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INTRODUCTION

Benjamin's Baroque: A Lost Object?

The history of this period and its taste is still very obscure.

—Johann Friedrich Herder, on the Baroque

One may compare [the critic] to a paleographer in front of a parchment whose faded text is covered by the lineaments of a more powerful script which refers to that text. As the paleographer would have to begin by reading the latter script, the critic would have to begin with commentary.

—Walter Benjamin, "Goethe's Elective Affinities"

Critical Periodization Studies

Herder's claim already more than two hundred years ago that the history of the Baroque is "obscure" is just as accurate in the early twenty-first century as it was in his day, this in spite of the enormous amount of attention devoted by literary, art historical, and art theoretical scholars to both the period (c. 1550–1700) and its styles in the intervening years.¹ *Benjamin's Library* thus engages in a "critical" task in the sense in which Benjamin uses that term in his "Elective Affinities" essay, taking as

1. "Die Geschichte dieser Zeit und dieses Geschmacks liegt noch sehr im Dunkeln" (qtd. in Benjamin, G: 1.1: 344; E: 167).

its subject the Baroque that becomes visible in a careful reading of the “commentary” on it provided in Benjamin’s famously arcane *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama*, which he in fact often referred to as his “Baroque book” (*Briefe* 1: 374).² The *Tragic Drama* book has provoked discussion far, far beyond the borders of Baroque studies, the field to which much of its textual analysis is devoted. Indeed, it might be fair to say that because both the Baroque and Benjamin’s understanding of its significance have been overwritten by so much later commentary, they have become nearly as invisible as Benjamin is visible, as unknown as he and the complexities of his thought are known—or at least assumed to be—today. And yet, Benjamin was just one of the many scholars engaged in the debates about the Baroque that were conducted with particular intensity beginning in the last decades of the nineteenth century and continuing on into the early part of the twentieth century. The project of this book is to rescue these discussions and Benjamin’s role in them from the obscurity into which they have “faded” by focusing on the important role the Baroque played in theorizations of the European modernity that exploded onto the world stage over the course of these very years, the same modernity that took both promising and destructive forms in Benjamin’s Germany in particular, both before and up through World War I.

As animated as debates about the Baroque were in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in German-speaking central Europe, however, most Anglophone and Anglo-American scholars today will be unfamiliar with even their broad outlines. This is so for a variety of reasons, among them that, although such conversations in some cases survived World War II by “immigrating” into the English-speaking world of the United States along with their German-Jewish scholar-authors, they had originally emerged out of specifically European discussions of the role of literature and art in the development of the modern nation-state and could thus take root in their new home only after they were translated (both literally and figuratively) into a new vocabulary and period logic more appropriate to the Cold War “New World.”³ Probably because the Baroque was often associated in the popular mind with a bizarre aesthetics, and with the age of absolutism by scholars, it was neither well understood nor approved of by more than a handful of Americans. Thus, after appearing briefly alongside metaphysical poetry, for example, as a field of study in departments of English and Comparative Literature in the 1960s and early 1970s, the Baroque gradually ceded pride of place to another early modern period, namely the Renaissance, which was the discursively and ideologically more congenial period of the two because it signified the “rebirth” of a vaguely democratic “classicism” with which the collegiate intelligentsia of an

2. For the “Elective Affinities” essay, see Benjamin, *Selected Writings* 1: 297–98.

3. Both discussions were ideologically weighted, if in different ways. For one example of how these European ideas were “translated” into U.S. terms, see Newman, “The Present Confusion Concerning the Renaissance.”

America *triumphans* could identify more easily in their new postwar role as custodians of the culture and achievements of a “West” that Europe could no longer defend. By the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Baroque had all but disappeared from the U.S. academic stage in most disciplines (except for Art History), jostled aside first by the relentlessly upbeat field of Renaissance studies and then by the innovative and interdisciplinary field of early modern studies, which joined forces with Renaissance studies to consign the Baroque to its academic grave.⁴ If and when it is referenced in Anglophone scholarship today, the term is associated primarily with the Latin American neo-Baroque (see Beverley), and occasionally with a more or less generically postmodern aesthetic and often characterized by a counter- or anti-hegemonic Deleuzian twist.⁵

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Europe, however, the study of the Baroque had unfolded in dialogue with the heavily ideological interrogation of period study writ large; in such discussions, the Renaissance was often understood not necessarily as the Baroque’s adversary, but rather as a kind of historiographic twin. Below I take up the ease with which both periods were in fact read as addressing questions of specifically national modernities at the time. Because the terms *Renaissance* and *early modern* continue to dominate the always weighted categories of period nomenclature that organize academic discourse about the late fifteenth through the early seventeenth century, it is important to consider first the politics of periodization theory in our own post- (or perhaps merely somewhat differently configured) neo-Cold War world. To what end do we continue to periodize using the categories of Renaissance and early modern rather than Baroque? Indeed, what are the stakes of our persistent need to periodize at all? It is under the aegis of critical periodization theory that we can best pose such questions.

Theories of periodization have been the object of renewed critical attention. Michel de Certeau argues, for example, that historiography creates periods by “select[ing] between what can be *understood* and what must be *forgotten* in order to obtain . . . intelligibility” (4). When periods are produced in this highly selective way, they become “reified” and “self-evident”; both the conditions under which they come into being and the ideological work of elision that the act of periodization performs are forgotten in turn (K. Davis 10). De Certeau notes that there are nevertheless always “shards created by the selection” process, “remainders left aside by explication,” which “surviv[e]” and “come back” to “discretely perturb . . . [the] system of interpretation” constructed by their repression (4). The production of the “Middle Ages” is a particularly useful case of the process that de Certeau describes. Scholars have pondered, for example, the ways in which the “periodizing operation” has over and over again found in the medieval a counterpoint to the

4. Renaissance and early modern studies are often thought to be antithetical to one another; see Marcus. Some scholars have learned to see the “darker sides” of the European Renaissance; see Mignolo.

5. See Deleuze.

tempo and concerns of an Enlightened “modernity” that characteristically uses its forgetting of a ‘devout’ Middle Ages to identify itself as marching ever forward in a “telic” trajectory of rational and thus implicitly secular progress (K. Davis 1–2 and 84). This kind of “medievalization” is often deployed in civilizational terms when the project is to reduce one’s adversaries and their agendas to a state of political nonage. Those who would not “advance” to “our” version of “democracy” are labeled “primitive,” “pre-modern,” and “feudal” and can thus be cast in the role of needing (often strong-armed) assistance in order to “develop” in the right way (Holsinger, *Neomedievalism*).

According to medievalist Bruce Holsinger, the invocation of the medieval nevertheless functioned somewhat differently for the avant-garde French theorists at the forefront of the charge to define the postmodern in the post–World War II period. Their project was, rather, to divest the present of such putative “advances,” of the “baggage of humanism, capitalism, . . . and triumphalist individualism” all in one, by reaching back over the demon Enlightenment to find in the Middle Ages the origins of a postmodern “now” free of an instrumentalizing modernity’s downsides (Holsinger, *Pre-Modern Condition* 197; K. Davis 5–6). As much as the progressive narrative of “forgetting” the Middle Ages may seem to be challenged by this second set of moves, the medieval is nevertheless still the main ghost in the forward-thrusting periodization machine. By embracing the Middle Ages as “modernity[’s] most consistently abjected . . . temporal other,” this iteration of the postmodern found in the medieval premodern a panoply of “transformative” and energizing ways to (re)invent itself as the new guardian and defender of redemptive forms of mysticism, eroticism, and irrationalism inherited from a past previously silenced, but now “reborn” (Holsinger, *Pre-Modern Condition* 5). The medieval past is neither “simply inherited” nor “patiently reconstructed” when it is “translated” into the present in either of these ways. Instead, in both cases, it is “summoned,” as a “relic” “from another place,” to become the sacred centerpiece of a “whole system of thought” that, whether modern or postmodern, consumes and replaces it (202, 4) in progressivist ways.

