Walter Benjamin’s Exegesis of Stuff

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Walter Benjamin, although unable to find a job within academia during his lifetime, has become one of the most formidable and influential scholars of the twentieth century. This is not to say that the question of what constitutes his scholarly legacy is altogether clear. His few longer works and numerous short pieces leave a fragmentary and inconsistent record with no definitive guidelines for its interpretation.

One of the most prominent contests over Benjamin’s legacy involves the dispute between theological and Marxist appropriations of his work. On the theological side of the debate, Gershom Scholem has argued that later interpreters have ignored the mystical strains in Benjamin’s thought:

It is…appropriate to point to aspects of Benjamin’s person and thought that are neglected by his current interpreters, or cast aside embarrassedly. To these belong, and perhaps above all else, his ties to the mystical tradition and to a mystical experience which nevertheless was a far cry from the experience of God, proclaimed by so many oversimplifying minds as the only experience deserved to be called mystical. Benjamin knew that mystical experience is many layered, and it was precisely this many-layeredness that played so great a role in his thinking and in his productivity.¹

While Scholem could never completely ignore Benjamin’s materialistic tendencies, he did insist that a strictly Marxist reading was unacceptably narrow. For Scholem, Benjamin’s thought was far too complicated and multifaceted to be categorized as the work of an orthodox Marxist. Scholem pointed to works such as “On Language as Such and the Languages of Man” and “Agesilaus Santander” as evidence that Benjamin was not, like many of his later interpreters, embarrassed by theological language.

The very range of subjects treated by Benjamin creates the possibilities for these diverging interpretations. Like the Bible, there is most likely some quotation or fragment of Benjamin’s writings that can be used to further almost any argument. Thus, while Scholem points to the more theologically speculative writings, other critics are able to cite “The Author as Producer” and “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” to support a Marxist portrayal. Indeed, Scholem’s interpretation was challenged by another of Benjamin’s friends, Theodore W. Adorno. Adorno claimed that theology is that, “which Benjamin is bent on faithfully and radically translating into the secular.”²

Jonathan Boyarin warns against trying to make Benjamin a consistent guide by showing him to be a consistent Marxist, consistent theologian, or a non-contradictory synthesis of the two:

In criticism, we are warned against the desire for a rebbe, a master whose dicta are all citable and

consistent. This desire has led critics to attempt a purifying identification of Benjamin as either a Marxist or as a ‘theologian,’ or more imaginatively, as a perfect transcendent incorporation of both of these inspirations. The last option is hard for me to resist. But to spend too much of our passion in wonder at his ability to predict the crisis of his time might lead us to miss the clues he could offer us to facing the crisis of our own.\(^3\)

The challenge facing the contemporary interpreter is how to reconcile Marxist and theological strands without creating a new totalizing system that explains away the contradictory and fragmentary nature of Benjamin’s thought. One of the ways to accomplish this is to ask whether there might be a lesson in the inconsistent nature of Benjamin’s body of work. It may not be an accident that it is so difficult to systematize Benjamin. After all, fragmentation was not only a characteristic of Benjamin’s work, it was one of his central ideas.

This fragmentation proscribes any clear-cut reading of Benjamin either as orthodox Marxist or theologian, or even more importantly, it would make impossible any reading that attempted to separate the two strands. But this is not because Benjamin succeeded in affecting any sort of dialectical synthesis between theology and Marxism as much as because he developed a conception of materiality that rendered any separation of the two obsolete.

In this paper, I will interpret Benjamin’s materialism in a way that does not circumscribe the theological dimensions of his thought. To do this, I will focus on the strategies by which he sought to find theological meaning in physical, concrete, ordinary things, what I have called his exegesis of stuff. Things themselves took on a value for Benjamin in a manner that made him an even more profoundly materialistic thinker than most Marxists.

After reviewing the various strategies Benjamin employed to interpret material objects, I will then conclude with a discussion of the implications of this materialism for Benjamin’s Messianic thought. Benjamin was drawn to the Messianic implications of both Marxist and theological systems. However, the ultimate fulfillment of any Messianic vision was always undercut by Benjamin’s stress on the incomplete, decadent, and irrevocable nature of modernity. This is not to say that the Messianic visions of each of these systems were not important to Benjamin, only that he never expected them to actually come.

