Introduction: Walter Benjamin and Religious Studies

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More and more often there is embarrassment all around when the wish to hear a story is expressed. It is as if something that seemed inalienable to us, the securest among our possessions were taken from us: the ability to exchange experiences.¹

In 1999 Pulitzer Prize winning novelist Larry McMurtry, author of Lonesome Dove and Terms of Endearment, published a memoir that might serve as an index of the degree to which Walter Benjamin has entered the consciousness of American literary culture in recent years. McMurtry titled his memoir Walter Benjamin at the Dairy Queen, a title that both evokes the German literary critic’s name and, by way of its surprising juxtaposition of elements (Walter Benjamin and the Dairy Queen), also enacts a particularly Benjaminian methodology. Benjamin celebrated such odd juxtapositions. Bringing together apparently unrelated images, he held, could produce a shock effect that would result in a change of perception on the part of the viewer or reader who would then see each element in a new light. In this way Benjamin hoped to stir us out of our acceptance of things as they are, unleashing the possibilities of reimagining our world in redemptive ways.

But McMurtry’s book goes even further down the Benjaminian path. The memoir opens with a scene of the author sitting in a Dairy Queen on a hot summer day in Archer City, Texas, sipping a lime Dr. Pepper and reading Benjamin’s 1936 essay “The Storyteller,” which he tells us is nominally a study of or reflection on the stories of Nikolay Leskov, but really (I came to feel, after several rereadings) an examination, and a profound one, of the growing obsolescence of what might be called practical memory and the consequent diminution of the power of oral narrative in our twentieth-century lives.²

The conjunction of Walter Benjamin’s essay and the Dairy Queen, we read, prompted McMurtry to reflect upon “practical memory” in his west Texas setting. There, Dairy Queens were both the gathering places where modern storytellers might meet to exchange experiences and a sign of the degree to which the West had been settled in only a few generations. Rather than proceeding chronologically, or moving through important events in the author’s life, the memoir instead emerges from associative links between Benjamin’s essay, thoughts on the experiences and stories of McMurtry’s grandparents (who were among the first settlers in west Texas), and reflections on McMurtry’s own experiences with books and the western landscape. Past and present are brought to bear on each other, exposing common concerns and expressing a dimension of the American experience that traditional forms of history would tend to overlook.

There is a sense, in reading McMurtry’s book, of exploring historical experience from the “inside.” What might seem unimportant to the historian appears to be terribly weighty to the lives of everyday people, who do their best to make sense

of their world and their place in it. One is left feeling that the
everyday has depth, that what matters is not so much the grand
events of history but the daily activities of people going through
their lives. As a student of American religious history, I am
struck by how much the historiography of religion in America
could benefit from this realization. As important as grand events
and historical figures are, the standard narratives of American
religious history often miss the hopes and frustrations, the trials
and joys, that have made up the experiences of life for the mass
of the American population. Moreover, the standard narrative
trajectory is unable to take into account the fact that what
appears to be settled from our perspective, looking backwards,
was never settled for those who lived in the midst of changing
times. The future was always a possibility for them, a time when
their hopes might be fulfilled. A different conception of history
and a different mode of representation might be needed to get at
the experiences that make up everyday religious worlds. Walter
Benjamin spoke to this situation in the following way:
“Historicism contents itself with establishing a causal connection
between various moments in history. But no fact that is a cause
is for that very reason historical. It became historical posthumously, as it were, through events that may be separated
from it by thousands of years.”

What would a history of
religion in America look like that took these issues seriously?

The concerns raised by Larry McMurtry’s memoir are
just one aspect of the far-reaching thought of German
philosopher and literary critic Walter Benjamin. This special
issue of Epoché is dedicated to exploring some of the ways that
Benjamin’s work might enrich the academic study of religion.

Walter Benjamin’s work achieved little notice among
scholars until long after his death by suicide on the Franco-
Spanish border in 1940. Nor was it terribly influential during his

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surprising when we consider the profound role that religion plays in Benjamin’s work.

