

# interpretation

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May & Sept. 1984 Volume 12 Numbers 2 & 3

- 141 Robert Sacks The Lion and the Ass: a Commentary on the Book of Genesis (Chapters 44–50)
- 193 Kent Moors Justice and Philosophy in Plato's *Republic*: the Nature of a Definition
- 225 Marlo Lewis, Jr. An Interpretation of Plato's *Euthyphro* (Introduction; Part I, Sections 1–3)
- 261 Jack D'Amico The *Virtù* of Women: Machiavelli's *Mandragola* and *Clizia*
- 275 Jim MacAdam Rousseau's *Contract* with and without his *Inequality*
- 287 David Boucher The Denial of Perennial Problems: the Negative Side of Quentin Skinner's Theory
- 301 David Schaefer Libertarianism and Political Philosophy: a Critique of Robert Nozick's *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*
- Discussion*
- 335 Laurence Berns Spiritedness in Ethics and Politics: a Study in Aristotelian Psychology
- 349 Ernest Fortin Rational Theologians and Irrational Philosophers: a Straussian Perspective
- 357 Stanley Corngold & Michael Jennings Walter Benjamin / Gershom Scholem
- 367 Charles M. Sherover The Political Implications of Heidegger's *Being and Time*: on Heidegger's "Being and Time" and the Possibility of Political Philosophy by Mark Blitz
- 381 Mark Blitz Response to Sherover
- Book Review*
- 387 Will Morrisey *Algeny* by Jeremy Rifkin
- Short Notices*
- 391 Will Morrisey *How Democratic is the Constitution? and How Capitalistic is the Constitution?* edited by Robert A. Goldwin & William A. Schambra; *Statesmanship: Essays in Honor of Sir Winston S. Churchill* edited by Harry V. Jaffa; *Winston Churchill's World View* by Kenneth W. Thompson; *Richard Hooker and the Politics of a Christian England* by Robert K. Faulkner; *Education and Culture in the Political Thought of Aristotle* by Carnes Lord; *Machiavelli's New Modes and Orders: the Discourses on Livy* by Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr.; *Rousseau's Social Contract: the Design of the Argument* by Hilail Gildin; *Rousseau's State of Nature: the Discourse on Inequality* by Marc F. Plattner

# interpretation

Volume 12 numbers 2 & 3

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# Walter Benjamin / Gershom Scholem

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**Briefwechsel 1933–1940.** Edited by Gershom Scholem. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1980.)

The letter occupies a privileged position in Walter Benjamin's oeuvre. His personal and intellectual relationships depend largely on correspondence; indeed his friendships occasionally seem to have been designed as opportunities for letter writing. Benjamin also attributed to the letter an overriding political and historical significance. As a result, many of his letters are essays in miniature, informed by all the seriousness and subtlety of his better-known works.

This self-conscious valorization of letter writing has provoked a good deal of comment. Scholem and Theodor Adorno, the editors of Benjamin's correspondence, suggest different explanations for the special power of these letters. For Scholem, they remain primarily the testimony of a personality distinctive for its solitude and uniqueness. Scholem's subjective reading, which appears in his comments on the original edition of Benjamin's letters and throughout their correspondence, seeks and finally finds a complex, brooding genius.<sup>1</sup> Scholem's attempt to make of his friend a man apart has found ready acceptance in America. The writings of Hannah Arendt, Charles Rosen and Susan Sontag use Romantic tropes to mystify Benjamin as outsider and iconoclast, in Sontag's phrase "the last intellectual."<sup>2</sup> Adorno, on the other hand, propagated an image of Benjamin exemplary for its abstraction from personality and its intellectual truth. For Adorno, Benjamin strove to erase from his person and from his writings all subjectivity: his Benjamin is the objective medium of a higher truth. The letter thus becomes for Adorno an independent form sublating both writer and ostensible message.<sup>3</sup>

Any such one-sided reading of these letters is misleading. Neither approach responds to Benjamin's sense of the letter form as a mediator between the individual subject and the historical and political context. Benjamin's letters are intended to preserve the dialectical tension between the private and the public

1. Cf. Scholem's introduction to Walter Benjamin, *Briefe* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1966), pp. 7–9, and esp. Scholem's essay "Walter Benjamin und sein Engel," in *Zur Aktualität Walter Benjamins*, ed. Siegfried Unseld (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1972), pp. 87–138.