“On Language as Such and the Languages of Man”

In his “On Language as Such and the Languages of Man,” Benjamin wrote one of his most unashamedly theological works. This essay outlines a theory of language which, through an original reading of the Book of Genesis, gives ontological priority to the creative word of God. But this ontological priority does not in any way favor a divine, transcendent realm outside of the material world. Citing the fact that God created things, Benjamin lends theological weight to the things themselves. Benjamin is clear in his rejection of both bourgeois and mystical conceptions of language:

The proper name is the communion of man with the creative word of God. (Not the only one, however, man knows a further linguistic communion with God’s word.) Through the word, man is bound to the language of things. The human word is the name of things. Hence, it is no longer conceivable, as the bourgeois view of language maintains, that the word has an accidental relation to its object, that it is a sign

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for things (or knowledge of them, as agreed by some convention). Language never gives mere signs.4

Here Benjamin is rejecting the emphasis on the arbitrariness of the sign found in Saussurean linguistics. The word does not exist apart from the world of things, but is intricately bound to it. The remainder of the passage proceeds to reject the mystical theory of language on similar grounds: “However, the rejection of bourgeois linguistic theory by mystical theory likewise rests on a misunderstanding. For according to mystical theory, the word is simply the essence of the thing. That is incorrect, because the thing in itself has no word, being created from God’s word and known in its name by a human word.”5 Both bourgeois and mystical theories underestimate the importance of things. The former misses the mark because of its emphasis on the arbitrariness of the sign. The latter is flawed because it overestimates the ability of a word to penetrate to an essence of a thing whereas the thing is irreducible to any word or essence other than itself.

Benjamin advocates a conception of language which would reject both of these poles, one in which: “Thus fertilized, it aims to give birth to the language of things themselves, from which in turn, soundlessly, in the mute magic of nature, the word of God shines forth.”6 By having the word of God shine forth in the language of things themselves, Benjamin locates theological inquiry in the material world. The problem with human language is not its inability to represent what is too abstract, or non-sensuous, or idealistic, or metaphysical. Rather, it is precisely the opposite: human language cannot do justice to the diving language because it is not material enough. Language is incapable of adequately representing a thing in all of its material complexity. In Benjamin’s own example, the word “lamp” can only communicate the language-lamp, not the lamp itself.

Benjamin contradistinguishes this distance between lamp and language-lamp with a magical communion and immediacy between name and thing. Quoting Fredrich Muller, Benjamin states: ‘Man of the earth, step near; in gazing, grow more perfect, more perfect through the word.’ This combination of contemplation and naming implies the communicating muteness of things toward the word-language of man, which receives them in name…”7 However, this immanent relationship between the name-language of man and the nameless language of things is undermined radically by the Fall. If human naming always “...fall[es] short of the creative word of God,”8 the expulsion from paradise further deteriorates the connection between the language of things and the language of knowledge in name.

After the Fall, which, in making language mediate, laid the foundation for its multiplicity, linquistic confusion could be only a step away. Once men had injured the purity of name, the turning away from that contemplation of things in which their language passes into man needed only be completed in order to deprive men of the common foundation of an already shaken spirit of language.9

Therefore, while Benjamin locates the origin of language in the “immediacy of communication of the concrete,”10 he also recognizes that history after the fall reinforces the distinction between the fully cognizant paradisiacal state of language and

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5 Ibid., 69.
6 Ibid., 69.
7 Ibid., 70.
8 Ibid., 70.
9 Ibid., 72.
10 Ibid., 72.
the human word. As history progresses, language continues to
decay as it undergoes repeated interpretations and translations.
The human word comes to lack concrete signification and lies in
a fallen, fragmented, mediated relationship to things.

“On the Mimetic Faculty”

In 1933, Benjamin, who was by then well into his
“Marxist phase,” attempted to rework his theological insights
into a more historical analysis. In a letter to Scholem, Benjamin
writes that his brief essay “On the Mimetic Faculty” is an
addendum to the larger “On Languages as Such,” an addendum
“…with a turn in our old tendency to show the ways in which
magic has been vanquished.” Still attempting to undermine
Saussurean linguistics but without recourse to “pure language,”
Benjamin anchored human language in a more anthropological
and naturalistic perspective. Whereas “On Language as Such”
drew on the Book of Genesis to imagine an Adamic language,
“On the Mimetic Faculty” sought an original language in an
exotic prehistory.

“To read what was never written.” Such reading
is the most ancient: reading before all languages,
from the entrails, the stars, or dances. Later the
mediating link of a new kind of reading, of runes
and hieroglyphs, came into use. Its seems fair to
suppose that these were the stages by which the
mimetic gift, which was once the foundation of
occult practices gained admittance to writing
and language.

Benjamin points back to the pre-rational world’s perception of
objects (through sounds, intuition, visual signs, and memory) as
the origin for the construction of language. This view was
anticipated in “On Language as Such,” where Benjamin
expressed an interest in Herder’s idea that “human beings invent
language themselves from the sounds of the living nature.”
Benjamin’s earlier reference to Herder, which stresses “primitive
man’s” magical correspondences with objects, were important to
his later thinking insofar as these correspondences awakened the
mimetic faculty in man.

