

# “Mr. BUNGLE SENDS HIS REGARDS”: WALTER BENJAMIN, A FALIURE?<sup>1</sup>

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To B. K. Tragelehn

## **A few words before**

When my family and I first visited Portbou, I constantly listened to the bells of the church. And I imagined how the dying Benjamin must have listened to them too. We spent five days here. By the end, we had friends everywhere: Santiago Vancells Gascons had shown us the register of deaths with Benjamin’s portrait photograph. Lorenzo Novés Hernández had guided us over the Pyrenees. Our walking-tour wasn’t easy. It was a rainy day, the stones were slippery. But it was very beautiful and exciting. In Puig del Mas we ate sweet, aromatic grapes. When we were at the top, all of a sudden the sun came out. We saw Banyuls and Portbou as well, and – I hesitate to mention it – a magnificent rainbow arched over the landscape.

We tried to remember the days in September 1940. Walter Benjamin’s last letter was written seventy years ago, probably exactly today: on September 25, 1940. The original document doesn’t exist any more. We only have a transcription by Henny Gurland, one of the supposed addressees of this letter. Benjamin wrote: “Dans une situation sans issue, je n’ai d’autre choix que d’en finir. C’est dans un petit village dans les Pyrénées où personne ne me connaît ma vie va s’achever.”<sup>2</sup> (“In a situation with no way out, I have no choice but to end it. My life will finish in a little village in the Pyrenees where no one knows me.”<sup>3</sup>)

When Benjamin wrote these words, nobody could imagine how radically this would change. Today every child here probably knows Benjamin’s name. As the Catalan poet and Benjamin translator Antoni Pous once said: In Portbou, by the sea, Benjamin is no longer a stranger, but one of our own dead. People from all over the world come to visit Portbou. And it is well known as a junction, almost a crux of European cultural history. Dani Karavan’s memorial has become an emblem of this. For many years, many committed people have been helping – despite many difficulties – to commemorate these last days of the life of Walter Benjamin in the minds of the world. They have succeeded.

I would like to express my very great respect for all their efforts. For my colleagues from the Walter Benjamin Archive and I, it is important to be in touch with *Memorial Democràtic*, and I really appreciate all the activities of this organisation and its staff and supporters:

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<sup>1</sup> This text follows my speech at the *Col·loqui Internacional Walter Benjamin*, Portbou, September 25, 2010. I haven’t completely deleted the oral character. Thank you to *Memorial Democràtic*, esp. Jordi Guixé, for inviting me to Portbou and spending these lovely days together. Thanks to Nicholas Jacobs, London, for letting me know words like “butterfingers” and for correcting the worst excesses of my English, to Ursula Marx, Walter Benjamin Archiv, for her carefully looking through my text, and to B. K. Tragelehn for many discussions about Benjamin.

<sup>2</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Briefe*, hrsg. v. Christoph Gödde u. Henri Lonitz, Frankfurt am Main 1995–2000 (quoted as GB, also in the text), GB VI, p. 483.

<sup>3</sup> Momme Brodersen, *Walter Benjamin. A Biography*, transl. by Malcolm R. Green and Ingrida Ligers, ed. by Martina Derviş, London, New York 1996, p. 257.

Miquel Camines, Jordí Guixé, Jordi Font Agulló, Maximiliano Fuentes Codera, Marc Andreu, Gemma Simon Mutane.