As revealing as such innovative historiography has been of the stakes involved in the role that the Middle Ages have been asked to play in the story of period evolution, it has not yet addressed the full range of dyads in whose toils the medieval as the origin of the unmodern has classically been caught. Nor has the role of situation, nation, and place been sufficiently assessed in relation to these pairs.⁶ One of the most salient examples of why it is necessary to think period and place together in fact involves the well-known claim that it was the Renaissance (rather than an Enlightened “modernity”) that first broke with the Middle Ages and, in so doing,

6. Holsinger (*Neomedievalism, Neoconservatism*) nevertheless does focus on the use by the “West” writ large of neomedievalizing logics to reduce its “others” to a primitive state, with the United States as a central player in this periodizing game.

became what Jacob Burckhardt already in 1860 so famously called the “mother” of “our” “civilization” (1). Cannily taking a step backward in order to progress beyond the medieval by fulfilling the promise of antiquity in its inauguration of a new and modern age, this “filiational” Renaissance—with its almost “biological link [that] binds us to the Renaissance, especially to the Renaissance in Italy”—has characteristically driven the narrative of modernity just as much as (yet also in tandem with) the Enlightenment (Mohlo 133). When understood in this way, it is a specifically *European* Renaissance that participates in what Julia Reinhard Lupton has called the logic of “typology” that is “one of the foundational principles of modern periodization” theory, a logic based on a hermeneutics of imitation, emulation, and figuration (23). Just as the New Testament and Christianity are said to both repeat and complete—and thus contain, supersede, and cancel out—the Old Testament and Judaism (23), specific *national* Renaissances are said to resurrect, repeat, and replace antiquity in the context of the evolving “modern” vernacular nation-state. In this sense, there is always a sacralizing element implicit in what we assume to be the secular periodicity of historiographic work, a sense that one period and place can “fulfill” the promise of another and be both whole and wholly present unto itself. When particular nations adopt this logic, the implications are clear.

The link between period and nation is important in several ways that I discuss in this book. My specific example is Benjamin’s interest in the *German* Baroque. But a critical inquiry into this nexus deserves attention beyond the discipline of Germanics. The study of the European Renaissance in general is characteristically “nationalized,” for example, when it is pursued in departments and seminars of English, French, or Italian, or as the subject of lectures at specialized conferences that nearly always tend to list in the direction of one or the other of the “great” modern nation-states. Even in our globalized world, well-patrolled borders thus continue to (de)limit both the production and the transmission of specialized knowledge. Museum collections are frequently displayed according to a similar logic, such that visitors may witness the beginnings of a national tradition in the state’s “early modern” (indeed, sometimes actually pre-nation-state) period (e.g., “Italian Renaissance”) and its rise to prominence thereafter. The result is a narrative of the emergence from political and confessional particularism and heterogeneity of an organically unified “nation,” a story that of course obscures the ways in which internal difference must always be eliminated on the way to “national” identity. Citizen-students are interpellated, or hailed, into such disciplinarily and institutionally concretized accounts of the “golden age” of the national Renaissances when they are asked to study the period—with both its glittering history and its colonializing “dark sides”—in this way. As a result, the period becomes part of an evolutionary tale in which all forms of civilizational progress and cultural production are pressed into the service of narratives of national (self) overcoming and contemporary fulfillment similar to the one Lupton describes. When studied and taught in this way, the Renaissance comes to play the same kind of sanctifying role for today’s secular states as the one

with which many sixteenth- and seventeenth-century theorists of the European vernaculars had originally invested their “mother tongues” when they identified them with the Adamic language capable of signifying the world with an accuracy bestowed by God (Borst).

When the Renaissance is deployed as an institutionally and historiographically circumscribed and homogeneous “national” period in these ways, it is used to mark the beginnings of the accession of the sovereign state to its “modern” maturity, with the rights, responsibilities, and duties to both defend a single version of its cultural past and expand its literal borders as it sees fit. The modern state so designated thus becomes far more than just the sum of its literal parts, far more than the merely geographical or even geopolitical entity we commonly associate with the term. Even the clear fictionality of this outsized, imagined form of itself cannot prevent the actions of any individual state from also becoming terribly concrete under ideational banners such as “freedom” and “democracy,” which it seeks to impose on both its own citizenry and other polities in the name of civilizational progress. In the face of these kinds of celebratory stories, post-“modern” and postcolonial critics can easily dismiss the study of the historical Renaissance as coincident with the cascading period logic and progressivist ideologies of both modernity and the self-aggrandizing imperial states that medievalist and theorist Kathleen Biddick calls “supersessionary” (2). While it is certainly worth asking whether it was not some version of precisely this kind of supersessionary Renaissance that became the banner under which both the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European nation-states and the Cold War United States marched when they endorsed the study of the Renaissance with such enthusiasm, such moves did not stop there. Indeed, it bears observing that many subnational world-cultural traditions—such as the Harlem and the Maori Renaissances, as well as the continent-spanning “African” Renaissance—may also have used the idea of cultural “rebirth” as a way of finding a seat at the table of “modernity” (Schildgen et al.; Ngugi).⁷ When a post-colonial culture enters upon its “Renaissance,” we must ask: What will come next?

But what about the Baroque? As most art historians know, Burckhardt’s “modern” Renaissance in Europe was originally joined at the hip with another period in addition to the medieval, namely the Baroque, which played its own, if somewhat differently configured, supersessionary role at the time. Both Burckhardt himself and his student and friend Heinrich Wölfflin were central participants in this debate, the latter most famously in his *Renaissance und Barock* (1888); I discuss Wölfflin’s foundational claims about the period in chapter 1. In the context of the forms

7. The emergence of the term in such contexts is not surprising. Historian of nationalism Anthony D. Smith explains that frequently there are “cultural and literary renaissances associated with nationalist movements,” movements that rely precisely upon tropes of “cultural gestation” cultivated by “‘humanistic’ intellectuals” who are in fact “disproportionately represented in nationalist movements and revivals” (6–7).

of critical periodization theory under examination here, it is important to note that scholars have often argued (incorrectly, I think) that in the Renaissance-Baroque relation, Wölfflin set the former above, over, and against the latter by characterizing the Baroque as the Renaissance's "decay," in the process creating the "un-modern" "historiographical monstrosity" that the Baroque has become (Hampton 1). It is—somewhat counterintuitively—precisely this limping version of the Baroque, seen as an alternative to the modernity associated with the periods said to have both preceded and followed it (namely the Renaissance and the Enlightenment), that has been aligned with and seen as an origin of the "Renaissance" of the neo-Baroque in the Latin American and Caribbean "margins," as noted above. Here, like the Renaissance, the Baroque functions in a supersessionary way, allowing the periphery to become the center in clever ways. When the Baroque plays this role in the contemporary world, it is nevertheless operating in ways that are historically true to form, picking up where it left off at its very birth moment as a historiographic category in and around the time when Benjamin's "Baroque book" was under way. Indeed, at the time, the period that he was studying was actually ideologically never all that far from the "modern" Renaissance that Burckhardt described because of its articulation as a "national" form, an articulation that demanded from the Baroque that it participate in a filiation narrative of its own. Already some time ago, René Wellek claimed that discussions of the Baroque were always "frankly ideological" (92). He was certainly correct in terms of the debates about the German Baroque that I discuss here.

