

Nietzsche's Nihilism in Walter Benjamin

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Abbreviations

- ADHL Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, transl. by Peter Preuss, Hackett, Indianapolis-Cambridge 1980.
- AP Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Mass.)-London 1999.
- B Walter Benjamin, *Briefe*, ed. by Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt 1978.
- C *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin*, trans. M. R. and E. M. Jacobson, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1994.
- FE Charles Baudelaire, *The Flowers of Evil*, transl. by James McGowan, Oxford University Press, Oxford-New York 1993.
- GBFA Bertolt Brecht, *Große kommentierte Berliner und Frankfurter Ausgabe*, ed. by Werner Hecht, Jean Knopf, Werner Mittenzei and Klaus Detlef Müller, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt 1994.
- GM Friedrich Nietzsche, *On Genealogy of Morality*, ed. by Keith Ansell-Pearson, trans. by Carol Diethe, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1994.
- GS Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt 1974–1989.

viii **Abbreviations**

- KG Friedrich Nietzsche, *Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, ed. by Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, De Gruyter, Berlin 1967–87.
- KS Friedrich Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke. Kritische Studienausgabe*, ed. by Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, De Gruyter, Berlin 1967–77.
- MECW *Marx Engels Collected Works* <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/cw>
- MEW Karl Marx Friedrich Engels, *Werke*, Dietz, Berlin 1973.
- OC Charles Baudelaire, *Oeuvres complètes*, Gallimard, Paris 1975.
- OFEI Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Future of four Educational Institutions*, Edinburgh-London 1910.
- SW Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, ed. by Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Mass.)-London 1999–2003.
- TSZ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*, trans. by Adrian Del Caro, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge-New York 2006.

Introduction

Walter Benjamin's analysis of modernity and modern society offers us a key with which we can interpret the communicative and cultural trends of our time. He tackles the major trends of the philosophy of his own time and analyses the social and cultural phenomena characterizing the birth of the modern age to develop a critical thinking that is able to deconstruct the myth of modernity: namely, the idea of progress. Benjamin rejects neither progress as a historical phenomenon nor the technical achievements that it brings, but he is against faith in progress as a new mythology. The best aspect of his philosophy is his method, his approach to the modern, and it allows us to apply some of his concepts to the present time. Benjamin's theological-political approach to modern society leads him to consider capitalism as a religion, 'perhaps the most extreme that ever existed'.¹ Liberalism, totally uncritically, sees capitalism as the 'last' (and unique) stage of historical development, growth as a necessary objective, and production forms as synonyms for civilization and culture. Yet capitalism is based on the disposition of guilt-debt, it is an aimless finality that reproduces endlessly the same profit mechanism.

Although vastly unsystematic, Benjamin's approach to modernity undoubtedly retains a theological character, embodied in his well-known thought image of the little hunchback hiding inside historical materialism. The question therefore relates to the possibility of conceiving, within this 'weak' (and perhaps desperate) messianic waiting, a political

perspective that would allow us to speak of an order of the profane ‘here and now’. If history is a ‘pile of debris’, a permanent catastrophe, then what represents politics—the order of the profane—can only be the ‘organizing of pessimism’. The question is whether in the ‘empty and homogeneous’ time of history, in the ‘meantime’ between creation and the promised, but not yet arrived, redemption, a space exists in which the profane becomes the possibility of being ‘organized’, despite its ephemeral and ‘catastrophic’ prospect. Only in this *dazwischen* (in between) is a political perspective possible. Benjamin builds a ‘secret agreement’ between Marx’s and Nietzsche’s thought systems, extrapolating some of their elements and then discarding them as empty husks. Marx’s system does not work without its immanence of historical necessity; and the thought of Nietzsche without the centrality of ‘bare life’ loses all vital creative impulses. The matrix of Nietzschean philosophy consists not only in the ‘destructive character’ of modernity and in ‘negative theology’, but above all in his ‘analogical’ thinking, which does not include any synthesis.