Contrary to an Enlightenment rational conception of
knowledge, Benjamin revitalizes devalued atavistic models of
perception and psychic states such as the occult, madness, and
pre-animistic myth. As history unfolds, the “ancients” more
immediate connection with objects attenuates, and “the
observable world of modern man contains only minimal residues
of the magical correspondences and analogies that were familiar
to ancient peoples.” According to Susan Handelman,
Benjamin saw history and progress as degrading and corrupting
the immediacy between man and things. The imperfect and
fragmentary nature of human language is linked to the
breakdown between the original correspondence of word and
thing.

In both “On Language as Such” and “On the Mimetic
Faculty,” Benjamin showed a predilection toward an original
esoteric language of things and a contemplation of the obdurate
world. In this world, artifice, concretion, and things themselves
were texts to be read. For Benjamin, the notion of language

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13 Benjamin, “On Language as Such and the Languages of Man,” v.1
16 “On the Mimetic Faculty,” 334.
extends far beyond verbal texts: “the languages of things and images of history—as if one could glimpse the ‘absolutely concrete’ i.e. ‘monads,’” miniature whole worlds. Or as if by employing and activating esoteric language oneself, some of this truth might be mediated and expressed. In his own way, Benjamin tried to bring together philosophy of language and philosophy of history.18 In his critique of Enlightenment, Benjamin rejected notions of progress in favor of a picture of modern decadence. But paradoxically, he turned to contemporary culture, commodities, the spaces and structures of modernity to find traces of meaning. As Handelman points out, Benjamin and Scholem were both concerned with rescuing and redeeming history, hearing the voice which have been muffled, and exploiting the radical potential in those lost images and cries.19 But as I have been arguing in this paper, the question of redemption would have to engage the world of material objects and the problem of decadent human language. The question then is how does one go about engaging in this materialistic mode of theological inquiry. How can one get at this language of things themselves in which word of God shines forth? How does Walter Benjamin create an exegesis of stuff?

Benjamin’s Materialism

To answer the question of how Benjamin attempts an exegesis of material objects, I have identified four interrelated, and distinctly Benjimianian modes of scholarship (There are, of course, others, but these typify Benjamin’s interest in material objects). These modes of scholarship are: (1) flâneur; (2) collector; (3) ragpicker; (4) physiognomist. All four of these approaches are significant to Benjamin’s exegesis of stuff as they represent strategies for reading and evaluating material objects.

This first type of scholar, the flâneur, is someone who wanders aimlessly around urban spaces, observing and appreciating the scenery and architecture of the city. The flâneur does not look for famous landmarks that attract tourists and visitors, but is rather attracted to the details and minuta of urban life:

For the masses as well as the flâneur, glossy enameled corporate nameplates are as good a wall-decoration as an oil painting is for the homebody sitting in his living room, or even better; the fire walls are their desks, the newspaper kiosk their library, letterboxes their bronze statuettes, benches their boudoir, and the café terrace the bay window from which they can look down on their property.20

The second type, the collector, is someone who collects things not only for their utilitarian value, but simply because they are things. For example, in his essay on book collecting, Benjamin dismisses the idea that books are collected only to be read. He advocates instead the nonreading of books:

And the nonreading of books, you will object, should be characteristic of collectors? This is news to me, you may say. It is not news at all. Experts will bear me out when I say that it is the oldest thing in the world. SUFFICE IT TO QUOTE THE ANSWER WHICH ANATOLE FRANCE GAVE TO A PHILOLISTE WHO ADMIRE HIS LIBRARY AND THEN FINISHED WITH THE STANDARD QUESTION, ‘AND YOU HAVE READ ALL THESE BOOKS, MONSIEUR FRANCE?’

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18 Ibid., 87.
19 Ibid., 8.
‘Not one-tenth of them. I don’t suppose you eat off of your Sevres china every day?’”21

The collector is someone who appreciates the binding of books, their publication dates, rare editions, and the like not because any of this has any effect on the intellectual content of the book, but because the collector is interested in the book as a material object. By “reading” the outside of a book, the collector inverts the privilege of inside over outside, appreciating the meaning on the material surface of the object.

The third type, the ragpicker, is related to the collector, but with the particular feature that the ragpicker sifts through refuse and garbage. This pile of refuse is filled with “rags of speech” and “verbal scraps.” Words themselves can become things that are thrown in the trash, and which the ragpicker, in his isolation, is the only one collecting.