Jürgen Habermas has called Benjamin’s “early” work (through about 1925) “redemptive criticism” due to its metaphysical and seemingly mystical concerns. In essays like “On Language as Such and the Language of Man,” “Critique of Violence,” and “Goethe’s Elective Affinities,” Benjamin respectively constructed a theory of language from the creation story in Genesis, explored the relationship between human law and divine justice, and argued that the proper role of the critic was to “redeem” a work of art by tearing its “truth content” from its “material content.” According to Richard Wolin, whose writing has helped to introduce Benjamin to American audiences, most interest in Benjamin’s work since the 1960s has tended to focus on his later Marxist writing, preferring to ignore the earlier “mystical” material. Yet, Wolin asserts, to dismiss Benjamin’s theological concerns is to misunderstand the important role that they played even in his later materialist work. Indeed, in the last piece that Benjamin wrote, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” he revealed the theological underpinnings of his entire materialist project:

The story is told of an automaton constructed in such a way that it could play a winning game of chess, answering each move of an opponent with a countermove. A puppet in Turkish attire and with a hookah in its mouth sat before a chessboard placed on a large table. A system of mirrors created the illusion that this table was transparent from all sides. Actually, a little hunchback who was an expert chess player sat inside and guided the puppet’s hand by means of strings. One can imagine a philosophical counterpart to this device. The puppet called “historical materialism” is to win all the time. It can easily be a match for anyone if it enlists the services of theology, which today, as we know, is wizened and has to keep out of site.

This was surely no ordinary “historical materialism,” as Benjamin’s friends and colleagues Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Gershom Scholem knew. He drew as much inspiration from the Kabbalah as he did from Marx, if not more, and his vision was directed more toward a messianic time of redemption than to the revolution of the proletariat. His Kabbalistic orientation led him to see the world as a fallen place that was nevertheless shot full with sparks of truth and redemptive potential. And history for Benjamin was not a story of progressive improvement, but a trail of catastrophes moving farther and farther from an original paradise.

The initial catastrophic moment was the biblical story of the fall. According to Benjamin’s reading of Genesis, language played a central role in both creation and the fall from paradise. It was through language that humans were separated from the divine. At the same time, however, language was the medium through which the human and the divine were related. Humans, on Benjamin’s reading, were given the capacity to name and were therefore responsible for completing the work of creation by translating the mute language of things—of the world—into names so that they could be recognized. The fall from this paradisiacal state, however, tore the original immediate connection between language and knowledge apart. The multitude of resulting human languages were henceforth separated from the unity of creation and divine knowledge.

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Name was divided from object, sign from signifier, and a gap separated human knowledge from divine truth. The original link between human and divine language, however, meant that through language there still existed the potential to redeem creation and return the unity of paradise before the fall. As Richard Wolin notes, redemptive criticism’s goal of returning to utopian origins need not imply the reestablishment of a pristine, original state of things; but according to a more dynamic reading, redemption signifies a return to a content merely *implicit* in the original paradisiacal state, whose ultimate, eschatological meaning will fully unfold only after the profane realm of history has been surmounted and the will of the Messiah realized. Origin is still the goal, but not as a fixed image of the past that must be recaptured *in toto*, but rather as the fulfillment of a potentiality that lies dormant in origin, the attainment of which simultaneously represents a quantum leap beyond the original point of departure.  

Benjamin’s Kabbalistically-influenced theory of language guided his literary and art criticism, his views on tradition and history, and eventually his materialist readings of urban landscapes and commodities. The job of the historical materialist critic, no less than the redemptive critic, according to Benjamin, was thus to unleash the messianic and utopian potential embedded within historical moments and works of art. Whatever we make of his more mystical thinking, his metaphysical concerns could be translated quite effectively into secular terms, and they shaped a highly creative form of critical theory.

What this meant in practice was wide-ranging. I have identified several different ways, often overlapping, that Benjamin worked to uncover the “redemptive potential” of his objects of study. I will briefly discuss four of these, but this should by no means be considered an exhaustive analysis.

