

Upon finishing the book, my main criticism was that I wanted more. I wished for an explicit confrontation by the authors with, on the one hand, Weber's concept of legitimation, and, on the other, with Marx's concept of fetishism. Both of these core concepts would seem to be related to the subject matter of this work, yet neither is discussed.

Walter Benjamin and the Bible. By Brian Britt. New York: Continuum, 1996, 156 pages, \$29.95 hbd.

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Walter Benjamin's works address a widely diverse, and seemingly unrelated variety of topics (i.e. the task of the translator, the use of allegory in the poetry of Baudelaire and in the German tragic drama of the Baroque era, surrealism, the philosophies of language and history, etc.). Furthermore, these writings utilize a variety of styles from straight prose to aphorisms to the extensive use of quotations. Among other things, Benjamin has been described as a philosopher, a mystic, a literary critic, and a Marxist. He was all of these things, and yet he was not, in an orthodox sense, any of these.

In *Walter Benjamin and the Bible*, Brian Britt suggests that Benjamin's work is not merely a mass of unorganized explorations lacking any particular focus or systematic approach. It is, he suggests, rather, a necessarily multifaceted attempt to attain a very specific goal which possesses its own sui generis systematic approach. "These compositional techniques," suggests Britt, "form the basis of an epistemological strategy of understanding history and experience that has philosophical, religious, aesthetic, and political dimensions" (113).

At the root of Britt's argument is Benjamin's theory of language. Benjamin felt that it was the goal of the philosopher, the critic, the historian, etc. to attempt (if only in principle) to recapture "pure language." In other words, Benjamin sought to recapture archetypal knowledge, as it was granted to Adam from God in the book of Genesis. In doing such, he sought the recovery a type of knowledge which is not expressible in the languages of man.

First elaborated in the 1916 essay entitled "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man," Benjamin's beliefs regarding the nature of language suggest that he saw the languages of man as "fallen". Benjamin believed that The language of Eden; i.e. "pure language," had a mimetic relationship with nature. It was a language of naming in which the name itself communicated the

essence of the referent. The language of man, however, represents a semiotic or "bourgeois" state of language where the signifier and the signified are merely random pairings of words and objects. In the languages of man, the essence of the object is no longer evoked in the communication of its name.

With the multiplicity of human languages comes the "overcoming" of things and the estrangement of man from the sacred in the world. Language itself, including the written word, is hopelessly separated from pure language. "Fallen" human language is necessary, however, in order for us to comprehend. Britt suggests that this is the paradox of the sacred text. "The past determines, but also eludes the present" (13).

For Benjamin, history is now, and in pointing out the aspects of pure language that continue to manifest themselves in the modern world he sought to achieve his ultimate goal. This goal being the bringing of historical dialectics (however briefly) to a standstill and thereby providing a "shock" that helps deliver modern humanity from the myth of historical progress which Benjamin felt, is the source of the collective, complacent, and status quo enhancing "dream sleep" of modernity. While my main complaint with this book is that I feel that Britt fails to adequately address the obvious political aspect of Benjamin's work, one would assume that the overcoming of this dream sleep serves to negate a major barrier to revolutionary praxis on the part of oppressed classes; namely by calling into question teleologically based legitimations of power on the part of the ruling classes.

Britt points out that while Benjamin mentions the Bible itself very infrequently, the concept of "sacred text" plays a major role throughout his works. He also points out quite nicely how Benjamin's definition of sacred text incorporated not only external criteria for sacredness (i.e. a text's being sacred due to its having been revered by many) but also internal criteria for sacredness (i.e. a text's being sacred due to the revelation that it provides to the reader).

Benjamin's conception of sacred text sees interpretation, commentary and translation as necessary to the maintenance of the life of the sacred text. Without this dynamic relationship between text and interpretation, the pure language hidden within the text itself dies out. It is this dynamic relationship of text and

interpretation that Britt, drawing on the work of Michael Fishbane, refers to as the text's "scriptural function." Interpretation and translation of a text that either implicitly or explicitly possesses sacred characteristics help to keep it alive. However, this does not necessarily mean that a work's scriptural function keeps the "literal," meanings of the words and sentences in the text alive. These are only the bourgeois, and necessarily limited communications of man without the magical aspect that Benjamin ascribes to pure language. It means, rather, that interpretation and translation keep the interlinear, archetypal remnants of "pure language" that can not be reduced to bourgeois language alive.