The Baroque that we encounter in Benjamin's thought had its roots in decisively "telic" (K. Davis 84) assumptions variously associated with the period at the time. Indeed, part of what we might call the Renaissance of the Baroque in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Germany was specifically devoted to celebrating the period as a privileged moment of national literary-historical rebirth. The Baroque was aligned with the Middle Ages, Romanticism, and Expressionism/Surrealism all in one in the creation of a phalanx-like series of antihumanist aesthetics and *Weltanschauungen* perhaps opposed to classicism of any sort, but nevertheless the origin of a countertradition of a continuous German culture reaching its fulfillment in the present of the recently consolidated nation-state.⁸ Petra Boden's work is helpful in describing the implication of this logic in the deeply nationalistic reform programs in *Geistesgeschichte* more broadly and in the study of any number of specific "national" cultural periods after approximately 1890 as well (Boden,

8. On the "canonization" of the Baroque as an anticlassical period, see Link-Heer, whose work is nevertheless premised on a problematic collapsing of the Baroque and the allegedly "deviant" style of Mannerism into one and the same thing in a way that obscures what was actually the rather more traditional role that the Baroque as a nondeviant period of German literature and culture was asked to play in an ideology of the modern nation. On the "positive" consideration of the Baroque in connection with a problematically "anti-humanistic" German *Volkstum*, see Honold 99.

“Stamm—Geist—Gesellschaft”). The previously much-maligned Baroque was one of the eras that benefited most from these new and integrative “impulses,” as Boden shows (219). The contest to define the relation between the Renaissance and the Baroque during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a contest in which the *Tragic Drama* book was also engaged, was thus undertaken *within* the confines of the tradition of national “literary history” that Benjamin so famously distinguished from the “literary criticism” he is often said to have preferred. The latter was the “modern” and “mortifying” analysis of individual artifacts and texts, the former their “traditional” integration into narratives about the flows of national literary and cultural history.⁹ The Renaissance-Baroque periodization debate that Benjamin privileges in the *Tragic Drama* book in fact belonged to this more “traditional” field. A close reading of his arguments about it thus allows us to catch a glimpse of Benjamin as a line worker in a powerful rhetorical economy working overtime in the early twentieth century to construct a more centered and orthodox national patrimony on behalf of the German *Kultur* nation.

Evolutionary logics about the German literary tradition are everywhere at work in the *Tragic Drama* book. Benjamin yokes together the passion plays of the Middle Ages and the Baroque tragic drama, for example, and links medieval to Baroque Christology, Baroque to Romantic theories of allegory, and Baroque to Expressionist art. It could even be argued that his messianic thinking and what Samuel Weber sees as the very project of defining “origin” (*Ursprung*) as the “rethinking” of the “concepts of history, tradition, and all they entail” (“Genealogy of Modernity” 467) are themselves part and parcel of developing a supremely integrative “anticlassical” tradition of German national culture. The several clear patterns of “rhythm” that characterize the treatment of German literary history in the *Tragic Drama* book suggest the centrality of periodicity to Benjamin’s notion of origin, which he himself designates as a regulative theory of “periodization” (*Gesammelte Schriften* 1.3: 935). While perhaps reminiscent of Nietzsche’s theory of eternal recurrence, which attempts to disrupt “progressive” history, as Richard Wolin suggests (xxv), then, Benjamin’s theory of origin may also be understood in the context of theories of cultural continuity designed both rhetorically and substantively to create a place for German literature and culture writ large in the narratives of a coming national modernity that were widespread at the time. Finally, it is important to note that the allegedly deeply antithetical dynamics of the Renaissance-Baroque paradigm, which it has become traditional to claim (although not in association with Benjamin’s ideas) began in the late nineteenth century and coalesced into the standoff between a “classicizing” Renaissance versus and above a “maverick” and perhaps even avant-garde Baroque during the very years during which Benjamin was at

9. See, again, “Literary History and the Study of Literature” (1931), in Benjamin, *Selected Writings* 2: 459–65. On the “mortification” of works by criticism, see the *Tragic Drama* book (G: 1.1: 357; E: 182).

work on the *Tragic Drama* book, had not yet done so at the time. Rather, precisely at the moment of what Marc Fumaroli (10) has called the “launching in Germany” of debates about the Baroque, Benjamin and other periodization theorists had yet to nail down—if he or they ever wanted to or could—whether and, if so, exactly how it differed from the Renaissance and where the historical or aesthetic dividing lines lay. The concept of origin as Benjamin defines it guarantees that this narrative will remain “incomplete” (“[u]nvollendet”; “[u]nabgeschlossen”; G: 1.1: 226; E: 45), part of the project of thinking the nation’s modernity by engaging in periodization debates, a project that was unfinished at the time that he wrote.

That theorizing the Baroque as part of a specifically German narrative of nation was ideologically loaded during these years is expressed in the most compact of ways by the eminent literary historian Karl Borinski, who makes clear in 1919 that there had not yet been any grand settlement about the relation of Burckhardt’s Renaissance, identified primarily with Italy, to the German context, and to the Reformation and the German Lutheran tradition above all, which Borinski, citing a whole host of scholars, explicitly identifies as the period of “German rebirth” (*deutsche Wiedergeburt*, 6). The political and ideological message and influence of a confession and church that in 1917—and thus at one of the most destructive moments of World War I both abroad and on the home front—had celebrated its quadricentennial jubilee nevertheless made a narrative of joyful rebirth difficult to align with the here and now of defeat at the end of this most brutal of modern wars. In this context, the much underestimated importance of Benjamin’s interest in the *Tragic Drama* book in Baroque playwrights whom he explicitly identifies as “Lutheran” (G: 1.1: 317; E: 138) must be taken into account (this although at least some of the Silesians were in all likelihood crypto-Calvinists). Which version of the origins of modernity was the Baroque—as the afterlife of the Reformation (rather than of the Renaissance)—supposed to represent in Germany and for whom, and how could individual artworks be understood when measured against the very abstract categories generated by such highly politicized debates? What, finally, were the consequences of institutionalizing a version of the nation’s cultural history that respected conventional confessionalized categories and terms when precisely that confession, namely Lutheranism, had been the sponsor of a devastating war? Benjamin later referred to the wartime and postwar debates as occurring during a “transitional and re-evaluating period of scholarship” (*Gesammelte Schriften* 3: 191). For him, as for others, the project of what a German modernity with origins in the early modern Baroque was to be in the aftermath of a war often conducted in Protestant terms was unfinished as well.

