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Gershom Scholem's reading of Brecht's *Arbeitsjournal*

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In February 1938 Gershom Scholem was on his way to the United States to give the famous *Hilda Stroom Lectures* which were to become the nucleus of his best known book, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*. In Paris he saw his friend Walter Benjamin and although neither knew at the time, this would be their last meeting; Scholem had emigrated to Palestine fifteen years earlier while Benjamin had continued to lead a vagabond life between Berlin, Paris, Svendborg (Denmark) and San Remo, where his ex-wife Dora ran a small hotel. We have an account of their final meeting in Paris made forty years later by Scholem, the friend who survived, and it makes up much of the last chapter of *The Story of a Friendship*, which Scholem published in 1975, on what would have been Walter Benjamin's 80th birthday. *Geschichte einer Freundschaft* had also been the subtitle of a book dedicated to Stefan George, published by Sabine Lepsius in 1935.¹

Scholem had maintained a keen interest in what was going on in publishing in Europe and he certainly would not have wanted to miss out on an opportunity to visit the bookshops of Paris on this rare European visit. Above all, the attention of a collector of antisemitic texts such as Scholem was attracted by a book which had come out in the December of the previous year. The bookshop windows of Paris were full of Louis Ferdinand Céline's book, *Bagatelles pour un massacre* and Scholem bought it immediately so that he could discuss it with his friend. This is an extract from Scholem's account:

Ein anderes Mal hatten wir eine Aussprache über den Antisemitismus. Als ich nach Paris kam, waren die Auslagen der Buchhandlungen sehr oft mit dem kurz vorher erschienenen Buch von Céline

¹ Cfr. Sabine Lepsius, *Stefan George. Geschichte einer Freundschaft* (Berlin: Die Runde, 1935). Perhaps Scholem chose this title on the suggestion of Werner Kraft, who had written about Stefan George.



Bagatelles pour un massacre dekoriert. Das war ein wildes antisemitisches Pamphlet von über sechshundert Seiten, das ich, von jeher ein aufmerksamer Leser antisemitischer Literatur, sofort erwarb, obwohl meine Kenntnisse des Französischen kaum ausreichten, viel mehr als die Hälfte des extravaganten vulgären Wortschatzes des Autors zu verstehen. Das Buch erregte großes Aufsehen. Daß der Nihilismus Célines nun an den Juden ein natürliches Objekt gefunden hatte, mußte zu denken geben. Benjamin hatte das Buch noch nicht gelesen, hatte aber über den Ausmaß des Antisemitismus in Frankreich keine Illusionen. Er erzählte, daß literarisch einflußreiche Bewunderer Célines sich um eine klare Stellungnahme zu dem Buch mit der Erklärung herumdrückten: “Ce n’est qu’une blague”, es sei eigentlich weiter nichts als eine große Farce. Ich suchte ihm den Unernst solcher Flucht in eine verantwortungslose Phrase vorzustellen. Er sagte, seine eigene Erfahrung habe ihn davon überzeugt, daß auch in den Kreisen der linken Intelligenz latenter Antisemitismus sehr weit verbreitet sei und nur sehr wenige Nichtjuden – er nannte Fritz Lieb und Adrienne Monnier – sozusagen konstitutionell davon frei seien. Er zitierte mir einige Beispiele, die anzuführen ich mich schäme, obwohl sie mir unvergeßlich in Erinnerung stehen. Vielleicht hängt es mit solchen Erfahrungen zusammen, die in jenen Jahren ja leicht zu machen waren, daß Benjamin, der selbst zwei Mal Ehen mit Nichtjüdinnen in Betracht gezogen hatte, bei einer Aussprache im Kreise von französischen Linken, von der mir seine gute Bekannte Gisèle Freund erzählt hat, zu ihrer großen Überraschung entschieden gegen Mischehen zwischen Juden und Nichtjuden Stellung nahm. Das habe alle Anwesenden damals sehr betroffen.²

² Gershom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin. Geschichte einer Freundschaft* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1975), pp. 264-265: “Another time we had a discussion about anti-Semitism. When I came to Paris, the windows of the bookstores were quite often decorated with Céline’s book *Bagatelles pour un massacre*, which had recently appeared. That was a wild anti-Semitic polemic of more than 600 pages that I, ever an attentive reader of anti-Semitic literature, acquired immediately, though my knowledge of French hardly sufficed to understand much more than half of the author’s extravagantly vulgar vocabulary. The book caused quite a stir. That Céline’s nihilism had now found a natural object in the Jews was bound to give one food for thought. Benjamin had not yet



Scholem as the keeper of his own and others' memories, in other words, the Scholem who survived, does not hold back and, in the light of what was to come, he is unsparing in his interpretation of the words and events of those dark, anxious days. In fact, how we should interpret Céline's tirade in that poisonous tract remains a controversial issue to this day. When we look back at later events through an ideological lens, it is difficult to bridge the intervening years and fully appreciate what those people knew and what they thought possible. There seems to be no feeling of *pietas* for his dead friend in Scholem's book; rather there is a posthumous sense of righteousness. The full heat of passion, and defeat, is still felt in presenting Benjamin as what he was *not*. Or not sufficiently.