Maybe Hannah Arendt had an uneasy sense of the importance of Portbou. In a letter to Gershom Scholem dated October 21, 1940, she wrote: “The cemetery looks out over a small bay, directly on the Mediterranean. Its terraces are hewn out of stone, and coffins are also put in these stone walls. This is one of the most fantastic and beautiful places I have ever seen.”<sup>4</sup>

What I’ve brought with me is also linked to Hannah Arendt. My title in German would be “Ungeschickt lässt grüßen”. It is a German saying. “Ungeschickt” is a kind of personification of a clumsy, botching, bungling habit or behaviour. “Mr Bungle sends his regards” is a translation into English, probably by Arendt herself. There are other translations as “Greetings from Mr Clumsy”, but this saying seems to be uncommon for English speakers. The English word ‘butterfingers’ may be the closest equivalent, but this only describes someone who is physically awkward and impractical, who would drop a ball if it was thrown to them; indeed one cannot imagine Benjamin as a very good outfielder on the baseball or cricket pitch. Benjamin knew this saying from his mother. She used to say “Mr Bungle sends his regards”, “whenever one of the countless little catastrophes of childhood had taken place”.<sup>5</sup> And this word came again into Benjamin’s mind when he read the German children’s poem about a fairy-tale figure “The little hunchback”. Benjamin quoted lines from this poem several times. The little hunchback is an important figure in his literary world.

Hannah Arendt wrote about this in her 1968 essay on Benjamin. Her image of Benjamin is focused upon words like ‘misfortune’, ‘bad luck’, ‘bungling’, ‘awkwardness’, and ‘clumsiness’. Arendt says: “With a precision suggesting a sleepwalker his clumsiness invariably guided him to the very center of a misfortune, or wherever something of the sort might lurk.”<sup>6</sup> About Benjamin’s death she wrote: “One day earlier Benjamin would have got through without any trouble; one day later the people in Marseilles would have known that for the time being it was impossible to pass through Spain. Only on that particular day was the catastrophe possible.”<sup>7</sup> One could retell Benjamin’s life “as a sequence of [...] piles of debris”<sup>8</sup>, Arendt says, and she reminds us of his failed journalistic projects, unpublished books and his unsuccessful attempt to obtain his “Habilitation”, or any kind of academic tenure.

This view of Arendt and others has more or less formed the image of Benjamin for about seventy years: The poor Benjamin. The unworldly Benjamin – clumsy and unskilled in the matters of life. Benjamin the butterfingers! Many people saw Benjamin as a genius, as a man with great ideas, but without luck, without any ability to manage his own life.<sup>9</sup> Just as

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<sup>4</sup> Brodersen, *Walter Benjamin*, p. 261.

<sup>5</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*, San Diego, New York, London [about 1993], p. 158.

<sup>6</sup> Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*, p. 159.

<sup>7</sup> Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*, p. 171.

<sup>8</sup> Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*, p. 159.

<sup>9</sup> See two recent examples: Ludger Lütkehaus, “Ungeschickt lässt grüßen”. Das “bucklicht Männlein” und die neue Edition der Schriften Walter Benjamins, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, May 4, 2010; and Ingo Meyer, *Legitimationsdiskurs. Über Jean-Michel Palmiers Benjamin-Studie*, *Merkur*, 64 (2010), June 2010, p. 533–538. – For Meyer, Benjamin was that kind of person one today calls a “nerd”: “Verschlossen, ungeschickt im Alltagsleben und in höchstem Maße eigenbrötlerisch, zur Gänze humorfrei und ständig von Plagiatsängsten getrieben, dem winzigen Bekanntenkreis gegenüber autoritär auftretend, bis zum vierzigsten Lebensjahr bei den Eltern wohnend, ihnen auch die Erziehung des Sohnes überlassend, unfähig gar, wie Palmier notiert, sich einen Kaffee zu kochen.” Meyer’s conclusion for Benjamin is “Scheitern am Leben”. – Luckily, there are more and more voices which

symptomatically, they refer to the fragmented structure of the *Arcades Project*. Also Lisa Fittko pictures Benjamin's behaviour as old-fashioned, clunky and too polite for this life. Her "The Old Benjamin" is part of this story.