The spectre that Marx evokes in the *Manifesto* should be compared to another spectre that is more perturbing—the *Uncanny*, as Freud would call it—evoked by Nietzsche when he writes: ‘Nihilism stands at the door: whence comes this uncanniest of all guests?’ This study aims to consider whether in Benjamin’s ‘materialism’ is hidden a ‘perturbing Guest’; namely, Nietzsche’s nihilism. The conceptual core of the book consists in retracing the ‘eccentric’ route of Benjamin’s philosophical discourse in the representation of modernity as a ‘place of permanent catastrophe’, attempting to ‘overcome’ Nietzsche’s nihilism through the notion of a ‘weak’ messianic hope. At the same time, the book also focuses on the function of Nietzsche’s thought in relation to the theory of art, and particularly the theory of the avant-garde, of which Benjamin was the main proponent. The inherent ambiguity of Nietzsche’s thought caused an often irreconcilable diversity of interpretations. Not only has Nietzsche’s thought been interpreted and used differently by German and broader Western culture in the early twentieth century, but even today there is a multiplicity of interpretations. Among the many sources of Benjamin’s thought, the influence of Nietzsche’s nihilism has rarely been explored by literary criticism. Apart from a few essays by Helmuth Pfotenbauer² and Irving Wohlfarth³ (1988, 2005), I am aware of only two systematic

studies on the subject: one in Italian,⁴ which therefore did not have international resonance, and one in English, a book by James McFarland.⁵

The analysis of Benjamin's complex conceptual reception of Nietzsche needs a dual interpretative strategy: at first we must have an interpretation of Nietzsche's thought, and then we have to provide an interpretation of its influence on Benjamin. This seemingly obvious claim holds many difficulties, because the characteristic of both philosophers is to be ambiguous, therefore interpreting them implies the need to choose. And since the two thinkers are radical, these choices must necessarily be radical: namely, to accept some lines of interpretation and exclude others. Benjamin, who repeatedly dealt with the problem of translation, was perfectly aware that Nietzsche's complex and ambiguous thought could be misunderstood. In a note, written between 1935 and 1936, with the French title 'La traduction—le pour et le contre' (Translation—For and Against), he puts the problem of the difficulty of translating a philosophical text and, albeit paradoxically, the problem of the translation of some key words, some fundamental concepts of Nietzsche's philosophy:

When Nietzsche brilliantly misuses the German language, he is taking revenge on the fact that a German linguistic tradition never really came into being—except within the thin stratum of literary expression. He took double the liberties allowed by language, to rebuke it for permitting them. And misuse of the German language is, finally, a critique of the unformed state of the German person. How can this linguistic situation be translated into another?⁶

He draws the conclusion that translation is always and at the same time a comment; that is, an interpretation. Nietzsche 'forced' the German language to radicalize his concepts and used thought images,⁷ metaphors and icons that the reader must decipher; therefore, the translation of his key concepts is always an interpretation of his thought. Even if, in the context of a translation theory, this paradoxical claim of Benjamin's does not say anything new—in fact, the French used to say '*traducteur/tradit-eur*' (translator/traitor)—related to Nietzsche's philosophy his statement does acquire a particular significance. In fact, Nietzsche's thought images have multiple meanings. In German, *Übermensch*, for instance, means a person who claims to be 'above' or 'beyond' the 'normality': the word has a semantic spectrum that simultaneously indicates 'to overcome' and 'to

go beyond'. However, this duplicity and ambiguity of meaning become a clear difference of interpretation if we translate the term as 'superman' or 'beyond man' (or 'overman'). And this happens with the term *Rausch* too, which Nietzsche uses to express the feeling of the Dionysian, and on which Benjamin draws very often in his writings. The word *Rausch* has a very complex and wide semantic spectrum: in German it means at the same time drunkenness, intoxication, euphoria and rapture. If we choose the translation 'drunkenness/intoxication', we reduce the philosophy of Nietzsche (and Benjamin's literary theory) to writing and thinking caused by the use of wine, absinthe or drugs; while if we choose the translation 'euphoria/rapture', we aim to emphasize the Dionysian, philosophical, self-destructive and at the same time creative aspect of his thought.

The fact remains that speaking of Nietzsche in a language other than German—and that is what Benjamin meant in his allusive and esoteric claim—means having to make a choice: to discard some semantic values and to emphasize only one or two of those contained in the original term. In *One-Way Street*, in the section 'To the Planetarium', Benjamin writes:

The ancients' intercourse with the cosmos had been different: the *ecstatic trance* [Rausch]. For it is in this experience alone that we gain certain knowledge of what is nearest to us and what is remotest from us, and never of one without the other. This means, however, that man can be in ecstatic contact with the cosmos only communally. It is the dangerous error of modern men to regard this experience as unimportant and avoidable, and to consign it to the individual as the poetic *rapture* of starry nights.⁸

In the usual English version *Rausch* is translated as 'ecstatic trance' and 'rapture'. However, often in other passages of Benjamin's writing and in literary criticism the term is translated as 'intoxication'. The dual translation of this word implies a dual and different interpretation of Nietzsche's and Benjamin's thought. The duplicity and ambiguity of Nietzsche's thought caused a very different interpretation and reception of his philosophy. He has been considered either the 'godfather of Nazism' or a victim of manipulation and misunderstanding.⁹