These things are common knowledge, but here I would like to focus on one specific issue: to present some comments made by Scholem that have appeared in Hebrew translation, but not in the original German, nor, to my knowledge, in any language understood by the majority of scholars of Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht. In the extract cited previously, one notes a conscious reticence on Scholem's part: Benjamin had quite clearly provided him with examples of anti-

read the book, but he was under no illusions about the dimensions of anti-Semitism in France. He told me that those of Céline's admirers who were influential on the literary scene got around taking a clear stand on the book with this explanation: "*Ce n'est qu'une blague*" – meaning that it really was nothing but a joke [cfr. Roland A. Champagne, *The Ethics of Reading According to Emmanuel Lévinas* (Atlanta: Rodopi, 1998), p. 51; see also the collection of criticism of *Bagatelles pour un massacre*: André Derval, *L'accueil critique de Bagatelles pour un massacre* (Paris: Écriture, 2010)]. I tried to show him how frivolous such a recourse to an irresponsible phrase was. Benjamin said his own experience had convinced him that latent anti-Semitism was very widespread even among the leftist intelligentsia and that only very few non-Jews – he named Fritz Lieb and Adrienne Monnier – were, so to speak, constitutionally free from it. He cited a few examples that I am ashamed to repeat, although they are engraved indelibly in my memory. Perhaps it was due to such experiences, which certainly were easy to have in those years, that Benjamin, who himself on two occasions had considered marrying non-Jews, resolutely came out against mixed marriages between Jews and non-Jews at a discussion among French leftists that his good friend Gisèle Freund told me about. She said this had come as a great surprise to her and had greatly perplexed all those present"; translation by H. Zohn in G. Scholem, *Walter Benjamin. The story of a friendship* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1981), pp. 212-213.



Semitism on the Left, and Scholem, while stating that he had not forgotten them, recoils from mentioning them due to embarrassment.

In a comment dated May 1st 1973,³ kept along with the rest of the Scholem Archive in the National Library of Israel in Jerusalem, Scholem gives a record of his conversation with Walter Benjamin in which, as we shall see, he is less reticent. Nevertheless, to understand why Scholem decided to put in writing (and in German) his memories years later, those memories he had once refused to publish through decency or decorum, it is necessary to examine the circumstances that surround their origin.

As their published correspondence shows,⁴ it is now evident that Scholem's and Benjamin's discussions regarding Brecht began early on. However, our reconstruction of events should begin later, after Benjamin's death, when Scholem was not only involved in the business of publishing Benjamin's letters, but also began to make his own memories of the past public.

In the summer of 1964 in the presence of Adorno, Scholem gave a talk at the Frankfurt Institut für Sozialforschung entitled *Walter Benjamin*; at the same time he was working on the publication of Benjamin's letters which came out in 1966. The same talk was also given in New York, in German, at the Leo Baeck Institute. The following year the paper was published in its original German version in the "Neue Rundschau"⁵ and also in Lux Furtmüller's English translation in the "Leo Baeck Institute Year Book",⁶ which also published it as

³ Cfr. National Library of Israel, Jerusalem, Scholem Archive, shelf mark Arc 4° 1599.

⁴ Cfr. Walter Benjamin – Gershom Scholem, *Briefwechsel 1933-1940*, edited by Gershom Scholem (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1980).

⁵ Cfr. Gershom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin*, in "Neue Rundschau", 76 (1965), pp. 1-21. The conference paper is also reproduced, with some slight changes, in *Über Walter Benjamin*, with articles by Theodor W. Adorno, Ernst Bloch, Gershom Scholem, Jean Selz, Hans Heinz Holz and Ernst Fischer (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1968), pp. 132-162 and in Gershom Scholem, *Judaica 2* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1970), pp. 193-227, and in Gershom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin und sein Engel. Vierzehn Aufsätze und kleine Beiträge*, edited by Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1983), pp. 9-34.

⁶ Cfr. Gershom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin*, in the "Leo Baeck Institute Year Book", 10 (1965), pp. 117-136.



part of the Leo Baeck Institute Memorial Lecture series.⁷ The Hebrew version of the paper appeared in 1965, in the Israeli periodical "Ammot".⁸ In one passage in particular, Scholem evaluates the significance of Benjamin's friendship with Brecht with extreme precision, and he discusses the consequences of that friendship which, in Scholem's opinion, were negative due to the influence that Brecht exerted on Benjamin:

Auch als historischer Materialist beschäftigt sich Benjamin mit einer Ausnahme intensiv nur mit sogenannten reaktionären Autoren wie Proust, Julien Green, Jouhandeau, Gide, Baudelaire, George. Die Ausnahme bildet Brecht, der auf Benjamin jahrelang eine ungebrochene Faszination ausgeübt hat – war er doch der einzige Autor, an dem er aus der Nähe das schöpferische Verfahren eines großen Dichters beobachten konnte und mit dessen ursprünglich stark anarchistisch gefärbten Kommunismus ihn vieles verband. Wenn auch der erste Anstoß dazu nicht von Brecht kam, hatte er zweifellos den größten Anteil daran, daß Benjamin realiter versuchte, den historischen Materialismus in sein Denken und seine Arbeit aufzunehmen oder gar sein Denken und seine Arbeit in den Rahmen dieser Methode einzuspannen. Brecht war die härtere Natur und hat auf die sensiblere Benjamins, dem alles Athletenhafte abging, tief eingewirkt. Daß Walter Benjamin dabei gut gefahren ist, wage ich nicht zu behaupten. Ich würde eher sagen, daß ich diesen Einfluß Brechts auf die Produktion Benjamins in den dreißiger Jahren für unheilvoll, in manchem auch für katastrophal halte.⁹

The passage quoted above is significant because Scholem refers to it on more than one occasion following the 1973 publication of

⁷ Cfr. Id., *Walter Benjamin*, Leo Baeck Memorial Lectures no. 8 (New York: Leo Baeck Institute, 1965).