You shouldn't misunderstand me: I'm a great admirer of Hannah Arendt. Her essay is wonderful, but I think she was wrong in putting so much stress on the "Mr Bungle perspective". Her view is especially problematic since she didn't hesitate to use the word *failure*: "[U]ndoubtedly Benjamin had the 'field of ruins and the disaster area' of his own work in mind when he wrote that 'an understanding of [Kafka's] production involves, among other things, the simple recognition that he was a failure'"<sup>10</sup>.

This statement calls for further discussion. I want to discuss it in three parts: I) "Mr Bungle sends his regards": the quotation in Benjamin's writings; II) Failure: the example of Kafka; and III) "The critic is the strategist in the literary struggle." (*One-Way Street*). The third point is the most important, since it is a sort of opposite to Arendt's interpretation of Benjamin. It deals with a smart and clever Benjamin. Benjamin's tragic end in Portbou shouldn't be seen as the clue to his whole existence. His death shouldn't be regarded as if it were the most important thing about him.

### 1. "Mr. Bungle sends his regards": the quotation in Benjamin's writings

The little hunchback is a reference in Benjamin's autobiographical texts. It is closely connected with his presumed ineptitude for practical life. In the *Berlin Chronicle* he mentions his "very poor sense of direction". And he says: "On her [i. e. his mother] I lay the blame for my inability even today to make a cup of coffee; to her propensity for turning the most insignificant items of conduct into tests of my aptitude for practical life I owe the dreamy recalcitrance with which I accompanied her as we walked through the streets rarely frequented by me, of the city center"<sup>11</sup> ("Ihr gebe ich die Schuld, daß ich noch heute mir keine Tasse Kaffee kochen kann, ihrer Neigung, die kleinsten Handreichungen, Verhaltensweisen zu Test(en) meiner Eignung für das praktische Leben zu machen, verdanke ich die träumerische Resistenz beim gemeinsamen Gang durch die selten von mir betretenen Straßen der City."<sup>12</sup>) And he remembers: "How nothing was more intolerable to my mother than the pedantic care with which, on these walks, I always kept half a step behind her. My habit of seeming slower, more maladroit, more stupid than I am had its origin in such walks, and has the great attendant danger of making me think myself quicker, more dexterous, and shrewder than I am."<sup>13</sup> ("Auch erinnere ich mich wie meiner Mutter nichts unausstehlicher war als die Peinlichkeit, mit der ich beim Gang durch die Straßen immer wieder um einen halben Schritt hinter ihr blieb. Langsamer, ungeschickter, blöder zu scheinen als ich es war, diese Gewohnheit nahm ich auf solchen gemeinsamen Gängen an und sie hat die große Gefahr, sich schneller, geschickter, schlauer zu glauben als man es ist." / GS VI, p. 466.)

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didn't follow this view. I, for example, fully agree with Heinrich Kaulen and his article "*Rehabilitierung der Polemik*", *literaturkritik.de*, Nr. 6 (June 2010), access: September 14, 2010.

<sup>10</sup> Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*, p. 169f.

<sup>11</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, ed. by Michael W. Jennings [and Others], vol. 2: 1927–1934, transl. by Rodney Livingstone and Others, Cambridge, London 1999, p. 596.

<sup>12</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, hrsg. v. Rolf Tiedemann u. Hermann Schweppenhäuser, Frankfurt am Main 1972–1989 (quoted as GS, also in the text), GS VI, p. 466.

<sup>13</sup> Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, p. 596.

