

Infancy and History

The Destruction of Experience



GIORGIO AGAMBEN

Translated by Liz Heron



VERSO

London · New York

THE PRINCE AND THE FROG

The Question of Method in
Adorno and Benjamin

Theodor W. Adorno to Walter Benjamin

New York, 10 November 1938

Dear Walter:

The tardiness of this letter levels a menacing charge against me and all of us. But perhaps this accusation already contains a grain of defence. For it is almost self-evident that a full month's delay in my response to your Baudelaire cannot be due to negligence.

The reasons are entirely objective in nature. They involve the attitude of all of us to the manuscript, and, considering my special interest in the question of the *Arcades* study, I can probably say without immodesty, my attitude in particular. I had been looking forward to the arrival of the Baudelaire with the greatest eagerness and literally devoured it. I am full of admiration for the fact that you were able to complete it by the appointed time, and it is this admiration which makes it particularly hard for me to speak of what has come between my passionate expectation and the text itself.

Your idea of providing in the *Baudelaire* a model for the *Arcades* study was something I took very seriously, and I approached the satanic scene much as Faust approached the phantasmagoria of the Brocken mountain when he thought that many a riddle would now be solved. May I be excused for having had to give myself Mephistopheles' reply that many a riddle poses itself anew? Can you understand that reading your treatise, one of whose chapters is entitled *The Flâneur* and another *Modernism*, produced a certain disappointment in me?

The basic reason for this disappointment is that those parts of the study with which I am familiar do not constitute a model for the *Arcades* project so much as a prelude to it. Motifs are assembled but not elaborated. In your covering letter to Max [Horkheimer] you represented this as your express intention, and I am aware of the ascetic discipline which you impose on yourself to omit everywhere the conclusive theoretical answers to questions, and even make the questions themselves apparent only to initiates. But I wonder whether such an asceticism can be sustained in the face of such a subject and in a context which makes such powerful inner demands.

As a faithful reader of your writings I know very well that in your work there is no lack of precedents for your procedure. I remember, for example, your essays on Proust and on Surrealism which appeared in *Die literarische Welt*. But can this method be applied to the complex of the *Arcades*? Panorama and 'traces', *flâneur* and arcades, modernism and the unchanging, *without* a theoretical interpretation – is this a 'material' which can patiently await interpretation without being consumed by its own aura? Rather, if the pragmatic content of these topics is isolated, does it not conspire in almost demonic fashion against the possibility of its own interpretation? In one of our unforgettable conversations in Königstein, you said that each idea in the *Arcades* had to be wrested away from a realm in which madness reigns. I wonder whether such ideas need to be as immured behind impenetrable layers of material as your ascetic discipline demands. In your present study the arcades are introduced with a reference to the narrowness of the pavements which impede the *flâneur* on the streets. This pragmatic introduction, it seems to me, prejudices the objectivity of phantasmagoria – something that I so stubbornly insisted upon even at the time of our Hornberg correspondence – as much as does the disposition of the first chapter to reduce phantasmagoria to types of behaviour of the literary *bohème*. You need not fear that I shall suggest that in your study phantasmagoria should survive unmediated or that the study itself should assume a phantasmagoric character. But the liquidation of phantasmagoria can only be accomplished with true profundity if they are treated as an objective historico-philosophical category and not as a 'vision' of social characters. It is precisely at this point that your conception differs from all other approaches to the 19th century. But the redemption of your postulate cannot be postponed for ever, or 'prepared' by a more harmless presentation of the matters in question. This is my objection. If in the third part, to use the old formulation, prehistory in the 19th century takes the place of the prehistory of the 19th century – most clearly in Péguy's statement about Victor Hugo – this is only another way of stating the same point.

But it seems to me that my objection by no means concerns only the questionable procedure of 'abstention' in a subject which is transported by ascetic refusal of interpretation towards a realm to which asceticism is opposed: the realm where history and magic oscillate. Rather, I see a close connection between the points at which your essay falls behind its own *a priori*, and its relationship to dialectical materialism – and here in particular I speak not only for myself but equally for Max, with whom I have had an exhaustive discussion of this question. Let me express myself in as simple and

Hegelian a manner as possible. Unless I am very much mistaken, your dialectic lacks one thing: mediation. Throughout your text there is a tendency to relate the pragmatic contents of Baudelaire's work directly to adjacent features in the social history of his time, preferably economic features. I have in mind the passage about the duty on wine, certain statements about the barricades, or the above-mentioned passage about the arcades, which I find particularly problematic, for this is where the transition from a general theoretical discussion of physiologies to the 'concrete' representation of the *flâneur* is especially precarious.