⁸ Cfr. Id., *Walter Benjamin*, in "Ammot", 4 (1965), 2, pp. 18-32; this version was also published in Gershom Scholem, *Devarim Be-go* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1975), pp. 426-449.

⁹ Id., *Walter Benjamin*, cit., p. 14: "Even as an historical materialist Benjamin, apart from one exception, is preoccupied only with so-called 'reactionary' authors such as



Brecht's *Arbeitsjournal*. With this important document it was possible to understand what Brecht thought of Benjamin and his work.

The first indications of Scholem's interest in the publication of Brecht's *Arbeitsjournal* are to be found in his correspondence with the writer Uwe Johnson. If I am not mistaken, the two men had first met in Frankfurt on June 30th 1972 when Scholem had given his celebrated talk *Walter Benjamin und sein Engel*. It can also be deduced from the letters that they met again in the summer of 1972 in Zurich. On September 11th 1972, Uwe Johnson wrote to Siegfried Unseld asking him for Scholem's address¹⁰ and in the same year he became Vice President of the Akademie der Künste in West Berlin. In this role, Johnson invited Scholem to give a speech to the Akademie in spring 1973, but although Scholem was in Germany in the March of that year, he was not able to go to Berlin. This resulted in an exchange of letters in which the publication of Brecht's work journals was also discussed.

On March 4th 1973 Johnson wrote to Scholem saying, amongst other things, that he would be pleased if Scholem could come to Berlin the following summer, adding, "Aus dem Stegreif weiss ich zwei Gegenstände, die ich gern mit Ihnen besprechen möchte: noch einmal die militärische Funktion Heinrich Blüchers in der K.P.D. vor 1933,

Proust, Julien Green, Jouhandeau, Gide, Baudelaire, George. The exception is Brecht who for years held Benjamin spellbound and fascinated. Brecht, indeed, was the only author in whom he was able to observe the creative processes of a great poet at close quarters. Also he had much in common with Brecht's at first strongly anarchically tinged brand of communism. Although Brecht did not provide the first impulse, it was undoubtedly his influence which made Benjamin attempt in earnest to absorb historical materialism into his thinking and his work or even to fit all his thinking and work into the frame of historical materialism. Brecht, the tougher of the two, left a profound imprint on the more sensitive nature of Benjamin, who had nothing of the athlete in him. That it was in any way for Benjamin's good is more that I would dare to claim. Rather, I am inclined to consider Brecht's influence on Benjamin's output in the thirties baleful, and in some respects disastrous". Gershom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin*, trans. by Lux Furtmüller, Leo Baeck Memorial Lecture 1965, available at: <https://archive.org/stream/leobaeckmemorialreel01#page/n99/mode/1up>.

¹⁰ Cfr. Uwe Johnson - Siegfried Unseld, *Der Briefwechsel*, edited by Eberhard Fahlke and Raimund Fellinger (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1999), p. 757: "Bitte könntest Du mir die Adresse G. Scholems geben?"



und neuerdings die Blicke auf Brecht, die seit der Veröffentlichung des Arbeitsjournals möglich sind”.¹¹ The military role of Heinrich Blücher, Hannah Arendt’s husband, evidently must have come up at an earlier meeting in Zurich (probably in September 1972, when Scholem was in Switzerland for various reasons including giving a talk at the Eranos meeting at Ascona),¹² while the new subject of conversation was suggested by the recent publication of Brecht’s *Arbeitsjournal*.¹³ On March 13th 1973 Scholem replied to Johnson to tell him that he could not go to Berlin in the summer, but raised the possibility of Johnson meeting up with him, perhaps accompanied by his wife, some time between July 16th and August 6th in Sils Maria in Switzerland:

Da hätten wir schon Gelegenheit “uns” über alles, was so ansteht oder uns am Herzen liegt, auszusprechen. Vielleicht werde ich bis dahin sogar mir die Arbeitsjournale von Brecht verschaffen können, die mir über Verschiedenes ein Licht aufstecken könnten. Ich werde mit dem Herrn Verleger sprechen, nachdem der Ladenpreis schamlos hoch ist.¹⁴

¹¹ Gershom Scholem, *Briefe III 1971-1982*, edited by Itta Shedletzky (München: C. H. Beck, 1999), p. 312: “So just off the cuff, I would like to discuss two things with you: once again the military function of Heinrich Blücher in the KPD before 1933 and, more recently, new opinions about Brecht in the light of the publication of his work journals”. Here, as elsewhere unless otherwise stated, the English translation is that of the present translator.

¹² Cfr. Gershom Scholem, *Die Farben und ihre Symbolik in der jüdischen Überlieferung und Mystik*, in “Eranos Jahrbuch”, 41 (1972), pp. 1-49, which also appeared in Gershom Scholem, *Judaica 3. Studien zur jüdischen Mystik* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1970), pp. 98-151.

¹³ Cfr. Bertolt Brecht, *Arbeitsjournal*, edited by Werner Hecht, 3 vol. (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1973). A new edition with different impagination and various corrections and additions was published the following year. As the more widely-used paperback edition (1994) is based upon the latter, page references of the more recent version will be added next to those of the version used by Scholem to make it easier for the reader to refer to the source. Reference is made here to the English translation: Bertolt Brecht, *Journals 1934-1955*, edited by John Willett, translated by Hugh Rorrison (London: Methuen, 1993).