In *Berliner Kindheit um neunzehnhundert* (*Berlin Childhood around 1900*), a book he named “Kindheitserinnerungen” that remained unpublished in his lifetime, a chapter is called “Das bucklichte Männlein” (“The little hunchback”). This is where Benjamin brought the little hunchback and Mr Bungle together: “My mother gave me the hint. ‘Greetings from Mr. Clumsy,’ she would say, when I had broken something or fallen down. And now I understand what she was talking about. She was speaking of the little hunchback, who had been looking at me. Whoever is looked at by this little man pays no attention – either to himself or to the little man. He stands dazed before a heap of fragments. [...] Where the hunchback appeared, I could only look on uselessly. [...] Only, I never saw him. It was he who always saw me.”<sup>14</sup> (“Meine Mutter verriet mir’s, ohne es zu wissen. ‘Ungeschickt läßt grüßen’, sagte sie mir immer, wenn ich etwas zerbrochen hatte oder hingefallen war. Und nun verstehe ich, wovon sie sprach. Sie sprach vom bucklichten Männlein, welches mich angesehen hatte. Wen dieses Männlein ansieht, gibt nicht acht. Nicht auf sich selbst und auf das Männlein auch nicht. Er steht verstört vor einem Scherbenhaufen [...] Wo es erschien, da hatte ich das Nachsehn. [...] Allein, ich habe es nie gesehn. Es sah nur immer mich.” / GS IV/1, p. 303)

The poem about the little hunchback was printed in the collection *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*. Benjamin knew the poem from Georg Scherer’s collection *Deutsches Kinderbuch*. In the poem the little hunchback is a strange, uncanny creature who is disturbing, steals and breaks things:

“Will ich in mein’ Keller gehn,  
Will mein Weinlein zapfen;  
Steht ein bucklicht Männlein da,  
Tät mir’n Krug wegschnappen.

(“When I go down to the cellar  
There to draw some wine,  
A little hunchback who’s in there  
Grabs that jug of mine.

Will ich in mein Küchel gehn,  
Will mein Süpplein kochen;  
Steht ein bucklicht Männlein da,  
Hat mein Töpflein brochen.”

When I go into my kitchen,  
There my soup to make  
A little hunchback who’s in there  
My little pot did break.”<sup>15</sup>

In Benjamin’s phrase from *Berlin Childhood*, the hunchback poses the threat of being looked at by someone you can’t see. The boy is fascinated, the little hunchback paralyzes him, casts a spell on him. It is a kind of hex, an invitation to be one with the piles of debris the hunchback made.

However, as far as Benjamin is concerned, it seems to me that we have a huge difference between the picture given by himself in his autobiographical writings and his real life. It is the famous difference between literature and life. Mr Bungle’s authentic place is a place of fiction: first of all, Benjamin’s autobiographical text *Berlin Childhood*. It is a matter of

<sup>14</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, ed. by Michael W. Jennings [and Others], transl. by Edmund Jephcott, Howard Eiland, and Others, vol. 3: 1935–1938, Cambridge, London 2002, p. 385.

<sup>15</sup> Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*, p. 158. – Although it would be very useful to discuss the different interpretations of “Bucklicht Männlein” and its position in Benjamin’s autobiographical writings, I can’t do it here. But I want to mention at least following inspiring articles: Irving Wohlfarth, *Märchen für Dialektiker*. Walter Benjamin und sein “bucklicht Männlein”. In: Klaus Doderer (Hrsg.), *Walter Benjamin und die Kinderliteratur*. Aspekte der Kinderkultur in den zwanziger Jahren, Weinheim und München 1988, p. 121–176; and Marianne Schuller, *Ent-Zweit – Zur Arbeit des “bucklicht Männlein” in Walter Benjamins Berliner Kindheit um neunzehnhundert*. In: Anja Lemke/Martin Schierbaum (Hrsg.), *“In die Höhe fallen”*. Grenzgänge zwischen Literatur und Philosophie, Würzburg 2000, p. 141–149.

creation, not the real life. And Mr Bungle is therefore a product of stylisation and literary creation. Benjamin coined a literary self portrait as a clumsy person, a man of misfortune. But several years before, he wrote in *Einbahnstraße* (*One-Way Street*): “To be happy is to be able to become aware of oneself without fright.”<sup>16</sup> (“Glücklich sein heißt ohne Schrecken seiner selbst innwerden können.” / GS IV/1, p. 113.)