First, Benjamin was interested in recovering the “truth content” in works of art, which he held to be distinct from a work’s “material content.” Whereas the material content was always a product of the times of the work’s creation, bound to the historical circumstances and linguistic/material conditions of its emergence, the truth content overcame those particular limitations. To redeem a work of art it was thus necessary to destroy its material content, to pry it loose from its particular setting, and therefore to free the truth within it. Benjamin’s concern, among other things, was with the fact that great works of art—those that somehow speak truth—are legible beyond their particular conditions of production. The material content of their reception might change in different times and places, but great works continue to speak to widely disparate audiences. In “The Task of the Translator,” the issue is stated in terms of the translatability of literature: what is it that the translator aims to translate? Mere words, or something else? “In translation,” Benjamin wrote, “the original rises into a higher and purer linguistic air, as it were.”  

11 It should be clear that this method of criticism rests upon Benjamin’s somewhat esoteric theory of language: the truth content that the critic strives to release is that which is not restricted by history or language, and which therefore approaches the divine. Yet it also highlights an important aspect of a work’s meaning that is otherwise difficult to grasp due to its inherent instability. It forces us to focus on a work as it moves through time and space, into and out of different contexts, bound to no single proper location yet productive of meaning wherever it exists.

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Second, Benjamin often understood redemption in terms of the recovery of wholeness. For the work of criticism, this meant that it was the critic’s task to recover as many meanings and experiences of an object as possible. In relation to truth content, then, the idea that a work of art or an object might mean very different things in different times or places was not a hindrance to the task of discovering its truth—instead, the very fact that it had so many meanings was its truth. To redeem such a work was to “remember” its full history, to “unfold” all of its possibilities. The diversity of historical and human meanings connected to the work only circles around, but never quite arrives at, the “messianic” completion of meaning that they all approach and in which they all participate. Benjamin utilized this method of criticism, which dances with phenomenology, most powerfully in his writing on cities and urban landscapes, as in *One Way Street.* In that book, which even today strikes its readers as unique and unusual in style, he allowed the city and its objects to speak through him as he walked the streets. He became a conduit for the experiences and memories evoked by what he encountered. Unfolding the many layers of the city, he recovered forgotten and unnoticed aspects of material and human history. Without settling on a final “meaning” of the city, he unfolded its many dimensions and possibilities.

Third, Benjamin took this meaning of redemption into history. In “The Storyteller,” he bemoaned the loss of storytelling and tradition in modernity. With the rise of the novel (in terms of both meanings of the word, as the “new” and as a genre of writing), *tradition*—the ability to exchange experiences—was lost. The experiences of everyday life were forgotten, replaced by a quest for the new and for technological progress. In Benjamin’s Marxist terms, fashion took the place of memory and ever-new commodities directed people away from past and present experience, unleashing patterns of forgetting.

By reflecting upon discarded objects, old buildings, and items from the past, Benjamin hoped to redeem them by remembering them, unfolding their meanings and experiences and thereby recovering the wholeness of historical human experience. His favorite model of the critic in this mode was the *flâneur,* wandering the streets and taking it all in. In a real sense the past was never fully gone, but was embedded all around us in the landscape of the present. In “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” just before his suicide and in the midst of fascism’s terror, he wrote, “nothing that has every 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 à l’ordre du jour*—and that day is Judgment Day.”

Finally, Benjamin’s most impressive but unfinished project on the arcades of nineteenth century Paris expressed another way that redemption might work. He advocated a technique of montage in which he would compile quotes and images with minimal commentary. On the one hand, we can understand the montage approach by way of his early theory of language. As in *One Way Street,* he appears to have wanted to be more of a conduit for material to speak “for itself” than an interpreter, since the idea of redemptive criticism was not to uncover the analytical “truth” (which would in any case be yet one more *human* truth, not the fullness of truth of an object) but to evoke experience of fullness and unity, to expand rather than to limit. On the other hand, as Susan Buck-Morss indicates in her immense study of the arcades project, Benjamin seems to have thought that juxtapositions of quotes and/or images could