¹⁴ Scholem, *Briefe III*, cit., letter no. 54, p. 57: “So we will have the chance to exchange opinions on our work and what we really hold dear. Perhaps by then I will have been able



The “honourable publisher” mentioned in the letter is evidently the aforementioned Siegfried Unseld, head of the Suhrkamp publishing house.¹⁵ Scholem’s request must have been successful because on May 15th 1973 he wrote to Unseld to say that he had received the two volumes of the journals:

Lieber Herr Unseld,
mit Freuden bestätige ich nun endlich die Ankunft der Bände des Arbeitsjournals von Brecht. Ich habe mich darauf gestürzt und kann nur mit tiefem Seufzen ausrufen: Ach, hätte ich das doch gehabt, als ich meinen Aufsatz über Benjamin schrieb und den Absatz über sein Verhältnis zu Brecht.¹⁶ Grausamer als durch die eigenen zwei Aufzeichnungen Brechts über die Arbeit Benjamins über das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter etc. und über die Geschichtsphilosophischen Thesen kann man ja wohl die von mir geäußerte Reserve über dieses Verhältnis nicht bestätigen. Aber als Zitat des am nächsten Beteiligten wären die Äusserungen ja wohl unschätzbar gewesen. Kein Wunder, dass Benjamin mir seiner Zeit schrieb, es gäbe eben Seiten in seiner Produktion, die für Brecht unverdaulich seien und die er daher ihm gegenüber im Schatten lassen müsse. Er wusste, wovon er redete. Natürlich hat Brecht einen völlig gesunden Instinkt gehabt und den ihm unerträglichen Mystiker in Benjamin gerochen. Ich muss die Sache irgendwo einmal zur Sprache bringen. Jedenfalls nehmen Sie bitte meinen herzlichsten Dank für diese unschätzbare Lieferung.¹⁷

to get hold of Brecht’s work journals, which could throw light on various issues. I will talk to the honourable publisher, since the price is so shamelessly high”.

¹⁵ On the correspondence between Scholem and Unseld, see Liliane Weissberg *Über Haschisch und Kabbala. Gershom Scholem, Siegfried Unseld und das Werk von Walter Benjamin*, in “Marbacher Magazin”, 140, Deutsches Literaturarchiv, Marbach am Neckar 2012, and the present author’s review in “Materia Giudaica”, 17-18 (2012-2013), pp. 286-289.

¹⁶ Shedletzky claims that this refers to a passage in *Walter Benjamin und sein Engel* (p. 88), in Gershom Scholem, *Briefe III*, cit., p. 331. However, I do not agree for reasons that will become apparent later.

¹⁷ *Ivi*, letter no. 72, p. 77: “Dear Mr Unseld, I can finally confirm that I received with pleasure the two volumes of Brecht’s work diaries. I have immersed myself in reading



Brecht's words had such a deep effect on Scholem that he brought up the subject again in a letter to Soma Morgenstern the following year. For some time, from the beginning of the 1970s, Morgenstern had written a number of letters to Scholem containing personal memories, mostly regarding Walter Benjamin, whom he had met in Berlin and then seen again during Benjamin's exile in Paris. In a letter dated January 28th 1974, Morgenstern refers to a discussion with Brecht, with Benjamin present, about Trotsky, Zinoviev and Stalin. At the end of the letter he says that he became Brecht's friend in California, after Benjamin's death, and that they had talked about the friend they had had in common. However, he claimed that he did not remember any note of criticism in what Brecht said about Benjamin; on the other hand Morgenstern did remember being told that Brecht had been critical of him:

Wir sprachen auch oft über Walter Benjamin, an dem er, wenigstens mir gegenüber, nichts auszusetzen hatte; eher an mir. Eines Tages erzählte mir Hanns Eisler: "Brecht sagt: Der Soma Morgenstern, der schreibt ja sehr gut. Aber er schreibt über jüdische Kulaken." Soviel Brecht – wenn auch wenig über Benjamin. Aber das dürfte Sie interessieren.¹⁸

them and I can only exclaim with a deep sigh: Ah! If only I had had them when I wrote my essay on Benjamin and in particular in the part about his relationship with Brecht! The reservations that I had about this relationship have been confirmed in the cruellest manner by the two references that Brecht makes to Benjamin's writings regarding *The Work of Art in the Age* etc. and on his *Theses on the philosophy of history*. Certainly, as declarations of someone directly involved, what he says is of the greatest value. It is not surprising that at the time Benjamin wrote to me saying that there were aspects of his work that Brecht could not stomach and so was forced to keep quiet about them when he was with Brecht. He knew what he was talking about. Naturally Brecht's instincts were in perfect working order and he had discovered that unbearable mystic that was hidden in Benjamin. Sooner or later I will have to take a public stance on this. In any case, my warmest thanks for this invaluable parcel".