It is not easy to imagine Benjamin a lucky man. He was melancholic, idiosyncratic and maybe too sensitive to be able to be lucky in a world like this world. However, if you take him altogether he was definitely not simply a man of misfortune. Letters, biographical documents, and statements by friends give a picture of Benjamin that has little to do with the hunchback story.

To become aware of yourself calls for a high level of insight, for a sort of cleverness and smartness. I’m sure Benjamin finally succeeded in breaking the spell. He succeeded in becoming aware of himself – in becoming self-confident.

## 2. Failure: the example of Kafka

The little hunchback is also a person in Benjamin’s texts on Franz Kafka. In his 1931 review of the posthumous Kafka collection *Beim Bau der Chinesischen Mauer* (*The Great Wall of China*) Benjamin quoted lines from this “mysterious folk song”, and he comments: “The little hunchback, too, is something that has been forgotten, something we once used to know; he was then at peace with himself, but now he blocks our way to the future.”<sup>17</sup> (“Das ist auch so ein Vergessenes, das bucklige Männlein, das wir einmal gewußt haben, und da hatte es seinen Frieden, nun aber vertritt es uns den Weg in die Zukunft.” / GS II/2, p. 682.)

“The little hunchback” is also an important chapter in Benjamin’s 1934 Kafka essay. As we have heard from Hannah Arendt, Benjamin considered Kafka a failure. Benjamin regarded it as important that Kafka saw himself as someone who failed. But it is interesting that he brought the word *failure* in while mentioning also categories like *purity* and *beauty*. It happened in a letter to Gershom Scholem in which Benjamin, on June 12, 1938, had written: “To do justice to the figure of Kafka in its purity and its peculiar beauty, one must never lose sight of one thing: it is the figure of a failure.”<sup>18</sup> (“Um Kafkas Figur in ihrer Reinheit und in ihrer eigentümlichen Schönheit gerecht zu werden, darf man das Eine nie aus dem Auge lassen: es ist die von einem Gescheiterten.” / GB VI, p. 114)

It is not a failure that leaves us alone without anything. Benjamin rejected interpretations, for example those of Max Brod, that interpreted Kafka as a Jewish mystic. Benjamin recalled Kafka’s self picture a failure. According to Benjamin, Kafka’s failure was unavoidable and historically necessary.<sup>19</sup> And Benjamin was sure, that one of the most important reasons for

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<sup>16</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, ed. by Michael W. Jennings [and Others], vol. 1: 1913–1926, Cambridge, London 1996, p. 463.

<sup>17</sup> Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, p. 596.

<sup>18</sup> *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem 1932–1940*, ed. by Gershom Scholem, translated from the German by Gary Smith and Andre Lefevere, with an Introduction by Anson Rabinbach, New York 1989, p. 226.

<sup>19</sup> See f. e. Benjamin’s sentence: “I believe in fact that every interpretation that – contrary to Kafka’s own feeling, in this case incorruptible and pure – proceeds from the assumption of a body of mystical writing realized by him, instead of just proceeding from the author’s own feeling, his rectitude, and the reasons for the inevitable failure, would miss the historical nexus of the entire work.” (*The*

Kafka's failure is connected to his method of writing. He wrote about Kafka: "He did fail in his grandiose attempt to convert poetry into teachings, to turn it into a parable and restore to it that stability and unpretentiousness which, in the face of reason, seemed to him the only appropriate thing for it."<sup>20</sup> ("Gescheitert ist sein großartiger Versuch, die Dichtung in die Lehre zu überführen und als Parabel ihr die Haltbarkeit und die Unscheinbarkeit zurückzugeben, die im Angesicht der Vernunft ihm als die einzig geziemende erschienen ist." / GS II/2, p. 427f.)

The English translation of that passage Benjamin is not very precise. Neither 'poetry' nor 'teachings' is meant. It would be better to say 'writing' and 'doctrine'. It is a very dialectical idea: failing in converting writing into doctrine. That is meant absolutely positively. Writing remains the winner.