2. Cf. Hannah Arendt, "Introduction: Walter Benjamin: 1892–1940" to Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968), pp. 1–55; Charles Rosen, "The Ruins of Walter Benjamin," *New York Review of Books*, 27 Oct. 1977, pp. 31–40; 10 Nov. 1977, pp. 30–38; and Susan Sontag, "The Last Intellectual," *New York Review of Books*, 12 Oct. 1978, pp. 75–76.

3. Cf. Theodor W. Adorno, introduction to Benjamin, *Briefe*, pp. 14–15.

nature of the utterance and between Benjamin and his addressee. As the correspondence with Scholem plainly shows, the letter became for Benjamin a means—perhaps the primary means—of maintaining his intellectual independence, for which he was forced to wage a fierce struggle.

Attempts to annex Benjamin and his work to a series of political, theological and literary movements date back to the 1920s, although it was only in the 1930s, the period of his exile, that the conflicts for his allegiance began in earnest. The Benjamin–Scholem correspondence is only the most extensive documentation of a friend’s or collaborator’s efforts to correct and finally steer the course of Benjamin’s thought. Scholem’s attempts to convince Benjamin of the irrelevance of historical materialism to the main structures of his thought is paralleled by efforts in the opposite direction on the part of both Bertolt Brecht and Adorno. Brecht could not tolerate Benjamin’s mysticism and the resultant vision of a Marxism concerned equally with the “struggle for raw material things” and the “fine and spiritual.”<sup>4</sup> To Brecht, this constituted a denial of the efficacy of direct action and a return to bourgeois cultural values. Max Horkheimer and Adorno were attuned, of course, to Benjamin’s spiritual delicacy, inspired by Jewish mysticism and German Idealism. But his attraction to Marxism and to Brecht’s plain, indeed, crude thinking (“plumpes Denken”) led them to admonish him repeatedly for a lack of mediation in his thought. Benjamin’s letters are marked by resistance to all such attempts to reform him. He saw in them an effort to simplify his thought impermissibly, by excising from it apparently irreconcilable elements.

The letter corresponds as a form to that “Chinese courtesy” of Benjamin’s, noted by friend and foe alike; he never failed to introduce into his friendships habits of an almost ritualistic complexity. These served to define the lines of approach and to ensure Benjamin’s separateness and independence. By imposing physical as well as intellectual distance even upon friends as close as Scholem, Benjamin protected “the contradictory and mobile whole” of his “convictions in their multiplicity.”<sup>5</sup> It should not be forgotten that for Benjamin to maintain his intellectual independence in the 1930s required uncommon courage. While former friends and sometime antagonists were launching their salvos from the shelter of institutions and secure incomes, Benjamin remained a peripatetic exile who could “no longer really manage to live in any one place.”<sup>6</sup> Even in the early days of the exile which began for him in 1933 before all literary employment in Germany had been closed to him, Benjamin wrote to Scholem that “there are places where I can earn a minimal amount, and places where I can live on the

4. Benjamin, “Über den Begriff der Geschichte,” in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser with the collaboration of Theodor W. Adorno and Gershom Scholem (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1971–1982), 1.2.694. All translations are our own.

5. Benjamin/Scholem, *Briefwechsel*, p. 138.

6. Benjamin, *Berliner Kindheit um Neunzehnhundert* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977), p. 149

basis of a minimal amount, but not a single one in which both of these conditions coincide.”<sup>7</sup>