At the beginning of the new millennium, we find ourselves again in a 'state of emergency'—in fact, it has become the norm. The West's con-

ceptual and institutional models are made in the midst of crises that stem from both outside and within. Faith in rationality and progress is no longer able to provide adequate responses to new material and intellectual needs. Nihilism really does seem to have become 'world politics'. It is now time to 'rethink' Benjamin in another way and to make an attempt to understand whether it is possible to define an 'order of the profane'. We must—above all—rethink his concept of history, to see whether it can provide a key to reading the most recent past and if it might contain elements that can help us to construct a theoretical apparatus, to understand the present, this 'space' that is in continuous transformation, where old categories are no longer required.

In his *Arcades Project* Benjamin uses some well-known figures (Baudelaire, Marx, Aragon, Proust, Blanqui and so on) as allegories to explain fundamental aspects of modernity. This book is built around these allegorical figures, and aims to explain both Benjamin's interpretation of Paris and the major trends of modernity through his interpretative criteria. Benjamin uses Baudelaire as a paradigm to criticize modernity, or, rather, to emphasize the dark side of the modern era, its immanent negative dimension. He considers Baudelaire to be the key figure of his era, because the French poet consciously lived through the great changes of modernity, and because in his poems he expressed the unease of the individual caused by these great transformations. Baudelaire puts explicitly the problem of poetry's audience and treats his verses as commodities. He is aware that the social function of the poet has undergone a transformation. Benjamin aims to write the 'prehistory of modernity', because he means that the search for origins can help us to understand both the communication mechanisms (in which images play a central role) and the false promises of happiness of modernity and its faith in progress. By extrapolating the significant objects as charged with allegorical meaning, Benjamin wants to write a history of dreams; that is, he aims to pinpoint the origin of the dream images. They derive, in fact, from the dreamer's lived experience of the past and from the image space (*Bildraum*), populated by images originating from advertising, cinema and the collective imagination. In this process he definitely prefers the moment of awakening to that of dreaming, and uses a technique very similar to that of Freud. Communication's images in the modern era are body-and-space

images: they are an expression of the unconscious that takes on itself fragments of bodily experience, instincts and memory traces, combined with the collective imagination. This oneiric language has to be deciphered, interpreted, 'read' like a book. The topography of the image space in the modern presents similarities with the topography of the metropolis: both are to be defined through memory, because of their temporary nature, their continuous changing.

The individual is constantly subjected to the shock of the new, which asserts itself as the destroyer of the already existing. The 'pile of debris' on which the melancholic look of Klee's famous angel falls is also the result of continuous renewal, which the modern brings with it, and corresponds to the systematic destruction of the already existing. Baudelaire's allegories (and also those of Benjamin) are comprehensible only if related to the epochal situation, in close contrast to the modern. And in this sense, the allegories express that radicalism and that destructive nature of which Benjamin talked regarding the 'productive impulse' unleashed by the same modernity. This process is directly connected to the conception of expressive means. The poet is far from being spontaneous, but—as Poe said (echoed by both Baudelaire and Benjamin)—he operates programmatically through the process of montage and 'splicing' in order to achieve his purpose. Producing art therefore requires the systematic destruction of the modern world's culture.

Benjamin deals with the 'mythology of the modern', a notion deriving from the psycho-anthropological arena, supported especially by 'eccentric' intellectuals, who were not progressive. His much evoked ambiguity lies in his interest in this kind of methodology, which he partly tries to use, and in his firm intention to fight against a 'mythological' interpretation of the modern on a conceptual level. Paradoxically, precisely when he 'goes' down into the 'subterranean', in the places of the mythical, of the magical, of the 'sacred', he practises his 'political' action: his incursions into these territories have the value of a political-cultural battle against those who would interpret the phenomena of modernity as 'inexplicable'. In his essay on Aragon and the Surrealists, mainly in his *Arcades Project*, Benjamin vehemently denies the possibility of interpreting the contemporary epoch by the myth. The mythological key is, according to him, an insufficient interpretative key, because it is linked to the oneiric element

and because it is not capable of resolving the ‘inexplicability’ of visible phenomena in current society.