That question is important for Benjamin too. Remember the words "to become aware of oneself without fright". The warning not to convert writing into doctrine also applies to Benjamin: You will not succeed, if you try to pigeonhole Benjamin. You will not succeed, if you try to read him as a theoretician with a system. In that point I fully agree with Hannah Arendt: It is not a very good idea to discuss Benjamin as a philosopher.<sup>21</sup>

In a failure like Kafka's Benjamin recognized greatness. This is a failure without betrayal. Benjamin considered Kafka a man who – in acknowledging his failure – remained true to himself. And Benjamin did not stop there. He detects a special relationship between failure and success. The best sign of validation for Benjamin's view is the following phrase of his about Kafka (from his already quoted letter to Scholem, dated June 12, 1938): "Once he [i. e. Kafka; E. W.] was certain of eventual failure, everything worked out for him en route as in a dream."<sup>22</sup> ("[W]ar er des endlichen Mißlingens erst einmal sicher, so gelang ihm unterwegs alles wie im Traum." / GB VI, p. 114.)

In recognising failure, in feeling it, you will not be without a way out. You will not be without hope. Hope is – as Benjamin said in his Kafka essay – a gift for the clumsy and bungling people like Kafka's "Gehilfen" ("assistants") from *Das Schloß* (*The Castle*). While speaking about the "assistants" Benjamin says: "It is for them and their kind, the unfinished and the hapless, that there is hope."<sup>23</sup> ("Für sie und ihresgleichen, die Unfertigen und Ungeschickten, ist die Hoffnung da." / GS II/2, p. 415.)

There is hope that the little hunchback will vanish some day. That he not only won't be seen anymore, but will cease his threatening presence. This messianic promise is connected to Benjamin's thinking as it reveals itself in his theses "On the Concept of History". In his essay on Kafka he expresses the promise in quoting a word by Gershom Scholem who is the great rabbi in this phrase: "This little man is at home in distorted life; he will disappear with the coming of the Messiah, who (a great rabbi once said) will not wish to change the world by force but will merely make a slight adjustment in it."<sup>24</sup> ("Dies Männlein ist der Insasse des entstellten Lebens; es wird verschwinden, wenn der Messias kommt, von dem ein großer

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*Correspondence of Walter Benjamin. 1910–1940*, ed. by Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno, transl. by Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson, Chicago and London 1994, p. 463.)

<sup>20</sup> Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, p. 808.

<sup>21</sup> See Hannah Arendt, *Walter Benjamin. Bertolt Brecht, Zwei Essays*, München 1971, p. 16–18.

<sup>22</sup> *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem 1932–1940*, p. 226.

<sup>23</sup> Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, p. 799.

<sup>24</sup> Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, p. 811.

Rabbi gesagt hat, daß er nicht mit Gewalt die Welt verändern wolle, sondern nur um ein Geringes sie zurechtstellen werde.” / GS II/1, p. 432.)

To be “at home in distorted life”: This connects the hunchback stuff with the political implications of Benjamin’s thinking – Michael Löwy and Eduardo Jozami discussed in Portbou.<sup>25</sup>

### 3. “The critic is the strategist in the literary struggle”

I do not want to trivialise the dialectic of failure and success, which can’t be discussed here sufficiently. It is an issue of philosophy, history, and literature. In his poem “Mnemosyne” Friedrich Hölderlin, for example, wrote the lines “And many things / Have to stay on the shoulders like a load / of failure” (“Und vieles / Wie auf den Schultern eine / Last von Scheitern ist / Zu behalten”).<sup>26</sup> This poem was important for Hannah Arendt’s understanding of *failure* which is with no doubt influenced by Martin Heidegger. Heidegger mentioned Hölderlin’s poem in his letter to Hannah Arendt from May 6, 1950: “Exactly at the time you had wrote me that quotation I thought about the load of failure”.<sup>27</sup> Twenty one years later in a letter to Mary McCarthy Arendt quoted these lines again, but she added two words which gave the quotation a new meaning: “Briefly: commemoration”.<sup>28</sup>