Scholem’s letters show that he was well aware of and often worried by Benjamin’s precarious financial and intellectual situation. This did not, however, restrain him from a series of judgments which seek not so much to seriously engage Benjamin’s political convictions as to call into question their authenticity. He found in Benjamin’s work “an intensive self-betrayal”—a viewpoint which led to polemics of increasing virulence.<sup>8</sup> He could thus ask with plain sarcasm if a recent essay was a “communist credo” and finally accuse Benjamin of “casting his best insights before dialectical swine.”<sup>9</sup> This tone, uncompromising and indeed condescending, is one which Scholem would not have allowed himself in the first fifteen years of his friendship with Benjamin. In the correspondence prior to the period covered in this book, Scholem’s attitude toward Benjamin was less assured and even deferential; Benjamin established himself quite early as first between equals. As Benjamin’s material base erodes, however, and as Scholem solidifies his own institutional position (he had been appointed *Ordinarius* at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem), a not so subtle change of tone enters the correspondence. Benjamin becomes the prodigal, the betrayer of the original basis, theology, upon which the friendship was founded. It would be wrong to underestimate the psychological harm of this alteration for Benjamin. Although he appears to withstand this and similar inroads on his independence, at what cost? The growing recognition of Scholem’s stature in the 1930s and the simultaneous dwindling of his own—he writes of his “victories in small matters, defeats in large ones”—provide a context in which Scholem’s intellectual imperialism, whether he was conscious of the exercise of power or not, must be critically questioned.<sup>10</sup>

To appreciate the importance of this political controversy for both correspondents, one must recall their common political background. In their youth, Benjamin and Scholem professed a theologically-charged anarchism. Benjamin’s “Theological-Political Fragment” of 1921 is something like the manifesto of this two-member movement. There, Benjamin denies any direct connection between secular political action and the intervention of a messianic nature into history. Benjamin demonstrates his “mystical conception of history” by means of a metaphor: the flight of an arrow toward happiness, which represents secular activity, inadvertently accelerates the flight of an arrow representing “messianic intensity.” The coming of the messianic order is hastened precisely by the movement of human history toward its own extinction (even in bliss):

The secular is to be sure not a category of the Kingdom but rather one of the most pertinent categories of its stealthy approach. For in profane happiness everything worldly

7. Benjamin/Scholem, *Briefwechsel*, p. 39.

8. Benjamin, *Briefe*, p. 525.

9. Benjamin/Scholem, *Briefwechsel*, pp. 136, 251.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

strives for its final demise. Nature is messianic in its eternal and total transience. The task of world politics, which must adopt nihilism as its method, is the striving for this eternal and total transience.<sup>11</sup>

Benjamin's nihilism and apocalypticism are nowhere stronger than in this fragment. His sense of history as an irreversible process of continuous deterioration will remain a cornerstone of his political thought. Even in his last essay, "On the Concept of History," written in 1940 from a Marxist perspective, history appears as a "single catastrophe, which heaps rubble on top of rubble."<sup>12</sup>

As he turns to Marxism, however, Benjamin gradually brings to his nihilism a faith in political action. As early as 1924 Benjamin had read Georg Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness*, an encounter he was later to describe as "epochal." The Marxist element of his thought, strengthened by his study of the communism of the French surrealists, continued to grow during the 1930s, especially under the influence of Brecht. Benjamin's Marxism is of course remarkably idiosyncratic, even by the standards of a political theory that has accommodated heterodoxy. But he can tolerate the mood of historical optimism only as it arises from a reflection on a process of decline. There is strictly speaking no idea of progress in Benjamin's thought except through political action which accelerates the rate of decline.

If Marx stood Hegel on his head, Benjamin turns him inside out. Benjamin's conception of history is neither progressive nor integral, but consists of radically discontinuous moments at a sort of dialectical standstill:

The historical materialist must give up the epic element in history. History becomes for him the object of a construction whose content is not empty time, but rather the singular epoch, the singular life, the singular work. He explodes the epoch out of the reified "historical continuity," the life out of the epoch, the individual work out of the life's work. The result of this sort of construction is that the life's work is retained and sublated in the individual work, the epoch in the life's work, and the course of history in the epoch.<sup>13</sup>

Benjamin's political project is inspired by this model of historiography. The goal of "revolution" is to explode from an apparently uniform and intelligible historical process a charged moment and so liberate its messianic potential for the destruction of the present. "In the experiencing of the past powerful forces become free which lay bound in the 'It was so once' of historicism."<sup>14</sup> Benjamin sees the outcome of this destruction of an illusory historical continuity as a "messianic freezing of events."<sup>15</sup> His theology of nihilism was always able to accommodate a certain Marxism.

11. Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, II,1,203-4.

12. *Ibid.*, I,2,697.

13. *Ibid.*, I,2,703.

14. *Ibid.*, "Eduard Fuchs, der Sammler und der Historiker," II,2,468.

15. *Ibid.*, "Über den Begriff der Geschichte," I,2,703.

Unlike Benjamin, Scholem is reluctant to admit any effect of deliberate political activity, however indirect, on the development of a theological order. Even as he softened his anarchistic and antinomian political tendencies, Scholem maintained a strict separation of political activity and messianism. In an ultimately disturbing letter of 1933 he reveals the depth and staying power of his faith in unaided apocalypse:

The most terrible thing about the problem is, though, if one can even dare to say so, that it will only be fruitful for the human situation of German Jews if a true pogrom takes the place of the lukewarm one which one will only try to stop. This represents probably the only chance that something positive will emerge from this sort of explosion. For the catastrophe is certainly of world-historical dimensions, and we can now learn to understand 1492.<sup>16</sup>

The reference to the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492 reveals a great deal about Scholem's understanding of the crisis and of its possible effects. Consciousness of this cataclysmic event is a fundamental constituent of the cabalistic tradition, as Scholem explains in detail in his *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*; by implication, then, only an event of such relentless inhumanity, unthinkable as desired by any rational will, could have an enduring effect upon history.

Despite these differences, however, Benjamin and Scholem share a sense of the seriousness of their correspondence: both are conscious of the documentary and indeed representative value of their comments on the events in Germany—comments often couched, significantly, in the rhetorical and intellectual styles of past eras. Scholem refers to their common attempt to save something of value from “the autodafé of everything un-German.”<sup>17</sup> Benjamin saw his letters as a repository of dream images which together constituted “a picture atlas of the secret history of the Third Reich.”<sup>18</sup> Letter writing becomes one of the last forms of expression and indeed of resistance available to one exiled in an atmosphere in which “the air can hardly be breathed.” (Benjamin also noted that the condition of the air “loses its pertinence when one's throat is being progressively tied shut”!)<sup>19</sup> Benjamin hoped however to exploit in the letter a more than theoretical power; he saw its power as revolutionary.

His understanding of the revolutionary effect of the letter is elaborated in a series of letters by other writers which he published with commentaries in 1931 and 1932 in the *Frankfurter Zeitung*. He drew examples of German epistolary prose from the period 1783–1883, from writers as diverse as Kant, Goethe, Metternich, and Nietzsche. Benjamin took pains to inform Scholem and others of the political effect he hoped for from the publication of these letters in Hitler's Germany—they appeared in book form in 1936 under the title *Deutsche Menschen*.

16. Benjamin/Scholem. *Briefwechsel*, p. 55.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 59.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 128.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 38.

In the book's original introduction, which was finally deleted so as not to endanger the work's availability in Germany, Benjamin writes:

The purpose of this series of letters is to show the face of a "secret Germany" which is sought for so eagerly today behind gloomy mists. For there really does exist a secret Germany. But its secrecy is not merely the expression of Germany's famous interiority and profundity, but rather the product of forces which, noisily and brutally, have denied Germany an importance in the public sphere and, at the same time, condemned it to a secret importance.<sup>20</sup>

This secret importance, residing for Benjamin in the prose written in an earlier period, is not to be understood in any conventionally conservative sense. Benjamin and Scholem shared an esoteric theory of language. Like Karl Kraus, they believed that the spiritual and moral condition of a culture is inscribed on every aspect of its language. But they believed also that language retained the traces of a pre-Adamic harmony of the human and the divine. In their view, the timely publication of these letters could have revolutionary consequences by bringing to bear on the debased language of fascist Germany the language of that secret Germany—namely, a language containing traces of an unmediated relation to the divine. This intent illustrates proleptically the most important concept of Benjamin's late historiography: the dialectical image.