¹⁸ Parts of Soma Morgenstern's letter to Scholem were published for the first time in Scholem, *Briefe III*, cit., pp. 341-344, here p. 344; the letter was also later published, in considerably reduced form, in Soma Morgenstern, *Kritiken, Berichte, Tagebücher*, edited and with an afterword by Ingolf Schulte (Lüneburg: zu Klampen, 2001), pp. 547-549, here p. 549; "We often spoke about Walter Benjamin, of whom, at least with me,



On February 4th 1974 Scholem replied from Jerusalem, returning to this specific question:

Die Beschwerde Brechts, dass Sie ihre Talente darauf verwandt hätten, über jüdische Kulaken zu schreiben, liegt ganz auf der Ebene seiner Beschwerden über Benjamins unglückselige jüdische Neigungen, über die wir jetzt durch die Veröffentlichung der Arbeitshefte von Brecht nur allzugenau orientiert sind. Schade, dass ich diese Äusserungen Brechts nicht bei meinem New Yorker Vortrag über Benjamin kennen und benutzen konnte. Sie entsprächen ganz genau dem, was ich damals sagte.¹⁹

As Itta Shedletzky informs us,²⁰ Scholem wrote the numbers of three pages on a blank page in the first volume of his copy of the *Arbeitsjournal*.²¹ These were pp. 16, 20 and 294.

Let us now look at the passages which attracted Scholem's attention; these are the only instances where Brecht mentions Benjamin:

25.7.38

benjamin ist hier. er schreibt an einem essay über Baudelaire. da ist gutes, er weist nach, wie die vorstellung von einer bevorstehenden geschichtslosen epoche nach 48 die literatur verbog. der versailer

he [Brecht] had nothing bad to say; more likely it was me. One day Hanns Eisler told me: 'Brecht says, Soma Morgenstern writes very well. But he writes about Jewish kulaks'. So much for Brecht, though not much about Benjamin. However, the matter might interest you".

¹⁹ Gershom Scholem, *Briefe III*, cit., letter 88, pp. 95-96, here p. 95: "Brecht complaining that you were wasting your talent writing about Jewish kulaks is on a par with his complaints about Benjamin's inauspicious Jewish tendencies, and they fit in with what we now know following the publication of Brecht's work journals. It is a pity that I did not know about this and make use of these comments by Brecht for the lecture that I gave on Benjamin in New York. They would have corresponded precisely to what I said at the time". Shedletzky once again exercises extreme caution about this; on p. 344 she only goes so far as to say that it not clear if Scholem is referring to the 1964 Leo Baeck Memorial Lecture, but it is difficult to argue that this is not the case.

²⁰ Cfr. Gershom Scholem, *Briefe III*, cit., p. 312.

²¹ Cfr. Scholem Archive at the National Library of Israel, Jerusalem: shelf mark 15859.1.



sieg der bourgeoisie über die kommune wurde vorauskomptiert. man richte sich mit dem bösen ein. es bekam blumenform. das ist nützlich zu lesen. merkwürdigerweise ermöglicht ein spleen benjamin, das zu schreiben, er geht von etwas aus, was er *aura* nennt, was mit dem träumen zusammenhängt (dem wachträumen). er sagt: wenn man einen blick auf sich gerichtet fühlt, auch im rücken, erwidert man ihn (!). die erwartung, daß, was man anblickt, einen selber anblickt, verschafft die aura. diese soll in letzter zeit im zerfall sein, zusammen mit dem kultischen. b[enjamin] hat das bei der analyse des films entdeckt, wo aura zerfällt durch die reproduzierbarkeit von kunstwerken. alles mystik, bei einer haltung gegen mystik. in solcher form wird die materialistische geschichtsauffassung adaptiert! es ist ziemlich grauenhaft.²²

13.8.38

benjamin behauptet, freud sei der meinung, die sexualität werde einmal überhaupt absterben. unsere bourgeoisie ist der meinung, sie sei die menschheit. als der kopf des adels fiel, stand ihm wenigstens noch der schwanz. der bourgeoisie ist es gelungen, sogar die sexualität zu ruinieren.²³

²² Brecht, *Arbeitsjournal*, cit., vol. I, p. 16 (ed. 1974, p. 14). “benjamin is here. he is writing an essay on baudelaire. there is good stuff there, he shows how the prospect of an age without history distorted literature after 48. the versailles victory of the bourgeoisie over the commune was discounted in advance. they came to terms with evil. it took the form of a flower. this is useful to read. oddly enough it is a sort of a spleen that enables benjamin to write this. he uses as his point of departure something he calls the aura, which is connected with dreaming (daydreams). he says: if you feel a gaze directed at you, even at your back, you return it (!). the expectation that what you will look at will look back at you creates the aura. this is supposed to be in decline of late, along with the cult element in life. b[enjamin] has discovered this while analysing films, where the aura is decomposed by the reproducibility of the art-work. a load of mysticism, although his attitude is against mysticism. this is the way the materialist understanding of history is adapted. it is abominable”. Brecht, *Journals 1934-1955*, cit., p. 10.

²³ Brecht, *Arbeitsjournal*, cit., vol. I, p. 20 (ed. 1974, p. 17). “benjamin maintains freud thinks that sexuality will one day die out completely. our bourgeoisie thinks it is mankind. when the heads of the aristocracy fell, at least their pricks remained erect. the bourgeoisie has contrived to ruin even sexuality”. Brecht, *Journals 1934-1955*, cit., p. 12.



