, these two lines are nothing less than an allegory of Benjamin’s 1916 essay, “On Language As Such and on the Language of Man.”
- [8] Benjamin, “The Role of Language in Trauerspiel and Tragedy,” in *Walter Benjamin, Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 1, 1913–1926*, eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1996), 59.