

Sprache und Gesichte

Philosophische Essays

W. Benjamin

December 21-31, 2011

I admit total defeat. It starts out with an essay on two poems of Hölderlin. Dutifully I look them up in the collected work of that German poet. I read them. Carefully a few times. Not much register, but I take heart, after all the poet is obscure, but so much the better Benjamin will give me guidance. Fat chance. Not the least. In fact the essay by Benjamin seems if possible even more obscure than the poems themselves. Poems should be obscure, after all they are supposed to go beyond the usual reach of language. Obscurity might even be a sign of depth. But does that hold as far as prose is concerned? As the old saying goes. What is obscurely expressed, is so too in thought. I am utterly disappointed. I try other of the essays of Benjamin. I find that they do not even make local sense. But I plod through. Occasionally I am delighted, an entire paragraph makes sense. But what sense it makes I quickly forgets, it making sense at all is enough of a temporary triumph. In the end I have managed to go through it all, no wiser after the effort. I look at an English translation I have had in my library for over thirty years. It is not the German that is the problem, although admittedly it does not help matters. Also in English I have difficulty making sense, getting a purchase. What to make of it?

This is an important question. There are several options to pursue. One is to take a humble view and admit your own limitations. Could it be that it is not only a matter of lack of education (my knowledge of Greek Mythology is limited indeed) but also an inability to follow really subtle thoughts. This is humbling indeed and you instinctively shy away from such submission. The lack of education is one thing, that you can understand. When you are truly familiar with a subject, you have a rich tapestry of associations, and thus when thinking about it, your conscious process becomes very elliptical. Thus an outsider does not have a chance of getting the point. Crucial things are simply missing. Now do you want to make up that deficiency of yours? Would it be worth it? After all life is finite and you have to make a choice. You cannot be an expert on everything, you cannot even be an expert of most things which lie within your capacity. But why do you want to make the effort? Out of vanity? Probably. And curiosity? There is always curiosity. If Benjamin is a celebrated intellectual, if his thinking lies at the very vanguard of what is possible, surely you would like a taste of it even if it would involve immersing yourself in classical mythology, maybe even learning old Greek. Call it curiosity if you want, certainly there is a strong element of vanity in it. But indeed his essays are varied and some, judging from their titles, seem to require no kind of arcane knowledge. Those too are, as I have admitted, equally opaque. So it is not mainly a matter of deficient culture, it is a mental incapacity to truly engage in subtle thought.

But before you make the commitment to go further you may explore the second option a little. Maybe Benjamin is a wind-bag, drunk on his own words. The world is

full of mountebanks and many people take them seriously. There are mountebanks for all kinds of people, including the intelligentsia. The latter types are the hardest to expose. Popper treasured lucidity, in fact he thought that the prime duty of an intellectual would be to explain himself in the clearest and plainest language. He had a few heroes, such as Russell, when it came to limpid presentations. Any complicated sentence can be pared down and then analysed. The exercise more often than not showed that whenever an obscure sentence was brought down to earth it revealed a platitude. To Popper it was clear, people such as Adorno and Habermas may display a dazzling verbal virtuosity, but the actual thoughts lurking behind that glitter was nothing but platitudes at best. Popper's attitude may be thought of as arrogant, on the other hand you do owe to yourself to explore that second option.

Words are seductive, and when you speak and think with no constraints imposed, your verbiage will be lush indeed. How seductive a temptation to let it take over, after all language is more than your individual self and if this is allowed to take over, you can marvel at your own profundity and take pride in an elegant turn of phrase. Could it be that I myself write as a Benjamin? Not on the same exalted level, such ambitions I do not have, but in a similar vein. Other people will find my own writing as obscure, turned on itself. Benjamin is sincere, he is not out to fool anybody (except perhaps himself). He is just going overboard. A pity, maybe in that verbiage there are some very good ideas. He may be confused but he is not stupid. After all if you are excited by something you forge ahead and do not worry about editing and cleaning up. Thus instead of setting him up as an ideal worthy of emulation, I should take him as a cautionary example. Thus I can leave him aside for the moment and go on to better things.

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