26.2.39

BENJAMIN und STERNBERG, sehr hochqualifizierte intellektuelle, haben es nicht verstanden und dringend vorgeschlagen, doch mehr menschliches interesse hineinzubringen, mehr von altem roman!²⁴

In an entry dated August 1941, Brecht writes:

walter benjamin hat sich in einem kleinen spanischen grenzort vergiftet. die gendarmerie hatte den kleinen trupp, zu dem er gehörte, aufgehalten, als seine reisebegleiter am nächsten morgen ihm mitteilen wollten, daß die weiterreise gestattet sei, fanden sie ihn tot. ich lese die letzte arbeit, die er dem institut für sozialforschung eingeschickt hat. günther stern gibt sie mir mit der bemerkung, sie sei dunkel und verworren, ich glaube, auch das wort “schon” kam darin vor. die kleine abhandlung behandelt die geschichtsforschung und könnte nach der lektüre meines CAESAR geschrieben sein (mit dem b[enjamin], als er ihn in svendborg las, nicht allzuviel anfangen konnte). b[enjamin] wendet sich gegen die vorstellung von der geschichte als eines ablaufs, vom fortschritt als einer kraftvollen unternehmung ausgeruhter köpfe, von der arbeit als der quelle der sittlichkeit, von der arbeiterschaft als protegés der technik usw. Er verspottet den oft gehörten satz, man müsse sich wundern, daß so was wie der faschismus “noch in diesem jahrhundert” vorkommen könne (als ob er nicht die frucht aller jahrhunderte wäre). – kurz, die kleine arbeit ist klar und entwirrend (trotz aller metaphorik und judaismen), und man denkt mit schrecken daran, wie klein die anzahl derer ist, die bereit sind, so was wenigstens mißzuverstehen.²⁵

²⁴ Brecht, *Arbeitsjournal*, cit., vol. I, p. 42 (ed. 1974, p. 33). “BENJAMIN and STERNBERG, very highly qualified intellectuals, did not understand it and made pressing recommendations for more human interest to be put in, more of the old novel”. Brecht, *Journals 1934-1955*, cit., pp. 23-24.

²⁵ Brecht, *Arbeitsjournal*, cit., vol. I, p. 294 (ed. 1974, p. 212). “walter benjamin has poisoned himself in some little spanish border town. the *guardia civil* had stopped the little group he belonged to. when the others went to tell him the next morning that they were being allowed to carry on, they found him dead. I read the last article he sent to



This reconstruction of events helps us to understand Scholem's comments better. They are dated May 1st 1973, and therefore before he wrote to Unseld; in them, he put his emotions down on paper having now read this hitherto unseen book.

1. Mai 1973

Nichts konnte meine 1964 geäußerte Ansicht über das Verhältnis Brechts zu Benjamin trauriger und schneidender bestätigen als die zwei Aufzeichnungen Brechts über W.B. in dem jetzt (1973) publizierten "Arbeitsjournal", S. 16 und 294. So, also genau wie ich es mir gedacht hatte, sah das aus. Das was an Benjamin am originellsten²⁶ war, war eben das, was Brecht am unerträglichsten sein mußte. An dem großartigen ersten Teil des von den jetzigen Marxisten so bewunderten Aufsatzes über das Kunstwerk sah er 1938²⁷ nur das ihm gegen den Strich gehende! "Alles Mystik, bei einer Haltung gegen Mystik. In solcher Form wird die materialistische Geschichtsauffassung adaptiert? Es ist ziemlich grauenhaft."

Natürlich hat Brecht vollkommen Recht – das ist der springende Punkt. Er wußte genau, was mit Benjamins Marxismus los war, und machte sich keine Illusionen. Die hatte nur Benjamin selber, der sich mit etwas zu identifizieren suchte, was ihm nicht wirklich gemäß war. Natürlich war es Mystik, was ihn bewegte – Gottseidank, hätte/ich fast gesagt – und was dem Brecht zuwider sein mußte: Brecht

the institute for social research, Günther Stern gave it to me, commenting that it is complex and obscure, I think he also used the word 'already'. The little treatise deals with historical research, and could have been written after reading my CAESAR (which b. could not make much of when he read it in Svendborg). b. rejects the notion of history as a continuum, the notion of progress as a mighty enterprise undertaken by cool, clear heads, the notion of work as the source of morality, of the workforce as protégés of technology, etc. he makes fun of the common remark about it being astonishing that fascism should 'still be possible in this century' (as if it were not the fruit of all centuries). In short the little treatise is clear and presents complex issues simply (despite its metaphors and its judaisms) and it is frightening to think how few people there are who are prepared even to misunderstand such a piece". Brecht, *Journals 1934-1955*, cit., p. 159.

²⁶ Scholem originally wrote "an Benjamin originell war", then made a correction between the lines.

²⁷ The word order was originally "1938 sah er", but this was then inverted.



schrieb über das Baudelaire,²⁸ an dem B. damals arbeitete: “Merkwürdigerweise ermöglicht ein Spleen Benjamin das zu schreiben. Er geht von etwas aus, das er Aura nennt, was mit dem träumen zusammenhängt (dem wachträumen). Er sagt: wenn man einen Blick auf sich gerichtet fühlt, auch im Rücken, erwidert man ihn (!) [So paradox kam diese reale Erfahrung Brecht vor!]. Die Erwartung, daß das was man anblickt, einen selber anblickt, verschafft die Aura. Diese soll in letzter Zeit im Zerfall sein, zusammen mit dem Kulturellen. B. hat das bei der Analyse des Films entdeckt, wo Aura zerfällt durch die Reproduzierbarkeit von Kunstwerken.²⁹ Alles Mystik, bei einer Haltung gegen Mystik... es ist ziemlich grauenhaft”.