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12 *One Way Street* can be found in its entirety in Bullock and Jennings, eds., *Selected Writings Volume I,* 444-488.
15 Benjamin “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” 254.
themselves spark messianic potential. Abrupt juxtapositions could release new ideas or ways of seeing, for instance. Through this technique Benjamin also sought to illustrate the forms of imagination and dreams that have historically been connected to commodities and new technologies, but which have since been forgotten, in an attempt to ignite critical reflection on the promises and failures of progress. Every new technology, every new invention, has carried with it the hopes that it might fulfill the dreams of the present time of its appearance. Yet over time those dreams have been forgotten, the technology has become normalized, and the promises have remained unfulfilled. Benjamin wanted to use images and experiences of the past to fight forgetting with the memory of our ancestors’ hopes.

In each case, Benjamin saw the work of the critic as the recovery of experience, especially the memory of the forgotten and the overlooked. Redemption and the fullness of human experience was located in that which had been discarded both by history and, especially, in Benjamin’s more historical materialist stage, by those in positions of political, economic, or social power who stood to gain by maintaining the status quo. It was they who constructed power by selective memory and incomplete citing of the past. In any event, Benjamin’s approach to criticism, history, and the relationship between the particular and the universal was, and continues to be, intriguingly creative.

Perhaps because of his longstanding identification with critical theory and the Frankfurt School, Benjamin’s recent influence has been especially evident among Marxist scholars. As the above should make clear, however, there is much for a Marxist to be concerned or even confused about in Benjamin’s orientation. He has also been influential among art historians and media scholars, thanks to his highly original work on the impact that technology has had on both our sense perceptions and our reception of works of art. The germinal essay in this regard is “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” In many essays Benjamin commented upon photography, film, and audio reproduction with innovative insight, noting that these technologies of reproduction necessarily alter our experience of space and time. They also make problematic the nature of the original to the copy. Again, those who approach Benjamin for his innovative approach to critical theory often leave aside his particularly religious elements.

It would seem that scholars of religion would be doubly excited by Benjamin’s work, drawn to it simultaneously for the reasons that have drawn other disciplines and fascinated by the central place of religion in Benjamin’s creatively materialistic thought and method. Whether understood as a theologian, a cultural critic with a unique interest in religion, or simply an innovative thinker, Benjamin has a great deal to offer the study of religion. Benjamin’s œuvre compels us to examine the relationship between theory and theology at the same time that it directs our attention to the productive, performative nature of both cultural expression and scholarly analysis. Very little scholarship in the field of religious studies to this point, however, has incorporated or wrestled with his body of work. There are, of course, some notable exceptions. One is Tomoko Masuzawa’s *In Search of Dreamtime: The Quest for the Origin of Religion*, which uses Benjamin to problematize the notion of origins in order to engage in a critical investigation of the work of Emile Durkheim, Max Müller, Sigmund Freud, and Mircea Eliade. Masuzawa’s approach to history—in terms of the idea of origins and in terms of the relationship of past religious

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studies scholarship to the present—is also influenced by Benjamin. Her critique of foundational approaches to the study of religion is not meant to arrive, finally, at a perspective that will more “truly” allow scholars to approach their object(s) of study; instead, she argues that the subject/object dichotomy is a false perspective to begin with. The object (in this case, “religion”) is conjured by the very questions raised and methods used by the scholars. The study of religion, therefore, is redirected from the object “out there” to the intersection where the world and an approach to the world meet in a constellation that mutually constitutes both subject and object.