And if we wish to gain a clear picture of him in the isolation of his trade, what we will see is a ragpicker, at daybreak, picking up rags of speech and verbal scraps with his stick and tossing them, grumbling and growling, a little drunk, into his cart, not without letting one or another of those faded cotton remnants—‘humanity,’ ‘inwardness,’ or ‘absorption’—flutter derisively in the wind. A ragpicker, early on, at the dawn of the day of the revolution.22

The fourth and final type of Benjaminian scholar, the physiognomist, measures surfaces to evaluate the character of a thing. For example, a physiognomist would attempt to assess someone’s personality through their physical features. Unlike much of the Western scholastic tradition which privileges the truth within and discards the manifest appearance, the physiognomist is interested in the surface, the shell, the outside boundary and shape of a thing:

The period, the region, the craftsmanship, the former ownership—for a true collector, the whole background of an item adds up to a magic encyclopedia whose quintessence is the fate of his object. In this circumscribed area, then, it may be surmised how the great physiognomists the world of things—and collectors are the physiognomists of the world of things—turn into interpreters of fate. One has only to watch a collector handle the objects in his glass case. As he holds them in his hands, he seems to be seeing through them into their distant past, as though inspired.23

The physiognomic approach allows one not only to measure, but to read and interpret the material surfaces of things. For example, in the following passage from a radio address on the work of ETA Hoffman, Benjamin explicitly contracts the material specificity of physiognomy against that which floats in mid-air:

Like many other great writers, he found the extraordinary not somehow floating freely in mid-air, but in quite specific people, things, houses, objects, and streets. As you may have heard, people who judge their character, their profession, or even their fate by the shape of their head, are known as physiognomists. In this sense, Hoffmann was not so much a seer as someone who looked at people and things. And

Revalorization of the Everyday and Insignificant

The flâneur, collector, ragpicker, and physiognomist all focus attention on an untraditional assortment of things, at least with regard to the conventions of scholarly inquiry. To this end, they undermine traditional or normative aesthetic hierarchies. Instead of valuing the great, extraordinary masterpiece, these approaches focus on what is ordinary; what is usually ignored by the critic or scholar.

For education in art (as Proust explains very well at various points) is not best promoted by the contemplation of ‘masterpieces.’ Rather, the child or the proletarian who is educating himself acknowledges, rightly, very different works as masterpieces from those selected by the collector. Such pictures have for him a very transitory but solid meaning, and a strict criterion is necessary only with regard to the topical words that relate to him, his work, and his class.25

On this level, Benjamin’s Marxist class-consciousness extends to his interpretations of things. The Marxist revalorization of the proletarian corresponds to a revalorization of all aesthetic hierarchies. Everything (literally) can be and should be interpreted and criticized.

But by endowing the insignificant and marginal with new importance, Benjamin only complicates and problematizes the task of interpretation. The fact that the everyday world demands interpretation means that it can no longer be taken for granted. The everyday world is seen in an entirely new light, one in which what was previously familiar now appears unfamiliar.

For histrionic or fanatical stress on the mysterious side of the mysterious takes us no further; we penetrate the mystery only to the degree that we recognize it in the everyday world, by virtue of a dialectical optic that perceives the everyday as impenetrable, the impenetrable as everyday. The most passionate investigation of telepathic phenomena, for example, will not teach us half as much about reading (which is an eminently telepathic process) as the profane illumination of reading will teach us about telepathic phenomena. And the most passionate investigation of the hashish trance will not teach us half as much about thinking (which is eminently narcotic) as the profane illumination of thinking will teach us about the hashish trance. The reader, the thinker, the loiterer, the flâneur, are types of illuminati just as much as the opium eater, the dreamer, the ecstatic.26

In this passage, Benjamin juxtaposes the reader, thinker, loiterer, and flâneur against the opium eater, dreamer, and ecstatic, claiming that the former are just as much types of illuminati as the latter. Of course, the latter represent truly exceptional, often religiously significant, types of behavior. In these behaviors, illumination is something remarkable and demands a break from the everyday world.

But for Benjamin, the potential for illumination is not restricted to a sacred space set apart from the ordinary and

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everyday profane world. Rather, his emphasis on the impenetrability of the everyday makes the understanding of ordinary material objects one of the most elusive forms of illumination. By privileging the reader, thinker, loiterer, and flâneur, Benjamin seeks modes of inquiry that will pursue a profane illumination that is able to see the significance of the insignificant, the centrality of the marginal, and the value of debris. “It resides in a profane illumination, a materialistic, anthropological inspiration, to which hashish, opium, or whatever else can give an introductory lesson. (But a dangerous one; and the religious lesson is stricter.)”