Ach, hätte ich das gehabt, als ich den Absatz über W.B. und Brecht schrieb!! Und über die Thesen zur Geschichte weiß er, der die Kafkaarbeit für faschistenfreundlich hielt, zu sagen (gegen Günther Stern, der sie für dunkel und verworren hielt):

“Die kleine Arbeit ist klar und entwirrend (trotz aller Metaphorik und Judaismen)”. So sieht das großartigste an den Thesen (über den Engel!) bei Brecht aus: Metaphorik und Judaismen! Ein Goi reagiert auf den Juden Benjamin.³⁰ Er ist derselbe Goi, der in der Betrunktheit zu Helene Weigel seiner Frau sagen konnte (W.B. zu mir in Paris 1938): Du dreckige Saujüdin.³¹

²⁸ Cfr. Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire. A Lyric Poet in the Age of High Capitalism*, trans. by Harry Zohn (London: NLB, 1973).

²⁹ Scholem originally wrote “des Kunstwerkes”.

³⁰ As Scholem had reached to the bottom of the reverse side of the page, the last sentence is written vertically along the left-hand margin with a reference marked with a cross.

³¹ May 1st 1973: “Nothing could confirm the opinion I expressed in 1964 of Brecht’s behaviour towards Benjamin in a sadder and sharper way than two references Brecht makes to W.B. in the recently published (1973) “Work Journals”, p. 16 and 294. And so things were exactly as I imagined. What was most original about Benjamin was what must have been most unbearable for Brecht. In 1938 the only thing that he saw in that great first part of essay on the art-work, now so admired by Marxists, was what he didn’t agree with! “A load of mysticism, although his attitude is against mysticism. This is the way the materialist understanding of history is adapted. It is abominable”. Of course Brecht is absolutely right – that is the point. He knew precisely what Benjamin’s problem was with Marxism and had no illusions about it. The only illusions



As we have already mentioned, it is not the first time that this brief comment on Brecht has been published. Scholem spoke openly about it in part in *Story of a Friendship*³² and then the Hebrew translation of the comments was published in 1989 in the posthumous work entitled *Od davar*, a collection of Scholem's published and unpublished works.³³ However, the difficulty in understanding the Hebrew version for most readers interested in Benjamin, in Brecht, and also in Scholem, provides sufficient grounds for its publication in the original German. Even the fact it is in German is significant; exactly fifty years after leaving Germany, Scholem wrote this comment, clearly at great speed and in the heat of the moment, in the language of his upbringing, the language of Brecht's work journals (the reading of which led him to take up pen and paper in the first place), and the language of his conversations with Walter Benjamin.

were Benjamin's who was trying to identify with something that was not really part of him. Naturally, it was mysticism that moved him – and thank God for it, I'd almost say – and this is what must have been irritating. As to Baudelaire, whom Benjamin was working on at the time: “Oddly enough it is a sort of spleen that enables Benjamin to write this. He uses as his point of departure something he calls the aura, which is connected with dreaming (daydreams). He says: if you feel a gaze directed at you, even at your back, you return it (!) [this bit of real-life experience must have seemed so paradoxical to Brecht] the expectation that what you will look at will look back at you creates the aura. This is supposed to be in decline of late, along with the cult element in life. B. has discovered this while analysing films, where the aura is decomposed by the reproducibility of the art-work. A load of mysticism, although his attitude is against mysticism... it is abominable”. Ah, I wish I had had this text when I wrote my paragraph on W.B. and Brecht!! And as to the thesis on history, the man who thought that the essay on Kafka was Fascist-leaning, could say (in contrast to Günther Stern who believed it obscure and confused): “In short the little treatise is clear and presents complex issues simply (despite its metaphors and its Judaisms)”. And so the true greatness of the thesis (on the angel!) is, for Brecht just metaphor and Judaisms! An irritated goy reacting to the Jewish Benjamin. This is the same goy who, when drunk, could say to his wife Helene Weigel (as Walter Benjamin told me in Paris in 1938): You dirty Jewish sow”. Scholem's references to Brecht's *Arbeitsjournal* are based on the English translation: Brecht, *Journals 1934-1955*, cit., pp. 10, 159, with minor adaptations.

³² As well as in Scholem's correspondence. Although this cannot be considered a publication as such, the letters are now accessible.

³³ References henceforth are to the Hebrew translation of the comment by Samuel Shaviv in G. Scholem, *Od davar*, edited by A. Shapira (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1989), pp. 451-452:



Of the many points of reflection that these comments might provoke, I shall limit myself to focusing on just two: on the one hand we note Scholem's desire to reconstruct events. Given this new document, he regrets that it had not been available when he gave and then published his talk on Walter Benjamin. For what is the use of a document if not to confirm a thesis? In comments on such a delicate matter and marked by such emotional involvement, Scholem clearly confirms what he and Adorno had always thought: Benjamin's friendship for Brecht was disastrous. Scholem also adds that this particular disaster was, in the end, the same as the greater one: the eternal illusion, the self-deception of German Jews, who felt drawn to the prevailing culture to the extent that they ignored its antisemitic threat. Once more, Scholem bitterly recognizes that he was right. As history has shown, Scholem seems to say, what Céline said was no joke and it was to be totally expected that a Stalinist like Brecht would be intolerant towards the Jew that was in Benjamin, something that the *Arbeitsjournal* confirms unequivocally. But Scholem's opinion of Brecht would not have been any different even without those comments. His opinions had not even been formed by the words that Benjamin had repeated to him in 1938; Brecht's drunkenness may have provided mitigating circumstances for what he said, though it could also be seen as a case of *in vino veritas*, uncovering the filthy foundations of well-bred convention. Scholem's opinion, the conviction that the non-Jew is antisemitic precedes all proof; where ne-