Benjamin’s anthropological writings remain fragmentary, but reveal a very precise conceptual strategy. The access to the underworld, to the subterranean realm of the metropolis, is drawn from Greek mythology. That is to say that traces of the ancient city—of its ruins—are to be found, metaphorically, underneath the modern metropolis, and that layered traces, archetypes, dreams and traumas of the ancient and the primitive man are to be found in the human psyche. Psychoanalysis itself relies on a mythical iconography. The icon of the labyrinth unmistakably emerges from such imagery. Benjamin’s concern is wholly directed at emphasizing the cunning with which it is necessary to venture into the labyrinth and manage oneiric materials without attempting to build a ‘mythology of the modern’. The mythical elements serve to establish anthropological archetypes; as Bachofen claims, they are symbolic expressions and not prehistorical realities. Benjamin aims to make the ‘fields’ of myth ‘arable by reason’, he wants to ‘clear’ the ‘primeval forest’ of mythical thinking, ‘where, until now, only madness has reigned’, with the ‘whetted axe of reason’.¹⁰

Benjamin tried to determine the threshold between a ‘critical’ and a ‘mythical’ thinking. His polemic against the ‘mythology of modern’ is a result of the fight between mythical and religious thought that has characterized the Jewish tradition. Yet the principal characteristic of Benjamin’s ‘critical thought’ consists in wanting to assign a ‘political’ value to this choice. The transition from a mythical violence to violence divine or revolutionary, which Benjamin handles in his essay *Critique of Violence*, is the political decision to found a justice based on the Logos and not the instincts of ‘bare life’. He does not confer on Nietzsche’s nihilism a ‘natural’ or physical meaning; rather, he refers the ‘bare life’ to its ephemeral character and its contrastive relation to the Kingdom of God, to eternity. Nietzsche is part of the constellation referring to this archetypal and ‘mythical’ order that must be overcome in the name of a theological-political dispositif. Benjamin’s process is involved in this controversy, leading to the formulation of the allegory of the angel of history.

Notes

1. SW 1, 288.
2. See Helmut Pfotenhauer, *Benjamin und Nietzsche*, in Burckhard Lindner (ed.), *'Links hatte noch alles sich zu enträtseln ...': Walter Benjamin im Kontext*, Frankfurt a. M. 1978, pp. 100–126.
3. See Irving Wohlfarth, *Resentment begins at home: Nietzsche, Benjamin and the University (1981)*, in Gary Smith (ed.), *On Walter Benjamin. Critic, Essays and Recollections*, MIT, Cambridge (Mass.) 1988, pp. 224–259; Id., *Nihilismus kontra Nihilismus. Walter Benjamins 'Weltpolitik' aus heutiger Sicht*, in Bernd Witte – Mauro Ponzi (ed.), *Theologie und Politik. Walter Benjamin ein Paradigma der Moderne*, E. Schmidt V., Berlin, 2005, pp. 107–136.
4. Mauro Ponzi, *Organizzare il pessimismo. Benjamin e Nietzsche*, Lithos, Roma 2007.
5. James McFarland, *Constellation. Friedrich Nietzsche & Walter Benjamin in the Now-Time of History*, Fordham University Press, New York 2013.
6. SW 3, 250.
7. 'The thought-image (*Denkbild*)—a word used by Benjamin as a kind of generic term for his own shorter text-pieces—can be seen as lying at the heart of his work on thinking-in-images (*Bilddenken*)' (Sigrid Weigel, *Body- and Image-Space. Re-reading Walter Benjamin*, Routledge, London- New York 1996, p. 48.
8. SW 1, 486 (my emphasis).
9. See Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1950; Heinz Frederick Peters, *Zarathustra's Sister: The Case of Elisabeth and Friedrich Nietzsche*, Crown, New York 1977; Alexander Kostka – Irving Wohlfahrt (ed.), *Nietzsche and 'an architecture of our minds'*, Getty Research Inst. for the History of Art and the Humanities, Los Angeles 1999; Golomb, Jacob – Wistrich, Robert (ed.), *Nietzsche, Godfather of Fascism? On the Uses and Abuses of Philosophy*, Princeton University Press, Princeton-Oxford 2002; Carol Diethe, *Nietzsche's Sister and the Will to Power: A Biography of Elisabeth Förster- Nietzsche*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana 2003; Ernst Bertram, *Nietzsche. Attempt at a Mythology*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana-Chicago 2009; Ashley

Woodward (ed.), *Interpreting Nietzsche. Reception and Influence*, Continuum, London-New York 2011; Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen, *American Nietzsche. A History of an Icon and his Ideas*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago-London 2012.

10. 'To cultivate fields where, until now, only madness has reigned. Forge mead with the whetted axe of reason, looking neither right nor left so as not to succumb to the horror that beckons from deep in the primeval forest. Every ground must at some point have been made arable by reason, must have been *cleared of the undergrowth of delusion and myth*. This is to be accomplished here for the terrain of the nineteenth century' (AP, 456 s. [NI, 4]. My emphasis).