Think about the tension between failure and success in revolutionary times. The German writer Volker Braun made it a crucial point of his plays and poems. In his essay “A Place for Peter Weiss” (“Ein Ort für Peter Weiss”) he used the words “my success, which is a failure” (“mein Gelingen, das ein Scheitern ist”).<sup>29</sup> It reminds of an entry in Benjamin’s diary made on May 5, 1931. According to Hemingway Benjamin said: “Entirely successful, entirely meaningful ventures can sometimes best be perceived when placed next to complete failures, things that are completely banal.”<sup>30</sup> (“Das ganz Glückliche, ganz Bedeutende kann man sich oft nicht besser einsichtig machen als indem man es ganz nah ans ganz Mißlungne, ganz Banale heranhält.” / GS VI, p. 424)

Maybe some of the defeats Benjamin suffered were calculated: One could mention the journal project *Angelus Novus*, Benjamin’s attempt to stay in Palestine, and even the unsuccessful “Habilitation”.<sup>31</sup> Anyhow there is no doubt that Benjamin had a lot of

<sup>25</sup> See their speeches at *Col-loqui Internacional Walter Benjamin*, Portbou 2010: “Revolution is the emergency brake” (Löwy) and “Beyond historiographic positivism and trusting naively in progress” (Jozami). Unfortunately I missed the lecture by Manuel Reyes Mate, “Walter Benjamin, a fire alarm”. – As to distorted life, see also the discussions about Kafka between Adorno and Benjamin, f. e. GS II/3, p. 1176.

<sup>26</sup> English version by Robert Bly, see <http://www.poetry-chaikhana.com/H/HolderlinFri/AllFruit.htm> (access: October 25, 2010).

<sup>27</sup> Hannah Arendt/Martin Heidegger, *Briefe 1925 bis 1975 und andere Zeugnisse*, aus den Nachlässen hrsg. v. Ursula Ludz, Frankfurt am Main, 1999, p. 105.

<sup>28</sup> Hannah Arendt/Mary McCarthy, *Im Vertrauen*. Briefwechsel 1949 – 1975, hrsg. u. mit einer Einführung v. Carol Brightman, München/Zürich 1999, p. 426.

<sup>29</sup> Volker Braun, *Wir befinden uns soweit wohl. Wir sind erst einmal am Ende*. Äußerungen, Frankfurt am Main 1998, p. 169.

<sup>30</sup> Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, p. 471.

<sup>31</sup> See Hannah Arendt’s view: “It is now hard to understand how he and his friends could ever have doubted that a Habilitation under a not unusual university professor was bound to end with a catastrophe.” (Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*, p. 158.)

misfortune. And even his failure is a matter of fact. Think of his precarious existence. Benjamin was right, when he said that all his “attempts to find a professional ‘place’ in the bourgeois sense of the word”<sup>32</sup>, came to grief. In a letter to Scholem from July 1932 he named four of his unpublished books “that mark off the real site of ruin or catastrophe”<sup>33</sup>. Hannah Arendt knew that Benjamin had lived in an “age of extremes” (Eric Hobsbawm): First World War, depression, appearance of fascism, displacement. We can trust her since she was familiar with Benjamin. And she was a person of integrity, and highly observant. What she said about Benjamin came at first hand.

We do not want to brush Arendt’s picture against the grain. But if we consider Benjamin’s perspective on Kafka, there seems to be an alternative draft – maybe “a slight adjustment”. We can find a view of Benjamin similar to his Kafka sentence I quote again: “Once he was certain of eventual failure, everything worked out for him en route as in a dream.”<sup>34</sup> And it seems to me possible to place three aspects against Mr Bungle. Three aspects against the depression of failure: Benjamin’s behaviour, his thinking, or method of writing, and his posthumous life. All of these three aspects are connected.