1 במאי 1973

שום דבר לא יכול היה לאשר באופן מעצב וברור יותר את השקפתי, אותה ביטאתי ב-1964, על יחסו של ברכט לולטר בנימין. מאשר שתי הרשימות של ברכט על בנימין ב-*Arbeitsjournal* (יומן עבודה) שלו שנתפרסם זה-עתה (1973), עמ' 16 ו-1964, בדיוק כך זה היה נראה, כפי שתיארתי לו. מה שהיה בבנימין המקורי ביותר, דווקא זה עשוי היה להיות הבלתי-נסבל ביותר עבור ברכט. בחלקה הנחרד הראשון של מסתו על יצירת האמנות, שהמרקסיסטים הדאינוגא כה מתפעלים ממנה, ראה הוא ב-1938 רק מה שלא מצא חן בעיניו! "הכול מיסטיקה, וזאת תוך הבעת עמדה נגד מיסטיקה. כך אנו מסגלים לצרכינו את תפישת ההיסטוריה המטריאליסטית? הרי זה נורא למדי". כמובן, ברכט צודק בהחלט – זוהי התקודה המכרעת. הוא ידע בדיוק, מה קרה למרכסיזם של בנימין. ולא היו לו אשליה. אשליה היו רק לבנימין עצמו, שכן הוא ביקש להדהות עם משהו שלאמיתו של דבר לא היה מתאים לו. כמובן, המיסטיקה היתה זו שהניעה אותו – תודה לאל, כמעט שהוספתי – וזה מה שהמנאים אותו כנראה על ברכט. וכך כתב ברכט על המסה "בודלר" שעליה עבד אז בנימין: "מזור שמין שגיון מאפשר לו לבנימין לכתוב את מסתו. הוא מתחיל במשהו שהוא קורא לו 'אאורה', הקשורה בחלום (חלום-בהקיץ). הוא אומר: אם או חשים שנתון בנו מבט, אף בבנו, אנו מחזירים מבט (!) [כה פראדוקסלית נראה התנסות מציאותית זו בעיני ברכט!]. ציפיינו כי במה שנביט, אל עצמנו נביט בו – הרי הוא שיוצרת את האאורה". ציפיה זו, לדברי בנימין, נחלשת ומתמסמסת לאחרונה, כשם שמתמסמסת הפולחן. בנימין גילה זאת אגב ניתוחו של סרט קולנועי מסוים, שבו מתמסמסת האאורה בגלל אפשרות שחוזרן של יצירות אמנות. הכל מיסטיקה, וזאת תוך הבעת עמדה נגד המיסטיקה... הרי זה נורא למדי" (שם, שם).

אילו היה ה ברי, "כאשר כתבתי את הקטע על בנימין וברכט!! ומי שראה את מסת בנימין על קאפקה כידודתית לפאשיזם, יכול להגיד על "תחוות דובר הפיליסיפיה של ההיסטוריה" של בנימין כדברים האלה (וזאת בנידוג לגינת שטרן שחשב אותן למעורפלות ומבלבלות): "ניבור קצר זה ברור הוא ומאיר עיניים (ולמרות כל המטאפוריקה והדעות היהודיות)". כך נראית הנחרת שבתווה של בנימין על המלאך בעיני ברכט: מטאפוריקה ורעיונות יהודיים. "גוי" מגיב על היהודי בנימין. זהו אותו הגוי עצמו, שהיה יכול להגיד במצב של שכרות לאתו הלנה וייגל (כפי שסיפר לי בנימין בפריס, ב-1938): "חזירה יהודיה מלוכלכלת"



cessary, the proof nourishes this belief *ad extra*, but it does not explain its cause.

Scholem remembered the way that Brecht had insulted his wife in such violent terms and referred to it obscurely as one of the “expressions that I am too embarrassed to mention”. While fully knowing its rhetorical power, perhaps there is another reason for Scholem’s reticence: an insult, once uttered, takes on a certain dimension and can then be seen as something relative; on the other hand, it is the *possibility* of being insulted, above all when the interlocutor is not drunk, that reveals the unspeakable insult lurking behind the façade.

What Scholem does not say, but certainly implies, is that although Benjamin obviously did not know what Brecht said about him on learning of his death, he well remembered the antisemitic insult directed at Helene Weigel. Evidently, as with Céline, Benjamin interpreted its meaning in a different way. He did not, Scholem seems to suggest, make the necessary connections. There is here a posthumous reprimand of Benjamin and of the whole of German Judaism which is of such a moral strength that elevates what Scholem says to a point of unbearable tension. But it also consolidates, unconsciously, Scholem’s solipsistic status as a survivor; he is not a witness, but a Cassandra on permanent active watch. It was hidden, potential gossip, mere whispering. But in the light of what was to come, it all becomes extremely serious, uncompromising rather than compromised.

In 1989 Scholem’s comments were published, although only for a readership that could understand Hebrew. That very year, in the special cemetery that had once been designated for the communist elect, the grave of Bertolt Brecht and Helene Weigel was daubed with the words “Sau-Jud”.³⁴ Had a wall fallen or was one being built? The fall of one caused, as often happens, the other one to become visible again, but at the same time it confused everything; almost as in an alcohol-induced stupor.

Translation from the Italian: Peter Douglas

³⁴ The desecrated tomb is shown during a conversation with Barbara Brecht in Marcel Ophüls’ documentary *November Days* (1991).