I feel this artificiality wherever you put things in metaphorical rather than categorical terms. A case in point is the passage about the transformation of the city into an *intérieur* for the *flâneur*, where one of the most powerful ideas in your study seems to me to be presented as a mere as-if. There is a very close connection between such materialistic excursions, in which one never quite loses the apprehension that one feels for a swimmer who, covered with goose pimples, plunges into cold water, and the appeal to concrete modes of behaviour like that of the *flâneur*, or the subsequent passage about the relationship between seeing and hearing in the city, which not entirely by accident uses a quotation from Simmel. I am not entirely happy with all this. You need not fear that I shall take this opportunity to mount my hobby-horse. I shall content myself with serving it, in passing, a lump of sugar, and for the rest I shall try to give you the theoretical grounds for my aversion to that particular type of concreteness and its behaviouristic overtones. The reason is that I regard it as methodologically unfortunate to give conspicuous individual features from the realm of the superstructure a 'materialistic' turn by relating them immediately and perhaps even causally to corresponding features of the infrastructure. Materialist determination of cultural traits is only possible if it is mediated through the *total social process*.

Even though Baudelaire's wine poems may have been motivated by the wine duty and the town gates, the recurrence of these motifs in his work can only be explained by the overall social and economic tendency of the age – that is, in keeping with your formulation of the problem *sensu strictissimo*, by analysis of the commodity form in Baudelaire's epoch. No one is more familiar with the difficulties this involves than I am; the phantasmagoria chapter in my Wagner certainly has not settled these problems as yet. Your *Arcades* study in its definitive form will not be able to shirk the same obligation. The direct inference from the duty on wine to *L'Âme du Vin* imputes to phenomena precisely that kind of spontaneity, palpability and density which they have lost in capitalism. In this sort of immediate

– I would almost say again, anthropological – materialism, there is a profoundly romantic element, and the more crassly and roughly you confront the Baudelairean world of forms with the necessities of life, the more clearly I detect it. The ‘mediation’ which I miss, and find obscured by materialistic-historiographic invocation, is nothing other than the theory which your study omits. The omission of the theory affects your empirical evidence itself. On the one hand, it lends it a deceptively epic character, and on the other it deprives the phenomena, which are experienced only subjectively, of their real historico-philosophical weight. To express it another way: the theological motif of calling things by their names tends to turn into a wide-eyed presentation of mere facts. If one wished to put it very drastically, one could say that your study is located at the crossroads of magic and positivism. That spot is bewitched. Only theory could break the spell – your own resolute, salutarily speculative theory. It is the claim of this theory alone that I am bringing against you . . .

This, I think, brings me to the centre of my criticism. The impression which your entire study conveys – and not only on me and my arcades orthodoxy – is that you have done violence to yourself. Your solidarity with the Institute [of Social Research], which pleases no one more than myself, has induced you to pay tributes to Marxism which are not really suited either to Marxism or to yourself. They are not suited to Marxism because the mediation through the total social process is missing, and you superstitiously attribute to material enumeration a power of illumination which is never kept for a pragmatic reference but only for theoretical construction. They do not suit your own individual nature because you have denied yourself your boldest and most fruitful ideas in a kind of pre-censorship according to materialist categories (which by no means coincide with the Marxist categories), even though it may be merely in the form of the above-mentioned postponement. I speak not only for myself, who am not qualified, but equally for Horkheimer and the others when I tell you that all of us are convinced that it would not only be beneficial to ‘your’ production if you elaborated your ideas without such considerations (in San Remo you raised counter-objections to this objection, and I am taking these very seriously), but that it would also be most helpful to the cause of dialectical materialism and the theoretical interests represented by the Institute, if you surrendered to your specific insights and conclusions without adding to them ingredients which you obviously find so distasteful to swallow that I cannot really regard them as beneficial. God knows, there is only one truth, and if your intelligence lays hold of this one truth in categories which on the basis of your idea of materialism may seem

apocryphal to you, you will capture more of this one truth than if you use intellectual tools whose movements your hand resists at every turn. . . .

Walter Benjamin's reply to Theodor W. Adorno

Paris, 9 December 1938

Dear Teddie:

It will not have surprised you to notice that it took me some time to draft my reply to your letter of 10 November. Even though the long delay in your letter made me suspect what it would say, it still came as a jolt to me. Also, I wanted to await the arrival of the galleys which you had promised me, and they did not come until 6 December. The time thus gained gave me a chance to weigh your critique as prudently as I could. I am far from considering it unfruitful, let alone incomprehensible. I will try to react to it in basic terms. . . .