Materialism and the Surplus of Meaning

The elusiveness of profane illumination is further complicated by the fact that it is impossible to fully exhaust the meaning of even a single thing. Each thing has an infinite specificity that allows for endless interpretation. In “A Berlin Chronicle,” Benjamin discusses the way in which memory can be compared to an unfolding fan.

He who has once begun to open the fan of memory never comes to the end of its segments. No image satisfies him, for he has seen that it can be unfolded, and only in its folds does the truth reside—that image, that taste, that touch for whose sake all this has been unfurled and dissected; and now remembrance progresses from small to smallest details, from the smallest to the infinitesimal, while that which it encounters in these microcosms grows ever mightier.

The insatiability quality of memory can be extended to any task of interpretation. All things, when explored in their endless specificity, open up new folds and details that call for new interpretations.

This is particularly true to the extent that human beings are restricted to using language to interpret things. They must therefore contend with the problem of the “overnaming” of things as described in “On Language as Such and the Languages of Man.”

But how much more melancholy it is to be named not from one blessed paradisiacal language of names, but from the hundred languages of man, in which name has already withered, yet which, according to God’s pronouncement, have knowledge of things. Things have no proper names except in God. For in his creative word, God called them into being, calling them by their proper names. In the language of men, however, they are overnamed.

Of course, in the pure language of things, no such overnaming would exist. But the realities of our fallen state force humanity to contend with a surplus of names as the proper name is obscured by language.

Procrastination and Messianism

In a sense then, Benjamin longs for a Messiah to redeem language, to restore access to an undistorted knowledge of things, to resolve all inconsistencies, and to repair all fissures and fragmentations. However, his exegesis of stuff, his emphasis on the significance of the insignificant, and the surplus

27 Ibid., 209.
29 Benjamin, “On Language as Such and the Languages of Man,” v.1, 73.
of meaning create an impossible task of interpretation which
delays any final Messianic resolution.

There is no practical way that one can interpret every
individual thing without systematizing and ordering them into
some kind of unity. But as we have seen, Benjamin rejects any
attempts at system and order. The fragmented nature of things
and Benjamin’s insistence on interpreting jagged material
surfaces means that the sum of the parts will always be greater
than the whole. There is no way, barring the appearance of the
Messianh, to get all of the things to fit together.

An ability to account for the meaning of everything is
essential for any possibility of redemption. The problem of the
significance of the insignificant in the everyday world also
complicates history. To redeem history would mean to
recognize the importance of every occurrence, not only major
events:

A chronicler who recites events without
distinguishing between major and minor ones
acts in accordance with the following truth:
nothing that has ever happened should be
regarded as lost for history. To be sure, only a
redeemed mankind receives the fullness of its
past—which is to say, only for a redeemed
mankind has its past become citable in all its
moments. Each moment it has lived becomes a
citation a l’order du jour—and that day is
Judgment Day.

By claiming that nothing should be regarded as lost for
history, Benjamin presents the historian with the impossible task
of collecting everything. But with the endless march of time,
things keep coming. The onrush of history and modernity make
it impossible to make sense of the tidal wave of meaning, and
delays the appearance of the Messiah. Any ultimate resolution

or totality is constantly being pushed backwards by the pile of
debris created by things.

In one amazing passage, Benjamin depicts this image of
a pile of debris delaying redemption:

A Klee painting named ‘Angelus Novus’ shows
an angel looking as though he is about to move
away from something he is freely contemplating.
His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his
wings are spread. This is how one pictures the
angel of history. His face is turned toward the
past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he
sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling
wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his
feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken
the dead, and make whole what has been
smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise;
it has got caught in his wings with such violence
that the angel can no longer close them. This
storm irresistibly propels him into the future to
which his back is turned, while the pile of debris
before him grows skyward. This storm is what
we call progress.

For Benjamin, the Messianic vision is always too late or
ephemerl. If one were to somehow redeem history by
accounting for all events and things (a task which would be
impossible), the time it would take to achieve such an
illumination would render it obsolete by the time it was realized.
Any moment of illumination is immediately destroyed by the
picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an
image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized
and is never seen again.”

31 Benjamin, Ibid., 258.
32 Benjamin, Ibid., 255.
In his announcement for a journal which never materialized, Benjamin gave theological meaning to this ephemerality:

After all, according to a legend in the Talmud, the angels—who are born anew every instant in countless numbers—are created in order to perish and to vanish into the void, once they have sung their hymn in the presence of God. It is to be hoped that the name of the journal will guarantee it contemporary relevance, which is the only true sort.\textsuperscript{33}