Masuzawa raises Benjamin’s name again in an essay entitled “Culture,” her contribution to Critical Terms for Religious Studies, edited by Mark C. Taylor. Here, after critically assessing the history and uses of the “culture” concept, she calls for a Benjaminian turn in methodology, proposing that cultural studies is now in a “posthermeneutical moment.” Noting that it has become commonplace among contemporary scholars of culture to insist upon the necessity of setting cultural analysis in historical context, that is, to “be historical,” Masuzawa asks us to question what “being historical” means. Like Walter Benjamin, she reminds us that history is not a “natural” configuration of past to present, but is itself culturally and (yes) historically situated. Therefore, Masuzawa imagines a different sort of cultural analysis:

What if ‘being historical’ is not a matter of recovering and reconstructing a richly nuanced narrative truth, full of ‘thick descriptions,’ of a certain wholeness of the past, but instead is a matter of more or less outwitting such a compelling narrative truth and letting some forgotten moments and contours of the past ‘flare up,’ as Walter Benjamin would say, in order to illumine and decompose the compulsive narrativity of history that dictates the ideology of the present?  

Exactly what a “posthermeneutic” religious studies might look like must be left open for debate and experimentation, but it is an opening for further consideration of Benjamin’s possibilities.

Jay Geller is another religious studies scholar who has shown an interest in Benjamin. His article “The Aromatics of Jewish Difference; or, Benjamin’s Allegory of Aura,” explores the place and labor of the sense of smell as it relates to Jewish identity, representation, and modernity in Benjamin’s writing. The result is not only an impressive reading of Benjamin, but also a creative approach to new questions about the body that should interest scholars of religion. How are the senses implicated in religious identity and representations of self and otherness? How have the senses been formed and refigured in particular historical contexts?

More recently, Brent Plate’s Walter Benjamin, Religion, and Aesthetics: Rethinking Religion through the Arts makes productive use of Benjamin’s writing on aesthetics, technology, and modernity to direct our attention towards new ways to think about religion through the arts. As Plate puts it in the preface, “this book is a project of sifting through Benjamin’s writings, looking for tools with which to articulate a religious aesthetics and an aesthetic religion.” The result is an intriguing exploration of, among other things, the role of the senses and experience in the construction of social reality, and therefore in the construction of religious worlds. Along the way, following

21 Brent Plate, Walter Benjamin, Religion, and Aesthetics: Rethinking Religion through the Arts (New York: Routledge, 2005), x.
Benjamin. Plate illustrates “how sociopolitical life affects all art, which in turn alters sociopolitical-religious life.”

Anthropologist Michael Taussig has produced perhaps the most original body of work that derives from Walter Benjamin’s concerns. From _Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing_, through _Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses_, and _Defacement: Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative_, to a recent collection of essays titled _Walter Benjamin’s Grave_, Taussig has brought a unique perspective on Benjamin to his own approach to ethnography, writing, and cultural criticism. His work explores the “religious” and “magical” dimensions of the cultural and political in a manner that tends to provoke either enthusiasm or disdain in his readers. One of the reasons for the controversy that surrounds Taussig is itself quite Benjaminian: Taussig takes seriously the mutual constitution of subject and object, and the performative nature of scholarly writing itself. That is to say, he recognizes, as did Benjamin, that scholarly analysis is itself a cultural expression and is subject to the same critical questions as those directed at the ostensible object of study. Moreover, Taussig, like Benjamin, attempts creative stylistic innovations as he struggles to write what might be called, following Masuzawa, a “posthermeneutic” approach to culture. The result is, to some, refreshingly creative; to others, it is infuriatingly unlike what we have come to think of as the goal of scholarship in the way that it refuses to posit a stable object of analysis or final interpretive conclusion. At the very least, however, Taussig’s work brings the problems raised by Benjamin into contemporary conversation and debate on the concept, representation, and interpretation of culture.

We hope that there are others laboring at this very moment to bring Walter Benjamin into the study of religion, whether following Masuzawa’s vision of a “posthermeneutical” religious studies, finding in his work the springboard to new questions or approaches to our discipline, or interpreting Benjamin himself as a religious thinker or theologian. Indeed, there are signs that his writings are beginning to inform other, more recent work in the field. This special issue of _Epoché_ is dedicated to the work of several young scholars who are doing just that, having found Benjamin fruitful in their own studies.