Remembering our conversations in San Remo, I should like to proceed to the passage in your letter where you refer to them yourself. If I refused there, in the name of my own productive interests, to adopt an esoteric intellectual development for myself and, disregarding the interests of dialectical materialism, . . . to get down to business, this involved, in the final analysis, not . . . mere loyalty to dialectical materialism, but solidarity with the experiences which all of us have shared in the past 15 years. Here too, then, it is a matter of very personal productive interests of mine; I cannot deny that they may occasionally tend to do violence to my original interests. Between them lies an antagonism of which I would not even in my dreams wish to be relieved. The overcoming of this antagonism constitutes the problem of my study, and the problem is one of construction. I believe that speculation can start its necessarily bold flight with some prospect of success only if, instead of putting on the waxen wings of the esoteric, it seeks its source of strength in construction alone. It is because of the needs of construction that the second part of my book consists primarily of philological material. What is involved there is less an ‘ascetic discipline’ than a methodological precaution. Incidentally, this philological part was the only one that could be completed independently – a circumstance which I had to bear in mind.

When you speak of a ‘wide-eyed presentation of mere facts’, you characterize the true philological attitude. This attitude was necessary not only for its results, but had to be built into the construction

for its own sake. It is true that the indifference between magic and positivism, as you so aptly formulate it, should be liquidated. In other words, the philological interpretation of the author ought to be preserved and surpassed in the Hegelian manner by dialectical materialists. Philology is the examination of a text which proceeds by details and so magically fixates the reader on it. That which Faust took home in black and white,* and Grimm's devotion to little things, are closely related. They have in common that magical element whose exorcism is reserved for philosophy, here for the final part.

Astonishment, so you write in your *Kierkegaard*, indicates 'the profoundest insight into the relationship between dialectics, myth, and image'. It might be tempting for me to invoke this passage. But instead I propose to emend it (as I am planning to do on another occasion with a subsequent definition of the dialectical image). I believe it should say that astonishment is an outstanding *object* of such an insight. The appearance of closed facticity which attaches to a philological investigation and places the investigator under its spell, fades to the extent that the object is construed in an historical perspective. The base lines of this construction converge in our own historical experience. Thus the object constitutes itself as a monad. In the monad everything that used to lie in mythical rigidity as a textual reference comes alive. Therefore it seems a misjudgment of the matter to me if you find in my study a 'direct inference from the wine duty to *L'Ame du Vin*'. Rather, the juncture was established legitimately in the philological context – just as it would have been done in the interpretation of a classical writer. It gives to the poem the specific gravity which it assumes when it is properly read – something that has so far not been practised widely in the case of Baudelaire. Only when this poem has thus come into its own can the work be touched, or perhaps even shaken, by interpretation. For the poem in question, an interpretation would focus not on matters of taxation but on the significance of intoxication for Baudelaire.

If you think of other writings of mine, you will find that a critique of the attitude of the philologist is an old concern of mine, and it is basically identical with my critique of myth. Yet in each case it is this critique that provokes the philological effort itself. To use the language of *Elective Affinities*, it presses for the exhibition of the material content in which the truth content can be historically revealed. I can understand that this aspect of the matter was less to

*In the *Studierzimmer* scene of Goethe's *Faust*, Part I, the student says: 'Was man schwarz auf weiss besitzt, kann man getrost nach Hause tragen.' (What one possesses in black and white one can safely take home.)

the fore in your mind. But so, therefore, were a number of important interpretations. I am thinking not only of interpretations of poems – *A une passante* – or of prose pieces – *The Man of the Crowd* – but above all of the unlocking of the concept of modernity, which it was my particular concern to keep within philological bounds. . . .

These two letters,¹ from which we have extracted the passages most closely touching on the problem of method, refer to the essay *The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire*.² As part of his collaboration with the Institute of Social Research, Benjamin had sent this essay to Horkheimer and Adorno, who headed the Institute, in autumn 1938. The essay was conceived as part of the *Arcades* project, on which Benjamin worked, without achieving its completion, from 1927 until his death; it was, in Benjamin's words, intended to provide a 'model in miniature' for the *Arcades* project.

At first sight, Adorno's objections to the work seem correct. They stem from methodological reservations so deep and stubborn that he could still express them in almost identical terms in the early 1950s, by which time 'the name of the philosopher who took his life while fleeing Hitler's executioners' had acquired 'a certain nimbus'.³ Adorno's description of Benjamin in *Prisms* tells us:

his micrological and fragmentary method never entirely integrated the idea of universal mediation, which in Hegel as in Marx produces the totality. He never wavered in his fundamental conviction that the smallest cell of observed reality offset the rest of the world. To interpret phenomena materialistically meant for him not so much to elucidate them as products of the social whole but rather to relate them directly, in their isolated singularity, to material tendencies and social struggles.⁴

These objections are based on an interpretation of Marxist thought and, specifically, of the relationship between structure and superstructure, which lays claim to an enshrined orthodoxy, a belief in which leads every deviation from this relationship to be instantly dismissed as 'vulgar materialism'. Within these terms, Benjamin's analysis of Baudelaire's poetry is presented as a 'direct inference from the duty on wine to *L'Ame du vin*' – that is, as a direct imputing of causal relation between isolated features of the superstructure and corresponding features of the structure, leaving the impression of a tribute paid to Marxism

which avails neither Marxism nor the author. Not the former 'because the mediation through the total social process is missing, and you superstitiously attribute to material enumeration a power of illumination which is never kept for a pragmatic reference but only for theoretical construction'. What flaws the work throughout is 'mediation. Throughout your text there is the tendency to relate the pragmatic contents of Baudelaire's work directly to adjacent features in the social history of his time.'