Given that the debates about a specifically German Baroque were ongoing when Benjamin was writing the *Tragic Drama* book, it would be foolish to say that he came down clearly on one side or the other of the tussles over nation and periodization by the time of the book’s publication in 1928. Indeed, he appears to have continued to rethink the positions he had outlined there in the years that followed

in ways that have been little remarked on. In the “supplemental work on the tragic drama book” notes he apparently made for a possible second edition (*Gesammelte Schriften* 1.3: 953–55), for example, Benjamin lists among the texts he needs to consult titles by a future member of the Institute for Social Research, K. A. Wittfogel. The reference to Wittfogel indicates that Benjamin may have already been on the way to developing a historiographically more traditional, materialist understanding of a different kind of “origin [*Genesis*] of the Baroque tragic drama,” perhaps as a matter of the historical unfolding of class conflict about which he writes in his review of Hans Heckel's *Geschichte der deutschen Literatur in Schlesien* (History of German Literature in Silesia), the year after the *Tragic Drama* book appeared (3: 193). Elsewhere and not too much later, Benjamin nevertheless also ponders the possibility of extending his analysis into a more authentically figural approach not unlike the one often associated with his earlier “messianic” period; the theory of “origin” he developed in his “work on the tragic drama” may well be related to Franz Rosenzweig's more religiously inflected concept of “revelation” (*Offenbarung*) (6: 207), Benjamin writes. Here, the Baroque might function in the more typological sense described above. Finally, sometime after 1930, we see Benjamin returning to his “theory of the afterlife of works” (*Lehre vom Fortleben der Werke*), which is crucial to the *Tragic Drama* book, positing that such a theory might be best understood when correlated with “Adorno's theory of ‘*Schrumpfung*,’” or “diminution” (6: 174). These post-1928 references all represent very different directions of method and thought that Benjamin continued to entertain; they are as various as the several historical, art historical, and literary-historical and critical versions of the Baroque with which his Baroque went on to intersect after 1933, debates I describe in the conclusion.

Burkhardt Lindner has usefully portrayed Benjamin's writings as less of a “synthesis of a [single] theoretical position” than an “explosive mix of seismographic intellectual and historical experiences” (“*Links hatte noch alles sich zu enträtseln*” 7). The description is apt for his reading of the Baroque too. The *Tragic Drama* book illuminates not only what Benjamin thought about Romanticism, neo-Kantianism, and messianism, then, but also how he understood the complex “mix” of periodization debates under way at the time. The terms “modernity,” “the modern,” and “modernism” of course do not all mean the same thing, and the mistaken confusion, yet also serendipitous intersection, of these terms with one another has led them to lead vexed lives in studies of Benjamin's ideas. While I argue here that the question of “the modern” was prominent in discussions of the Baroque when Benjamin wrote, also in close association with debates about the genealogy and significance of any number of narratives of national evolution and continuity in the history of the German *Kulturnation*, I am not suggesting that Benjamin set out to write a “nationalist” literary history. That he abhorred such approaches is clear in his review of Max Kommerell's *Der Dichter als Führer in der deutschen Klassik* (The Poet as Leader in German Classicism) (1928), for example, which was published in

the journal *Die literarische Welt* in 1930, but written in 1929, just one year after the *Tragic Drama* book appeared (*Gesammelte Schriften* 3: 252–59). But writing about literary-historical periods in these years involved one in debates about national culture in highly scripted ways. It is this kind of involvement that I investigate here.

Texts as Witnesses

Benjamin's Arcades Project was, as he wrote to Gershom Scholem in 1935 (*Briefe* 2: 653–54), the second installment of the approach he had taken in the *Tragic Drama* book some years before. Both works belonged to the virtual industry of archeologies of the modern that flourished in the early twentieth century. Taking place within the very halls of academe from which Benjamin was eventually excluded, but which he still hoped to enter as he wrote the book, the debates about the role of the Baroque in this modernity have for the most part been barred from consideration in connection with his work, almost as if to take revenge on the offending institutions on his behalf. These debates infiltrate the *Tragic Drama* book in some of the extremely visible ways to which I now turn. Benjamin shares a canon of Baroque texts with disciplinarily recognized discussions of their vexed periodization such as Paul Stachel's *Seneca und das deutsche Renaissancedrama* (Seneca and German Renaissance Drama) (1907), for example; he may even have borrowed the notion of the "ruin" as crucial to the Baroque from Karl Borinski's famous *Die Antike in Poetik und Kunsttheorie von Ausgang des klassischen Altertums bis auf Goethe und Wilhelm von Humboldt* (Antiquity in Poetological and Art Theory from the End of the Classical Period to Goethe and Wilhelm von Humboldt) (1914), where it appears prominently. My purpose here is nevertheless not to dissect *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama* via "source study" as traditionally and entirely too simply understood. Rather, my aim is to explain how to "re-source" the book such that the contours of contemporary debates about the Baroque become visible. Medievalist Bruce Holsinger describes *ressourcement* as the "rediscovery or redeployment" of previously marginalized or forgotten sources in the service of "contemporary reform."¹⁰ Benjamin endorses this kind of work in the *Tragic Drama* book when he recommends "open[ing oneself] . . . up to the source texts" (G: 1.1: 376; E: 201). Resourcing the Baroque as it existed when Benjamin wrote about it is thus not a question of tracking the details of the "influences" of prior scholarship on his ideas. As Benjamin himself famously explained, "It is primarily the lethargic [scholar] who is 'influenced'; anyone who is an [active] learner sooner or later succeeds in mastering whatever becomes useful to him in pre-existing [foreign] work and makes it part of

10. Holsinger's prime example is the mid-twentieth-century *ressourcement* by reformist French Catholic Henri de Lubac in association with the radical reforms of Vatican II (*Pre-Modern Condition* 163–67). Holsinger himself "re-sources" avant-garde and postmodern theory by attending to an alternative canon of texts with which it intersects; see Holsinger 1–25.

his [own] work as a matter of technique" (*Gesammelte Schriften* 4.1: 507). Rather, we must learn to see the ways Benjamin "open[ed himself] up to" the numerous theories of the Baroque circulating at the time.

One way of embarking on the mission of re-sourcing is to consider the libraries Benjamin used when writing his book. In literal terms, one of these was the Prussian State Library on Unter den Linden in Berlin, which had extensive holdings of both Baroque-era texts and secondary studies of the period. Benjamin did much of his research for the *Tragic Drama* book at the Prussian State Library, and its collection contained most of the texts to which he refers. Another more figurative "library" that he consulted was the greater archive of books and journals in which the discussions of the Baroque that he engages in the *Tragic Drama* book were conducted. The holdings of both of these libraries are clearly indicated in the citations and references that clutter both the body of Benjamin's text and the extensive notes that accompany it. Reconstructing representative dialogues between his "Baroque book" and the works present in these collections reveals how difficult it would have been for Benjamin *not* to adopt the premises of debates about the Baroque as a period of national rebirth circulating at the time, while also raising the possibility that his recalcitrant theory of origin may well have been developed in response to them. The possibility of overhearing the conversations in which Benjamin was involved as he wrote, and understanding them as more than just "fictive" dialogues with texts about or associated with the Baroque, has existed for quite some time.¹¹ He was exceedingly fastidious about his reading habits, for example; the sequential list of books that he read beginning in 1916–17 and up to the end of his life is available in volume 7 of the Frankfurt edition of his works.¹² Benjamin also gives precise indications in the notes to the *Tragic Drama* book about where in existing scholarship expanded treatments of the arguments with which he has engaged may be found.¹³

11. See Kemp, "Fernbilder" 224. I do agree with Kemp's claim of the importance of understanding Benjamin as involved in a process of "taking" (*Nehmen*), "reworking" (*Verarbeiten*), and "developing further" (*Weiterentwickeln*), however.