Every present is determined by those images which are synchronic with it: every Now is the Now of a certain possibility of knowledge. In this Now truth is so loaded with time that it is ready to explode. The past does not throw its light onto the present, nor does the present illumine the past, but an image is formed when that which has been and the Now come together in a flash as a constellation. In other words: the image is the dialectic at a standstill. For while the relationship of the present to the past is a purely temporal one, the relationship of that which has been to the Now is a dialectical one: this relationship is not a temporal one, but rather has the character of an image. The image which is read, that is, the image in the Now of its possible perception, is marked to the highest degree by the stamp of the critical, dangerous moment upon which all reading is based.<sup>21</sup>

The dialectical image is Benjamin's term for the product of this collision—the junction of a moment from the past with a moment in the present historical context of the reader. Every such image contains an essential revelation of the past (what has been) and the present (the Now). This constellation of past and present is critical because, if accurately read, it reveals in an explosive way the barrenness of present history in its relationship to the past.

Benjamin keeps intact within his Marxism his original mystical understanding of the messianic course of history. The ideas set down in the 1921 fragment remain the cornerstones of his thought. As a kind of political activity, reading aids the larger theological enterprise, triggering explosions which reveal historical

20. Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, critical apparatus to *Deutsche Menschen*, IV, 2, 945.

21. *Ibid.*, *Das Passagen-Werk*, V, 1, 578.

degeneration and hasten the end of time. It is only in this sense that Benjamin continues to advocate nihilism as the “method of world politics,” and only in this sense that he can refer, as late as 1934, to his wholehearted agreement with Scholem’s idea of a “theocracy and *Heilsgeschichte* immune to secular history.”<sup>22</sup>

Benjamin’s sense of revolution thus has more in common with an act of inspired reading than it does with seizing railroads. Attributing power for change to human perception and reason, his historical materialism is deeply attached to German Idealism. The Mandarin optimism of his Marxism, with its apparently contradictory overlay of mysticism and nihilism, isolates Benjamin within the Socialist camp. His ascribing a revolutionary potential to the letter form is only one example of his esoteric idealization of Marxist praxis. Yet the correspondence with Scholem, with its occasional deliberate invocation of the style and the ideas of letter writing from the past, makes quite clear the importance Benjamin attached to the enterprise. As in *Deutsche Menschen*, Benjamin meant his letters to Scholem to contain and elaborate revolutionary impulses which future acts of publication and reading could liberate.

If a single impression of Benjamin’s personality survives the volume of the *Correspondence*, it is the messianism of Benjamin’s will to read and write. His power to sustain this will and make it work is exceptional. There are few other examples of this determination to go on writing under such difficult circumstances and yet at so uncompromising a standard of depth and refinement. The fact that Benjamin was a professional critic does not itself explain the persistent high quality of his work. A relenting of standards would seem more likely, on the grounds that Benjamin now urgently needs to make a living.

This steadfastness of the impulse to write, as documented in this correspondence, comes into our lukewarm climate like an icy wind. *Here* we are inclined to authorize the right of melancholy to undo our productive impulses; *there* is Benjamin’s power to work creatively under harrowing circumstances of poverty, dislocation and uncertainty. Letter after letter registers his pain and despondency, no doubt, but also news of his writing, of new works achieved.

In this light it comes as no surprise that so much of this correspondence is concerned with the personality and work of Franz Kafka: Benjamin must have sustained himself through an ego-identification with Kafka. He saw in Kafka’s life a fragile material base like his own and, beyond this, an exemplary devotion to a literary and philosophical enterprise bent wholly on salvation. It is no exaggeration to say that Benjamin’s personal survival depended on his rejection of the false notes in Max Brod’s biography of Kafka. If *this* “amiable friend,” the author of “holy” works, were Kafka, then there existed no genuine precedent for the writer and personality which Benjamin wished to become. Indeed one of the great puzzles for him about Kafka is the very fact of his friendship with Brod.