## Behaviour

I don’t think that Benjamin was clumsy and that everything he tried went awry. Think of his aplomb in dealing with artificial forms and methods. He was an avant-gardist, he loved experimentation, and he didn’t respect frontiers between disciplines and schools. Think of his sovereignty in communication. He was able to find a unique tone for each of his friends. It is not only a form of adaptation, but a sign of communicative competence. Hannah Arendt has named it “model of diplomacy”.<sup>35</sup>

He was pretty well connected. You have to check his address book from Paris to see that he was not an isolated man. In negotiation with publishers and editors he could be smart and tough. He was a clever strategist. And he knew how necessary it was to be one. Take his sentence from his book *Einbahnstraße (One-Way Street)*: “The critic is the strategist in the literary struggle.”<sup>36</sup> He appreciated horse sense and being down-to-earth. In a letter to Werner Kraft dated July 26, 1934 he suggested that humanity should abandon promises of salvation and should try to start its day as a “rational person who has had a good night’s sleep begins his day”.<sup>37</sup>

## Thinking / Method of Writing

To be brief: Benjamin’s gift I most cherish is his ability to think in extremes. He was able to handle very different positions side by side. This thinking in extremes gave him breadth and freedom. He was able to bear tensions. Tensions like Marxism and Jewish thinking, history and modernity, revolution and hashish, reproducibility and aura, archive and actuality.

<sup>32</sup> Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, p. 617 (*Berlin Chronicle* / see GS VI, p. 494.).

<sup>33</sup> *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin*. 1910–1940, p. 396 (see GB IV, p. 113). – In Hannah Arendt’s essay this phrase is more appropriately translated as “field of ruins and the disaster area” (Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*, p. 169).

<sup>34</sup> *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem 1932–1940*, p. 226.

<sup>35</sup> See Arendt, *Walter Benjamin. Bertolt Brecht*, p. 23.

<sup>36</sup> Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, p. 460.

<sup>37</sup> *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin*, p. 452 (see GB IV, p. 467).



For his method of writing one can use a word he has used in relation to Bertolt Brecht: “laboratory of versatility” (“Laboratorium Vielseitigkeit”). We should not consider the incompleteness of the *Passages (Arcades)* as a defect. Francesc Abad said: “Walter Benjamin’s *Passages* aren’t a work but a workshop.”<sup>38</sup> Every note is a piece of archive. The quotations are archive pieces collected by a man who wanted to protect the traces of history. Not only the main traces but also the remote, the rejected, the supposedly unimportant. The whole manuscript is a huge archive of Paris in the XIXth century. It is impressively organised with plans, schedules and adorable coloured signs. With this Benjamin formed a flexible model of history and thinking about history, art, and living in the past.

### **Posthumous Life**

Benjamin thought and wrote as an archivist and as a kind of archaeologist. He was aware of the very precarious situation of his own life. But he wanted to save his work. He wanted to establish a life beyond his own lifetime.

He sent manuscripts, notebooks and printed versions with handwritten notes to his friends Gershom Scholem, Theodor W. Adorno, Alfred Cohn, Hannah Arendt, and Bertolt Brecht. And he knew – as he wrote to Scholem on April 4, 1937 – “that perhaps only our combined archives could present an exhaustive collection of them”<sup>39</sup>. His writing was oriented towards the future. He knew that he had lost his contemporary audience in exile, and that’s why he sent messages to future generations. The messages were received. Without Benjamin’s wise, experienced, unbungled efforts we wouldn’t have his archive now. I do not want to make too a bright story of it. But I do not either want to end on a sad note.

Benjamin’s life ended in Portbou. But to read it as a failure would be like bringing his life to an end once again.

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<sup>38</sup> See his exhibition “Piezas del block W. B.”, Goethe-Institut Barcelona, September – December 2010.

<sup>39</sup> *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem 1932–1940*, p. 194.