12. Benjamin's letters are full of discussions of the books he purchased and read; in the letters he often delivers even harsher assessments of some of the books whose titles clutter the footnotes of the *Tragic Drama* book, where he is somewhat more diplomatic.

13. The "philological worries" about gathering further "references and facts acceptable to current scholarship" about the history of Greek tragedy, for example, about which he writes to his friend Florens Christian Rang in 1924 (*Gesammelte Schriften* 1.3: 892; *Briefe* 1: 332–34), are thus everywhere audible, as is his desire to be in step (albeit in a somewhat arrhythmic kind of way) with a broader academic discussion about the Baroque. In 1926, Benjamin claims to be concerned, for example, about how "official scholarship" will receive the book (*Briefe* 1: 438). Later, he writes in a letter to Hofmannsthal in 1928 of his hope not just that the Warburg circle will take note of the book (see Weigel), but also that it will be reviewed by Richard Alewyn, the up-and-coming young star of Baroque studies during these years (*Gesammelte Schriften* 1.3: 909). That Benjamin thought, finally, that he had successfully inserted himself into the academic guild of those working in the field is tragically evident as late as 1938 in his statement in a French-language curriculum vitae that the *Tragic Drama* book "was reviewed very favorably by literary critics as well as by academics" (6: 222–23). Steiner ("Allegorie und Allergie") has shown that the book was in fact more widely reviewed even in Germany than had initially been thought.

To begin the task of reading Benjamin's *Origin of the German Tragic Drama* for the evidence it provides about some of the volumes that made up his libraries is thus not a difficult task. Doing so confirms Pierre Macherey's claim—to which the title of this book refers—that “every book contains in itself the labyrinth of a library” (49). Reading a book with its library means calling the texts of a book's library as witnesses, allowing the complex and often self-contradictory “mental tools” (Macherey thought of them as “the conditions of a work's possibility”; cf. Eagleton 13, qtd. in Sprinker x) of a particular period and set of discursive systems out of which the book arose to emerge into view. The notion of calling “texts as witnesses,” as I understand it, is derived from the work of the early twentieth-century *Annales* school historians Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre, who found that the questions “How can we explain . . .?” and “Was it possible that . . .?” rather than “Is it true that . . .?” were the most important questions to be posed in the pursuit of historical understanding (Febvre, *Problem of Unbelief* 16). Such questions could best be answered, they claimed, by examining as wide a variety of “evidence” as possible. The complex nature of *Annales* school methodology as articulated by its founding fathers, Bloch and Febvre, during the very same years that Benjamin was writing his book is a vast subject that has been ably discussed by Stuart Clark, Carlo Ginzburg, and Ulrich Raulff. The nuanced way in which Bloch and Febvre dealt with texts as witnesses suggests how re-sourcing Benjamin can begin.

Sometime between 1939 and 1941, after his Jewish ancestry had barred him from occupying his professorship at the Sorbonne, medievalist Marc Bloch, who, along with Febvre, founded the *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale* (Annals of Economic and Social History), made notes for a brief and poignant little book, the *Apologie pour l'histoire; ou, Métier d'historien* (The Historian's Craft). Bloch never published—or even finished—what can be seen as his own calling to account of his life's work (cf. Bloch 4). Active in the French Resistance, he was captured and executed by the Germans in 1944, just four years after Benjamin took his own life. Both men opposed the notion that history could or should be told through the lens of what Bloch calls the “idol of origins” (29).¹⁴ As interesting as a comparison of Bloch's and Benjamin's persons and explicit theories of history might be, it is nevertheless Bloch's nuanced examination of the question of historical evidence in his book in which I am interested here because it serves as a model for the kind of historical work in which I am engaged in this book. According to his colleague Febvre, who undertook the “delicate task” of preparing the “unfinished manuscript for publication” (cf. Bloch xiii), *The Historian's Craft* was to be a “manifesto” of a new historiographic method for the “younger generation,” the central point of which was to be an understanding of the status of the “observed fact” (32, 54). If an

14. Benjamin's comment that he was interested less in issues of “beginnings” (*Entstehung*) than in those of “origin” (*Ursprung*) (G: 1.1: 226; E: 45) in the *Tragic Drama* book resonates here.

examination of some of the “facts” that can be “observed” in Benjamin’s book on the Baroque is not to lead to the same kind of opportunistic “occupation” as that described in the quote at the beginning of the preface to this book, it must define carefully both the status of texts as witnesses to history and the methods of “cross-examination” to be employed when assessing them.

As both Raulff (184–217) and Ginzburg have shown, Bloch had been committed to developing a “critique of witnessing” ever since his short essay of 1914, “Critique historique et critique du témoignage” (Historical Criticism and a Critique of Witnessing). Although it is tempting to claim that he did so in open wartime rejection of what is so often dismissed as the “nationalist” tradition of “German positivism,” Bloch was also clearly in dialogue in this essay with the equally as important and clearly German-identified method of *Geistesgeschichte* and with Karl Lamprecht’s “universal” cultural history in particular, both of which had actually been attacked in Germany for their “unpatriotic” failure to be “political” enough (see Werner 126–32). Directed primarily against what was in fact the French tradition of positivist history (Schulin 199), Bloch’s articulation of a critical theory of witnessing in *The Historian’s Craft* grew out of this mix.

Early on in *The Historian’s Craft*, Bloch offers an example of the difficulty, but also the rewards, of considering the “observed fact” in nonreductive ways:

In the tenth century a.d., a deep gulf, the Zwin, indented the Flemish coast. It was later blocked up with sand. To what department of knowledge does the study of this phenomenon belong? At first sight, anyone would suggest geology. The action of alluvial deposit, the operation of ocean currents, or, perhaps, the changes in sea level: was not geology invented and put on earth to deal with just such as these? Of course. But at close range, the matter is not quite so simple. Is there not first a question of investigating the origin of the transformation? Immediately, the geologist is forced to ask questions that are no longer strictly within his jurisdiction. For there is no doubt that the silting of the gulf was at least assisted by dike construction, changing the direction of the channel, and drainage—all activities of man, founded in collective needs and made possible only by a certain social structure. At the other end of the chain there is a new problem: the consequences. At a little distance from the end of the gulf, and communicating with it by a short river passage, rose a town. This was Bruges. By the waters of the Zwin it imported and exported the greatest part of the merchandise which made of it, relatively speaking, the London or New York of that day. Then came, every day more apparent, the advance of the sand. As the water receded, Bruges vainly extended its docks and harbor further toward the mouth of the river. Little by little, its quays fell asleep. To be sure, this was not the sole cause of its decline. . . . But this was certainly at least one of the most efficacious of the links in the causal chain. (23–24)

Bloch’s example suggests that historical knowledge projects necessarily transgress disciplinary and methodological borders; here, the “fact” of the accumulation of sand must be embedded in a complex network of diverse causes and effects. Such

projects thus begin with an assessment of the famous “detail” so important to Warburg. But for understanding, they then go far beyond surface empiricism into the realm of the pre- and posthistory of the “deep gulf” of the Zwin. What seems like an assumption of the “progressive intelligibility” of the data that Bloch’s unpacking of his example reveals (10) nevertheless ultimately unmask itself as producing a kind of “history” that has no clean lines. From alluvial deposits to quays to the rise and fall of Bruges’s commercial class, and thus of the city’s historical fortunes, and back again: these are the diverse, yet linked, heterogeneous, yet not hierarchically organized “tracks”—Bloch attributes the term to François Simiand (55)—of the “vast chaos of reality” (22) that both produces and is produced by the historian’s “data.”