22. Benjamin/Scholem, *Briefwechsel*, p. 163.

Brod's biography is reprehensible because of the attitude of bonhomie, the lack of reserve, toward its subject: this point returns precisely to that distance which Benjamin required from his friends and which his letters accomplished. Brod's text is enfeebled by "the author's striking lack . . . of a sense of thresholds and distances. . . . Brod misses Kafka's composure, his self-possession."<sup>23</sup>

Benjamin stresses Kafka's strength even while insisting on the fragility and negativity of his project which, like Benjamin's own, required protective seclusion. There is in Kafka's work something less than "wisdom"—for of wisdom "only the products of its decay are left."<sup>24</sup> But one of these products is "the rumor" about the true things, a rumor which requires intent listening. Kafka listened to tradition—and so *pace* Max Brod—he did not talk! "Conversation," wrote Kafka (though Benjamin did not know this), "takes away the importance, the seriousness, the truth from everything I think."<sup>25</sup> Benjamin's chief point about Kafka's truth, then, despite its great verisimilitude to modern experience, is its attachment to tradition. As a work which arises from an act of listening—not of seeing, for "he who listens strenuously does not see"—it is "essentially *solitary*."<sup>26</sup> Yet even from his solitary venue, Kafka did not fail to hear what the best observers, like Sir Arthur Eddington and Paul Klee, were able to see. "What is really and in an exact sense wildly incredible in Kafka is that this most recent world of experience was conveyed to him precisely by this mystical tradition."<sup>27</sup>

Scholem, of course, shows a lively interest in this discussion, but the degree of his involvement is different and altogether less personal. It makes for poorer criticism. Their key exchange, for example, turns on this question of Kafka's relation to the truth of tradition. Benjamin puts the matter in the form of a marvelous metaphor.

Kafka's real genius was that he attempted something entirely new: he sacrificed truth in order to cling to its transmissibility—to the Haggadic element. Kafka's writings are fundamentally parables. But it is their misery and their beauty that they had to become *more* than parables. They do not modestly lie at the feet of doctrine, the way that the Haggadah lies at the feet of the Halakah. Even as they have submitted, they unexpectedly raise up a mighty paw against it.<sup>28</sup>

(Haggadah refers to those legends or parables found in the Talmud; Halakah are strict deductions from Mosaic law issuing into binding precepts.)

This is Benjamin's essential view of Kafka, which Robert Alter finely paraphrases: "Kafka's parabolic fictions . . . are not, most essentially, dreams or

23. *Ibid.*, pp. 267, 268–69.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 272.

25. *Diaries, 1910–1913*, ed. Max Brod, trans. Joseph Kresh (New York: Schocken, 1948), p. 292.

26. Benjamin/Scholem, *Briefwechsel*, p. 271.

27. *Ibid.*,

28. *Ibid.*, p. 272.

theological allegories or enigmatic psychograms or prophetic myths, but a body of Aggadah in search of a Halakhah, lore in quest of Law, yet so painfully estranged from what it seeks that the pursuit can end in a pounce of destruction, the fictional rending the doctrinal.”<sup>29</sup>

What, now, is Scholem’s response to this reading? He cannot resist frank allegorization. “In my view the clergyman in the Cathedral [in Kafka’s *The Trial*] is the coded figure of a Halakist, a rabbi able to transmit, if not the Law, then its current traditions from a parable about it.”<sup>30</sup> Scholem insists that Kafka’s perspective is that of the Jewish mystic, despite Kafka’s failure to credit it. “The world of Kafka is the world of revelation. . . . The crux is the *impossibility of carrying out* what has been revealed; at this point a *correctly* understood theology and the key to Kafka’s world come together. . . . The *existence* of the secret law wipes out your interpretation. . . . *Here* you have gone too far in your exclusion of theology, tossing out baby with the bathwater.”<sup>31</sup> But in a poem on *The Trial* Scholem had also written, “Only your Nothingness is the experience / Which they can have of you.”<sup>32</sup> Benjamin seizes on this word. Nothingness is more than the failure to carry out revealed law; it points rather to irremediable absence, the lost “consistency of truth.”<sup>33</sup> And yet, in Kafka, this Nothingness is carried over into the irreality of fiction, which therein finds its truth. “I have tried to show,” Benjamin writes, “how Kafka has sought to feel his way to salvation on the reverse side of this ‘Nothingness’—if I can put it this way—on its lining.”<sup>34</sup> What is generally clear in this polemic is that, for Scholem, Benjamin has made Kafka too much the modern *writer* operating out of a certain secularized negative theology, and too little the Jew.