In his examination of Deuteronomy 31-34 Britt points out that the Bible (which Benjamin considered to be the sacred text par excellence for western and European culture) itself utilizes a great deal of interpretation and commentary thereby itself producing a hermeneutical model for Biblical interpretation as a dynamic and ongoing interchange between text and interpretation. He suggests that "In Deuteronomy 31-34, textural reflexivity and variety illustrate the scriptural function" (25) furthermore, he suggests that, "Because the recovery of pure language is always an incomplete task, sacred text refers to the whole culture of interpretation proceeding from the Bible" (25, 30). The Bible, as this suggests, is not "set in stone" for Benjamin in a manner that forbids interpretation through modern, even ostensibly secularized eyes, but should be looked upon, rather, as a foundation upon which much of modern culture has been arrived at through such interpretation. This follows from the hermeneutical model found in the Bible itself.

It is for this reason that Benjamin feels (contrary to his contemporaries Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig) that direct confrontation with biblical text is the wrong approach to the re-attainment of pure language. "As revaluation, the Bible must necessarily evolve the fundamental linguistic facts, but these facts are only a philosophical representation of the spiritual being of the sacred text" (94). Benjamin's lack of direct confrontation with the Bible itself is thus explained by Britt to be the result of a belief on Benjamin's part that the "necessary linguistic facts" as they have evolved from the time of the fall must be understood in order for the would-be interpreter to engage with the Bible itself in a meaningful manner.

Britt suggests that Benjamin felt that modern readers "...see the world only through the darkened lens of the fall..." Consequently, he felt that the proper road to enlightenment was, not to return to the Bible itself, but rather to "first examine that lens" (137). To examine the Bible without understanding how we have come to our own contemporary experience of the sacred would lead to failure in comprehension of the original pure language contained therein.

The category of "sacred text," according to Britt, was not limited for Benjamin to those texts that are often explicitly referred to as sacred. Benjamin believed that Western, and European culture in particular, is thoroughly emersed in the sacred in all areas of life. This does not mean that he believed that Europe and the West in general are extra religious, but rather, that biblical notions have seeped so deeply into our cultures that even many of the ostensibly secular aspects of our lives contain implicit sacred influences. "In the west," Britt suggests, "the scriptural function obtains when a text takes part in the tradition of the Bible, or Biblical discourse; in Benjamin's terms, such a text becomes an archive of pure language" (24).

Britt goes on to suggest that Benjamin's interest in allegory, surrealism, and even in things such as architecture in his study of the Paris arcades stems from a notion that they also can be seen to possess a scriptural function. "...modern experience preserves religious and social phenomena through new expressions. Modernity paradoxically affirms the persistence of sacred phenomena that lie beyond the reach of contemporary experience" (112). Insofar as Benjamin believes that the Biblical tradition approximates western and European culture, the concept of the "scriptural function" of a text allows us to view even these texts which are not ostensibly sacred, as archives of pure language. Britt also suggests that Benjamin does his part in the attempt to regain pure language by virtue of his juxtaposing of disparate texts (be they overtly "sacred" or not) with one another creating a state which Benjamin refers to as "dialectics at a standstill." This tactic allows the implicit influences of pure language to flash, ever so fleetingly, before us (an experience that Benjamin referred to as "shock"). "The dialectical image is the 'caesura' in the movement of thought" (124). This pause makes reflection and enlightenment possible.

Benjamin's interest in allegory, in German tragic drama, and in the poetry of Baudelaire is the most immediately accessible and

understandable example of this technique. In allegory, by definition, we find implicitly stated references to deeper, hidden meanings. It is these hidden meanings that, to Benjamin, are manifestations of the lost pure language; of language that cannot be communicated directly in bourgeois human language. "The antinomies of allegory are also the antinomies of sacred text, which negotiate the contradiction between self expression and ordinary meaning, 'sacred standing and profane comprehensibility'" (104).