While the issue of language factors into all of the following articles in one way or another, the first three grapple with Benjamin’s conceptualization of language and its relation to experience most directly. Gabriel Levy’s article, “Walter Benjamin’s Linguistic Mysticism as Cure of the ‘Language-Myth,’” reads Benjamin’s theories of language against current findings of cognitive science, finding that the latter affirms and sheds light on Benjamin’s conceptions of language. Drawing on Benjamin’s distinction between “language as such” and “human language,” Levy then proposes a new way to think of religion as “the routinized second order byproduct of the first order reflection Benjamin wanted to recover” in writings on the mimetic faculty. In particular, Levy argues that biblical prophecy marks a shift in human cognition that emerged with the invention of writing, as a “precipitation of the conceptual shifts caused by a new literary class reflecting on language itself.”

Jacob Latham next takes up Benjamin’s interest in recovering and representing experience itself in “The City and the Subject: Benjamin on Language, Materiality, and Subjectivity.” Benjamin wrote much about cities, about their histories, their memories, and the way that their spaces intertwine with human subjectivity Latham also begins with
Benjamin’s writing on the nature of language, but follows the notion of “a language of things” that takes him in a different direction: into “the idea of an erotic subjectivity that is a subject whose identity is in part constructed by the object world.” The subject, according to Benjamin, is formed in conjunction with the rhythms of material space in which a person lives. Memory and dreams, no less than habits and patterns of daily life, are intimately connected with material objects and places. The recent interest in material culture, space, and architecture among scholars of religion ensure that Latham is not alone in finding this aspect of Benjamin’s work suggestive.

Cheryl Beaver follows in “Walter Benjamin’s Exegesis of Stuff.” Is Benjamin best understood as a theologian or a Marxist materialist? These two alternatives, shaping much conflict over interpretations of Benjamin, are not mutually exclusive, Beaver argues. Benjamin’s conception of materiality, which she approaches through his conceptions of language and criticism, “render any separation of the two obsolete.” She claims that the inconsistency of Benjamin’s body of work, its inability to be systematized completely, is not an accident or flaw, but is rather a method appropriate to the fragmentation of human experience in the modern world. Beaver reviews four modes of scholarship that Benjamin employs in studying material objects, all of which open interpretation and criticism to even the most mundane of material things—and even the most mundane things become, through Benjamin’s approach, sources of “profane illumination.”

The final two pieces treat somewhat different aspects of Benjamin’s oeuvre. In “Some Half-Baked Speculations on Benjamin, Privacy, and Fascism,” Barry Gaucho grapples with the relationship between security and privacy, a topic with a special urgency in the present geopolitical climate. He approaches the problem through Benjamin’s writing on the aesthetics, especially on the uses of surrealism and technological innovations (such as film) to “create a revolutionary sensibility that contended with the intoxication of modern senses.” In his sophisticated analysis of Benjamin’s perceptions of the revolutionary potentials of art and aesthetics, Gaucho warns that while mass culture may indeed be liberative—capable of producing flashes of “profane illumination” that disrupt the taken-for-granted and thus opening a space for innovation and radical praxis—it may also, quite easily, be used in the service of fascism. Gaucho brings his discussion around to the question of religion, politics, and critique in present-day America, suggesting that Benjamin’s thoughts on aesthetics may help us “to reflect on religious freedom under global capitalism.”

Finally, in “Walter Benjamin’s 115th Dream,” John Lardas Modern explores Benjamin’s conceptions of history and the translation of the past (its representation through the work of the historian) in terms of how Benjamin’s insights might be applied to the conceptualization and writing of a new form of American religious history. He brings this general discussion to bear on a brief study of the “secret history” of *Moby-Dick* as an exemplar of American religion in a Benjaminian fashion, letting the text loose in history and following its reception and various interpretations as a method to recover unrecognized sources of religion in the American past.

It is our hope that this collection of essays will provoke interest in further explorations of Benjamin’s work and its relation to religious studies, inciting creative approaches to new directions in our discipline.