In the discussion between Benjamin and Scholem, the dispute about the theological bearing in Kafka is a matter of nuance and degree. Both their accounts are evidently more refined and accurate than the commentaries which they deplored—theological commentaries of the Prague school which read Kafka’s *Castle*, for example, as an allegory of “man’s search for God.”<sup>35</sup>

The Benjamin/Scholem correspondence on the question of Kafka’s attitude to truth is superior to a good deal of commentary today, even of the most meticulous epistemological kind. We say “superior” as meaning more faithful to Kafka’s *sometimes* plain account of the matter. The matter turns now on the question of the alleged principal negativity of truth in Kafka. Even so astute a reader as Manfred Frank still argues for its absolute negativity.<sup>36</sup> Truth is only of

29. Walter Benjamin, “The Aura of the Past,” in *Defenses of the Imagination: Jewish Writers and Modern Historical Crisis* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1977), p. 60.

30. Benjamin/Scholem, *Briefwechsel*, p. 159.

30. Benjamin/Scholem, *Briefwechsel*, p. 159.

31. *Ibid.*, pp. 157–158, 154.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 255.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 272.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 160.

35. *Ibid.*

36. See, e.g. “Ordo Inversus,” in *Geist und Zeichen* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1977), pp. 75–92.

what is not the case; it is, namely, the truth of untruth. Kafka's truth is the unutterableness of truth: whatever can be said is not true. But Benjamin does not put the point either so absolutely or, let it be added, so sophistically. For if this were the correct form of Kafka's relation to truth, then Kafka could rest without shame in the certitude of shortcoming and error. But untruth is not a source of certainty for Kafka.

It is true that Benjamin's highly confident sense of Kafka's "failure" can lead him to speak of the interpreter's *temptation* to valorize this failure. Thus, Benjamin writes, "When he [Kafka] was once certain of eventual failure, everything worked out for him *en route* as in a dream." But he goes on to add: "There is nothing more memorable than the fervor with which Kafka emphasized his failure."<sup>37</sup> The mood of fervor is hardly consistent with the mood of peace or, indeed, with the certainty of error.

This point is illustrated in *Das Schloss*, in which the relation of K. to the Castle can figure as a form of truth-seeking. Entry into the Castle is entry into the truth of things. In such a metaphor the chief quality of interpersonal relations is carried over into the relation of knower and known: the known is figured as *acknowledging* the knower. Where there is truth there is reciprocal recognition.

An early passage from *The Castle* speaks this way of K.'s serious acceptance of the quest and struggle for admission to the Castle: "So the Castle had acknowledged him as Land Surveyor. On the one hand this was unfavorable for him, since it showed that in the Castle everything essential about him was known, the balance of powers weighed and the challenge taken up with a smile."<sup>38</sup>

The metaphor restates the *failure* of knowledge in approximately these Faustian terms: All you know of the spiritual object is what you assume, it is not *me*. The truth condescends to be known not as it is in itself but in the manner appropriate to the human subject, a manner that does not jeopardize it. Truth can be known only as what it is not.

But this point, for Kafka, requires adjustment. The condescension of truth figures parabolically in *Das Schloss* as only one side of K.'s experience. "On the other hand," writes Kafka, the readiness of the Castle to take up the struggle "was also favorable, since it proved, in [K.'s] view, that they underestimated him and that he would have more freedom than at the start he had dared to hope. And if they thought that through this—intellectually-speaking, certainly superior—recognition of his land Surveyal, they would be able to keep him permanently terrified, they were mistaken. He had a slight shudder, but that was all."<sup>39</sup>

There is a Promethean, an altogether usurpatory feeling, too, to Kafka's parables in their very independence of Halakah. This is what Benjamin was the first, rightly, to perceive and speaks on behalf of his own intellectual daring.

37. Benjamin/Scholem, *Briefwechsel*, p. 273.

38. *Die Romane* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 1972), p. 464.

39. *Ibid.*