Benjamin, Britt suggests, utilized and endorsed at least four interrelated methods in his approach to making the interlinear caches of pure language at least intuitively accessible. These methods include 1) the rhetoric of the task, 2) the experimental mixing of genres, 3) the utilization of aphoristic fragments, and 4) the extensive use of quotations. The rhetoric of the task serves to keep the notion that pure language is ultimately obtainable in check. It serves as a constant reminder that, while we may approach the re-attainment of pure language, we can never rest on our laurels because history decontextualizes things and causes us to lose it once again. The other three methods were utilized, Britt believes, in the attempt to provide a sort of montage effect that is more than the sum of its explicit parts, i.e. a montage that exposes the "pure language" hidden therein. "Like a montage, the combination of genres [as well as the use of aphorisms and quotations] stimulates critical consciousness by complicating and disrupting ordinary discourse" (65).

With *Walter Benjamin and the Bible* Brian Britt has written a challenging, but informative book on an often difficult subject. Having gleaned numerous books and essays on the subject of Walter Benjamin and his various works, I would suggest that, as difficult as it is at times, Britt has provided a relatively clear interpretation of the works of an often perplexing social thinker. However, it should be emphasized that this book (as Britt himself emphasizes in his introduction) is just that; an interpretation. It is an interpretation, however, that is, for the most part argued for well and is well supported by references from Benjamin's own writings.

In a deceptively short work (156 pages) Britt provides the reader with a fairly compelling argument for his suggestion that the dynamic concept of "scriptural function" can be constructively utilized in coming to grasp Benjamin's understanding of sacred texts as they persist and manifest themselves in modernity. In the

process, he also provides what is, in effect, a unifying model for what has heretofore often been looked upon by many as Benjamin's disjointed pastiche of a literary corpus. In addition, Britt provides the reader with a look at Benjamin's life and philosophical background. He discusses Benjamin's main philosophical influences (especially Johan Georg Hamann [Ch4], and Wilhelm von Humboldt [Ch2]) as well as Benjamin's positions on theological issues in contrast to his contemporaries Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig [Ch4].

While I believe that this background is definitely of interest to the would-be Benjamin scholar, one gets the feeling that it sometimes drops into the flow of the text at inopportune places. I'm not entirely convinced that Britt's book could not have been arranged more effectively. Like Benjamin's body of work, Britt's book seems unnecessarily fragmented. While superfluous material is scarce (with the exception of a mildly interesting, but ultimately not particularly relevant appendix) and while all that is needed seems to be present, Britt's argument, none the less, seems unnecessarily disjointed.

In addition, I would again suggest that Britt, who admittedly seems to be aiming this book primarily at individuals in the field of religious studies, pays entirely too little attention to the political aspects of Benjamin's work. His argument for the role of sacred text and the scriptural function in Benjamin's works is well (if disjointedly) done, but Britt fails to effectively explain just why Benjamin was trying to attain the state of "dialectics at a standstill" in the first place. Obviously Benjamin's goal of a "cultural Zionism" which saw Jewish culture everywhere was a big part of it, but Marxism was also a major factor in his particular brand of cultural criticism. Without a more in depth exploration of Benjamin's unique brand of Marxism the would be Benjamin scholar could easily get lost.

The Bible and Walter Benjamin seems as though it might be of great interest to, and a potentially rewarding read for individuals interested in certain very specific topics. Individuals interested in (and somewhat aquatinted with) critical theory and its ongoing dialogue with poststructuralist thought should be particularly interested in this book, as should those individuals interested in the sociologies of religion, culture, and of language. This is a graduate level book, and it should be read closely, patiently and perhaps in conjunction with additional material regarding Benjamin's political positions. It has the potential to

provide a wealth of information to the careful reader. While somewhat flawed and limited in scope, this book covers its principal concern quite adequately.