In the 1914 version of these ideas, Bloch had suggested the similarity of historical and scientific investigation. One can come close to probable, if not absolute, conclusions about “wie es eigentlich gewesen [ist]” via comparative study, he seems to claim, assessing the reliability of historical evidence and testimony by juxtaposing a wide range of sources. A witness’s account of his heroic crossing of a flooded river can be assessed in light of statistics about the less than spectacular heights reached by floodwaters in the same year, in other words. The illustration is Bloch’s (see Ginzburg 129–31). But within ten years and as a result of his observations of the disorientation and trauma of soldiers in the trenches of World War I, who could not testify accurately even about what they had themselves seen and done, Bloch began to understand that inaccuracies, even deliberate errors, were also part of history and should not be understood as mistakes. Indeed, “errors” are important “witnesses” themselves. For Bloch, historical investigation was thus a “laboratory” rather than a “tribunal” (Raulff 193). The historian’s task is one of interrogation, to be sure, but interrogation as undertaken by a “teaching judge” (*juge d’instruction*) who investigates, rather than by the judge as an official who adjudicates and decides between the false and the true (Bloch 138–40). By the early 1940s, and in explicit dialogue with the changes in “mental climate” brought on by “Einstein’s mechanics” and “quantum theory” (17), Bloch is thus able to claim that history can have the “dignity of a science,” even as he cautions against expecting closure in its practice. Only the complexly interwoven set of factors involved in the grand “experiment” of history can be observed in their concrete “residues” (54), he writes; the phenomena themselves ultimately remain “inaccessible” (55). Bloch was thus not naive about the impossibility of ever getting to a Rankean “things as they really happened, ‘wie es eigentlich gewesen’” (138). Indeed, in a phrase that sounds uncannily like Benjamin in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, Bloch is clear that the processes by which evidence is transmitted, the vagaries of what survives and what perishes, owe much to “the goddess Catastrophe” (73), who often intervenes in cataclysmic fashion in our access to the past. Benjamin’s *Tragic Drama* book is a phenomenon, or “fact,” along these kinds of Blochian lines. It cannot be reduced to its “sources” or required to illustrate what Benjamin may or may not have “gotten wrong” (or right) about the Baroque. Rather, it provides evidence that helps explain what a thesis on the Baroque could have meant at the time that he wrote.

Texts themselves are mediating as well as mediated events. It was Lucien Febvre, Bloch's colleague and fellow Annalist, who understood and exploited the function of books as historical witnesses of these several kinds. Unlike Benjamin and Bloch, Febvre survived the war. Historian Natalie Zemon Davis characterizes Febvre's famous work on Rabelais, *The Problem of Unbelief in the Sixteenth Century: The Religion of Rabelais* (1942), which was written and published in occupied Paris, as a book written "at a time of secrecy and veiled meanings . . . about secrecy and veiled meanings" (4), and thus itself evidence about how to survive. By considering a huge array of treatises and polemics, scientific, medical, and theological tracts, popular broadsheets, poetry, and contemporary manuals of language use as "testimony and witnesses" of what men of the sixteenth century would have been "capable of hearing and comprehending" (*Problem of Unbelief* 16, 5), Febvre came to the conclusion that it would not have been possible, in the sixteenth century, for Rabelais to have been the "atheist" that Abel Lefranc, against whom Febvre wrote his book, had claimed he was. According to Davis, Febvre was nevertheless more timid in the 1940s than Rabelais had been in the 1540s and for obvious reasons avoided introducing into his discussion of the "possibilities" of religious thought in the Renaissance the additional evidence of the Jewish thought that Davis claims is so important for understanding Rabelais. In support of her argument, Davis adduces several fourteenth-century manuscripts by "Provençal rabbis" that by the sixteenth century were printed in Italy (19); her mimicry, yet also supplementation, of Febvre's method displays how working with texts is a way of looking "not for certainties, but for possibilities." Both Febvre and Davis thus move "outward" from a specific text, namely Rabelais' *Gargantua et Pantagruel*, "into the collective mental and affective world of the time" (8). Both begin with a discrete question about what and how a specific set of terms and texts could be understood, and end by setting the several periods with which they intersect into motion. Benjamin might have recognized in this method his own fundamental principle that literature is "a set of principles for the analysis of history" (*Gesammelte Schriften* 3: 290). In *Benjamin's Library*, I follow Bloch's, Febvre's, and Davis's models by beginning with the evidence the *Tragic Drama* book itself provides, using it as a witness to the times when the Baroque was the subject at hand. Here it is important to remember, with Febvre, that the "history of the sciences and the history of thought are made up of fragments of violently contrasting designs and colors, a series of theories and attitudes that not only are distinct from one another but oppose and contradict one another" (*Problem of Unbelief* 354). "Cross-examining" *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama* in this way thus opens up only more—and not fewer—ways of reading Benjamin with the Baroque.

The juxtaposition of Benjamin's work with the methodologies of the early and extremely interdisciplinary phases of the Annales School, which nearly coincided with it, is a novel one. Indeed, even though he came from a different disciplinary location, Marc Bloch's observation of the conundrum that telling history presented

during these difficult times reflects well on Benjamin's concerns. In 1953, Joseph Strayer writes of Bloch's *The Historian's Craft*, which was written around 1940, the year Benjamin took his own life:

The more history we write, the more we worry about the value and nature of history. The increase in the number of books on historiography and historical methodology is proportionally far greater than the number of historians. Such books have been especially numerous in the last ten or fifteen years, for obvious reasons. (vii)

What these "reasons" were is alluded to by Annales historian Fernand Braudel in his nearly contemporary retrospective lecture, "The Situation of History in 1950":

"History is the child of its time . . ." And should its methods, its projects, those answers that only yesterday seemed so rigorous and dependable, should all its concepts suddenly collapse, it would be from the weight of our own thinking, our own study, and, most of all, the experiences we have undergone. Now, over the past forty years those experiences have been particularly harsh for all of us . . . why should the fragile art of writing history escape from the general crisis of our age? (6)

The coincidence in the early twentieth century between the methods of the Annales scholars and Benjamin's philosophy and theory of history and his method of reading suggests that, as "children of their time," he and they were responding to a common need to try to make sense of the multiple crises facing Europe in those years. Bloch's and Febvre's firm commitment to probing the inconclusive "possibilities" of the past in their examination of diverse data serves well as a guide to examining the testimony that Benjamin's *Tragic Drama* book provides about the status of the Baroque as part of this response. Elsewhere Febvre dismisses what he calls "aristocratic history," which works by taking a sounding of an epoch on the basis only of the "great events," "great proceedings," and "great men," and then forging this evidence into "one of those great chains of distinct, homogeneous facts" ("History and Psychology" 2). This is the history of what Alain Boureau, in his study of another German Jew interested in the premodern origins of the modern, Ernst Kantorowicz, calls "known realit[ies]." They must be joined, Boureau claims in Annales-like fashion, to thicker descriptions of "supplementary microcontexts" that take seriously "the virtual embedded in the possible" (xix). "Unpacking" Benjamin's library in the *Tragic Drama* book is part of this same project.

Reading Benjamin/Reading the Baroque

In the chapters that follow, I retrieve the importance of the Baroque for Benjamin's articulation of the conundrum of German modernity by placing the *Tragic Drama* book in conversation with the debates about the Baroque being conducted

at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. The first section of chapter 1 considers the ways in which Benjamin read the Silesian plays precisely *not* as the “tragic dramas” of Osborne’s English-language translation, but rather as “mourning-play” texts that differed significantly from ancient tragedy in Benjamin’s mind. According to much criticism of the genre at the time, the “rebirth” of antiquity was said to be visible in the reappearance of ancient tragedy on the Renaissance stage; German Baroque plays could be “redeemed” by inserting them into this tradition. Both established and up-and-coming scholars, such as Paul Stachel and Herbert Cysarz, were heavily invested in this narrative about the Baroque, which allowed them to include it in their versions of a continuous national literary tradition that had culminated in Weimar Classicism. According to Benjamin, Stachel’s and Cysarz’s versions of the period nevertheless fall short of their stated goal precisely because they ensnare the period, its plays, and thus the very idea of the Baroque in a backward-looking web of criteria and terms. Benjamin’s renaming of the genre of the plays as modern “tragic dramas,” or “mourning plays,” thus engages in a focused polemic. While he too seeks to insert the seventeenth-century German texts in an evolutionary periodization scheme, he does so in order to free them from dependency on the ancient and foreign norms that set the standard in Stachel’s work above all. The Baroque plays thus become “modern” in a new kind of way. Benjamin’s understanding of how and why to define the period in this way was not coincidentally tied to challenges that the controversial historian Konrad Burdach had offered to conventional definitions of the Renaissance proper as a moment of “rebirth,” as I also show in this section. Benjamin cites Burdach’s recuperation of a more spiritual and, indeed, “northern” Renaissance in the (in)famously mystifying parts of the “Epistemo-Critical Prologue” that concern his ideational theory. Yoking his theory of the origin of the Baroque to Burdach’s thesis about the beginnings of a new national sensibility in premodern and early modern times seems to have allowed Benjamin to offer his version of the Baroque as an alternative to Stachel’s and Cysarz’s versions, thus permitting him to define the period as a new kind of Renaissance in specifically German terms.

Benjamin’s double-barreled gesture of refusing to define the Baroque as a latter-day Renaissance even as he argues for a Renaissance of the German Baroque was not unlike the definitions of the Baroque endorsed by the art historians and art theorists Heinrich Wölfflin and Alois Riegl, whose work on the Baroque was so influential for definitions of the period. Both Wölfflin and Riegl were concerned to describe the Baroque as something other than an eternally “decaying” Renaissance in ways not adequately addressed by criticism to date. As in the case of Benjamin, so too with Riegl and Wölfflin, the ability of the Baroque to serve as a *better* beginning of modernity than the Renaissance involved the period in a re-birthing moment of national significance that located it at not such a very great distance from the Renaissance, as its historiographic twin. In the second section of chapter 1, I examine these art historical debates and how they articulated a new periodicity

of style that involved the collectivity of the nation in important ways. In the third section of the chapter, I turn to contemporary definitions of a specifically *literary* German Baroque by critics Fritz Strich and Arthur Hübscher, whose work relied on Wölfflin's. Benjamin cites Strich's and Hübscher's versions of the period throughout the *Tragic Drama* book. Their discussions mirrored the art historical conversations by striving to locate the essence of a German literary tradition in an autonomous national sensibility and canon of forms. In both cases, the existence of a "modern"—and specifically "northern" and German—Baroque was crucial in providing categories with which to construct this tradition as an alternative to a "foreign" ("southern" and hence Burckhardtian) Renaissance endlessly indebted to the past. Benjamin's Baroque dipped into and was part of these several discussions of the Baroque as a "heroic" national age.¹⁵

The pattern of quotations in the *Tragic Drama* book from both the Silesian plays of the seventeenth century and the other dramatic texts that are its central concern also reveals the importance of associating the origin of the tragic drama with a very specific "modern" version of the Baroque. These dramatic texts and their links to an ideology of nation are the subject of chapter 2. The literal production of the tradition of Baroque plays that Benjamin cites can be witnessed particularly clearly in a late nineteenth-century nationalist edition of the plays of one of the seventeenth-century Silesian playwrights he discusses, namely Andreas Gryphius. Benjamin appears to have owned this volume, which was edited by Hermann Palm.¹⁶ I discuss the Palm Gryphius in the first section of chapter 2. In the second section, I place Palm's version of the Baroque in dialogue with, first, several Baroque and "Enlightenment" editions of plays by two other seventeenth-century Silesian playwrights, Daniel Casper von Lohenstein and Johann Christian Hallmann, which Benjamin appears to have used in the State Library, and then with the longer tradition of German theater that Benjamin also discovered there. It was in anthologies of dramatic texts edited by men whose work is little known today, such as the mid-nineteenth-century scholars Karl Weiß and Franz Josef Mone, for example, and the early twentieth-century Rudolf Payer von Thurn, that Benjamin claims to have found the origin of a fully German dramatic tradition; his work with their texts tells us quite a bit about the genre in which he was interested in the *Tragic Drama* book. Benjamin also investigated another and somewhat odd set of plays in his book. These other plays, *Hamlet* and *Life Is a Dream*, are of course not in and of themselves odd. Nor were they by German Baroque playwrights or by Germans at all, but rather by the Englishman Shakespeare and the Golden Age Spanish playwright Calderón. In the *Tragic Drama* book, Benjamin reads them not only as Baroque, but also as part of an argument about the need to understand

15. On the "heroic" stage of Baroque studies in the early twentieth century, see Voßkamp 687–89, and below, chapter 1.

16. See *Briefe* 1: 140.

the “mourning play” as “nationally determined” (*nationell bedingt*) (G: 1.1: 265; E: 86). What is particularly striking about the plays of Calderón and Shakespeare in Benjamin’s argument is not only that they are cited as “tragic dramas” instead of as tragedies, but also that he designates them as the best exemplars, “the complete and perfected form” of the “baroque mourning play” (G: 1.1: 260; E: 81). How a non-German playwright like Shakespeare could belong to a “modern” German Baroque is the subject of the final section of chapter 2.

There is, finally, another specifically German, but far less celebratory Baroque in which Benjamin is interested in the *Tragic Drama* book. It is at the center of his concern in some of the most esoteric and mystifying parts of his study, namely the sections on melancholy and on the allegorical emblematics of the texts that he describes as having been written by specifically “Lutheran” playwrights. These aspects are the focus of chapter 3, which calls attention to the commentary that the “Baroque book” offers on the afterlives of the Lutheran Reformation in both the seventeenth century and in Benjamin’s own time. The political theology of German *melancholia* as it was associated with a “Lutheran” dramatic tradition was addressed in a popular short story about Shakespeare’s Hamlet by the nineteenth-century Protestant literary historian Rochus von Liliencron, as well as in Liliencron’s late nineteenth-century edition of the works of the seventeenth-century Jesuit theorist of melancholy Aegidius Albertinus. Benjamin cites both of these texts in the *Tragic Drama* book, and I analyze the greater context of their confessional politics in the first section of chapter 3. Benjamin’s complex claims about melancholy, martyrdom, and creatureliness, on the one hand, and the allegorical nature of representation, language, and staging in what he claims are the “Lutheran” emblematic texts of the Baroque, on the other, locate them within the vexed narrative of modern Germany’s cultural and political continuity with the world of Luther’s Reformation, a narrative deeply embedded in the literal and ideological strife of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century “battle for civilization” (*Kulturkampf*) between the confessions and in the politically inflected versions of Protestant “war theology” (*Kriegstheologie*) that arose during World War I. Liliencron’s work offers a window onto these issues as they emerged out of the culture of the sixteenth century and spilled into modern Germany; Benjamin’s seventeenth century extends and completes and yet also pauses before the implications of this legacy.

“Allegory,” Benjamin explains in several of the versions of his curriculum vitae that have been preserved, was an “art form” “related” (*verwandt*) to the tragic drama (*Gesammelte Schriften* 6: 226) and more often than not was associated with the spectacular emblem books that poured out of the presses of Europe throughout the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Although of great interest to libraries and private collectors alike, these volumes have been as historiographically lost and misunderstood as the Baroque plays themselves in Benjamin criticism. In claiming that the allegorical logic dominant in these texts was also peculiarly Lutheran, Benjamin was nevertheless following a pattern of claims that had already been made

in earlier twentieth-century work on the “afterlives” of classical and late medieval mythology, theology, and humoral psychology in the Reformation era by the scholars of the so-called Warburg school, such as Erwin Panofsky and Fritz Saxl, as well as by Aby Warburg himself. This work and Benjamin’s response to it are the focus of the second section of chapter 3. The work of the Warburg scholars focused on the tensions that disputes about astrology, faith, and action had created among the German Reformers; the specific object of interest was the famous image of melancholy depicted by the sixteenth-century German artist Albrecht Dürer. Benjamin had seen Dürer’s *Melencolia I*, which he calls an “inexpressibly deep and expressive print,” for the first time in 1913 (*Briefe* 1: 76). Warburg had endorsed understanding the image as a meditation on the impact of a version of war-theological “heroic” Lutheranism on both Dürer and the modern German state. It is in explicit dialogue with Warburg’s claims that Benjamin’s significantly more downbeat position on a “Lutheran” Baroque allegory must be understood.

The final section of chapter 3 is the only part of *Benjamin’s Library* that takes a historically Baroque text as its focus. It does so as a way of understanding Benjamin’s reading of Andreas Gryphius’s shockingly literal allegorical play, *Catharina von Georgien Oder Bewehrete Beständigkeit* (Catharine of Georgia; or, Constancy Defended) (1657), in the context of the confessional stew created by Benjamin’s contestation of Warburg scholarship, and explains his understanding of the horrific consequences for life in the “creaturely” world of the Lutheran allegorical logic he thinks informs the play. Benjamin’s description of the “brutal stage” (*rohe Bühne*) of the Baroque tragic drama was accurate, as the emblematic poetics that drives Gryphius’s play makes clear. In the links Benjamin sees between this brutality and the autonomy of the secular world when it is unleashed from its ethical and spiritual moorings according to the Lutheran model, he finds a way to problematize the literary and art historical narratives about the “heroic age” of a modernity built on this particular version of a confessionalized German state. The events of Gryphius’s play may explain why Benjamin found it necessary to try to distinguish between ancient tragedy and the “modern” tragic dramas in the first place. The “allegedly . . . post-tragic idioms” of the tragic drama seem nevertheless to have collapsed back into “complicity” with tragedy (Koepnick 279) under a Lutheran sky. Pointing out how this occurred during the Baroque was the first step to declaring the project of German modernity incomplete in the immediate post–World War I years.

The German Baroque that emerges out of the intricate arguments of Benjamin’s *Tragic Drama* book had several significant afterlives, none of which Benjamin himself lived to experience. They nevertheless shine as bright a light on his version of the period as his version sheds on theirs. One particularly disturbing example is the subject of the conclusion: the astonishing resonance of Benjamin’s ideas about the Baroque in National Socialist literary histories. The dislocating effect of linking Benjamin to the Nazis nevertheless captures his theory of the afterlife of the work exquisitely and helps diagnose the problems involved in telling

history in a clear-cut or monodirectional way, with “good” and “bad” legacies and the national or counternational traditions they create antiseptically disentangled from one another and leading to different goals. The project of mapping national modernities onto the body of the Baroque in the present study begins, then, with what Katie King has called the “citational community” of the *Tragic Drama* book, in which the texts—primary and secondary, critical and philosophical, literary and art historical—from which Benjamin quotes jostle for visibility as “witnesses” to a series of moments in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when a variety of questions about the role of nationalism and culture, of modernity and tradition, clustered around the terms and texts in which the history and aesthetics of the Baroque were debated. This study ends by citing a particularly perverse afterlife, suggesting that we can never be sure what the famous “eddy” of “becoming” that is “origin” as an “thoroughly historical category” (G: 1.1: 226; E: 45) will bring. The image that results is what Benjamin might have called a “representation” of the Baroque as viewed from a series of “stations of observation,” at which one stops and periodically tries to “catch . . . one’s breath” (*Atemholen*) (208; 28).

Not all of the texts that may have been in Benjamin’s several libraries are dealt with in what follows. Rather, I focus primarily on those in which questions about the Baroque are posed both directly and indirectly as inquiries into the origins of modernity and the characteristics of a specifically German tradition. The anxiety associated with addressing such topics at all is palpable in the astoundingly diverse array of books that Benjamin cites, as well as in the multiple contradictions in which the argument becomes entangled as he struggles to whittle out a place and position for both his subject and himself in these debates. In Germany during these years such questions were, again, not casual ones. As Anson Rabinbach has argued, the “catastrophe” of World War I challenged many of the progressive narratives about the inheritance of the past and the prognosis for the future of individuals, nation-states, and “civilization” as a whole in fundamental ways. The aftermath of decisions made in Versailles could be felt in the military, political, and economic crises that came to a head in Germany as Benjamin was completing his book, and his letters from this period testify to the ideological and existential crises besetting both him and the nation in these years (e.g., *Briefe* 1: 311). Re-sourcing *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama* reveals the ways such issues were embedded in debates about the Baroque at a time when only an “ambivalent narration of progress” could be told (Koepnick 279). Unearthing these issues is an exercise in what Lucien Goldmann, in nearly Annales-like terms, called the science of “découpage,” the “circumscription” of the evidence, not in order to solve, but rather to “explain” the problem not of “what,” but of “how” the German Baroque could have signified at the time (99). The jumble in Benjamin’s book of critical voices and disciplinary debates testifies to the cacophony of the times. The afterlives of his Baroque in the 1930s and 1940s in Germany offer us a platform from which we may, in turn, consider the implications of our own periodization work in more critical ways.