The accusation of 'vulgar materialism' could hardly be more explicitly expressed. From Adorno's doctrinal point of view, however, his argument seems perfectly coherent. Was it not Engels himself who, in a much-quoted letter to J. Bloch, stated that only *in the final instance* is production the determining historical factor? The yawning gap between structure and superstructure opened by this 'in the final instance' is bridged by Adorno through the appeal to 'mediation' and the 'total social process', thanks to which 'good' speculative theory is forearmed against any 'direct inference'. This 'universal mediation, which in both Hegel and Marx establishes totality', is the unassailable guarantee of Marxist orthodoxy in Adorno's critique, whereby his own doctrinal solidity is confirmed.

There remains only the regret that this critique is directed at a text which, as anyone who has read the essay in question will know, is perhaps the most illuminating analysis of a global cultural moment in the historical development of capitalism. To this regret is added a sense of unease, deriving from the fact that a critique founded on such incontrovertible doctrinal bases should have felt the need to borrow terminology that would seem more appropriate to the technical vocabulary of exorcism and ecclesiastical anathema than to a lucid philosophical refutation. Adorno has approached his friend's text like Faust at the 'satanic scene' of the phantasmagoria on the Brocken Mountain. Benjamin is accused of allowing the pragmatic content of his topics to conspire 'in almost demonic fashion' against the possibility of its own interpretation, and of having obscured mediation by 'materialist-historiographic invocation'. This language reaches its culmination in the passage where Benjamin's method is described in terms of a spell: 'If one wished to put it very drastically, one could say that your study is located at the crossroads of magic and positivism. That spot is bewitched.

Only theory could break the spell . . . '.

If it is true that every exorcism betrays its own solidarity with the exorcized one, it may be legitimate to advance some doubts about the theoretical foundation for Adorno's critique. Perhaps the superstitious 'power of illumination' whose exorcism is being sought is the very one being duly vindicated by the theory. And because the role of the exorcist is enacted here by 'mediation', perhaps it is worthwhile inspecting more closely the dialectical rationale on which it depends.

What Adorno is referring to by the term 'mediation' is clarified by his words: 'Materialist determination of cultural traits is only possible if it is mediated through the *total social process*.' These words, like the avowal that precedes them – 'let me express myself in as simple and Hegelian a manner as possible' – show that the mediation which Adorno has in mind is the one that is the object of Hegel's eulogy in a passage from the introduction to *Phenomenology of Spirit*, which it is appropriate to quote in its entirety:

The True is the whole. But the whole is nothing other than the essence consummating itself through its development. Of the Absolute it must be said that it is essentially a *result*, that only in the *end* is it what it truly is; and that precisely in this consists its nature, viz. to be actual, subject, the spontaneous becoming of itself. Though it may seem contradictory that the Absolute should be conceived essentially as a result, it needs little pondering to set this show of contradiction in its true light. The beginning, the principle, or the Absolute, as at first immediately enunciated, is only the universal. Just as when I say 'all animals', this expression cannot pass for a zoology, so it is equally plain that the words, 'the Divine', 'the Absolute', 'the Eternal', etc., do not express what is contained in them; and only such words, in fact, do express the intuition as something immediate. Whatever is more than such a word, even the transition to a mere proposition, contains a *becoming-other* that has to be taken back, or is a mediation. But it is just this that is rejected with horror, as if absolute cognition were being surrendered when more is made of mediation than in simply saying that it is nothing absolute, and is completely absent in the Absolute.

But this abhorrence in fact stems from ignorance of the nature of mediation, and of absolute cognition itself. For mediation is nothing beyond self-moving selfsameness, or is reflection into self, the moment of the 'I' which is for itself pure negativity or, when reduced to its pure abstraction, *simple becoming*.⁵

The mediator interposing its good offices between structure and superstructure to safeguard materialism from vulgarity, therefore, is Hegelian dialectical historicism, which, like all go-betweens, is prompt in demanding its percentage. This percentage takes the form of renouncing the concrete grasp of each single event and each present instant of praxis in favour of deferral to the final instance of the total social process. Since the absolute is 'consequence', and 'only in the end is there truth', each single concrete moment of the process is real only as 'pure negativity' which the magic wand of dialectical mediation will transform – in the end – into the positive. There is but a short step from this to declaring that every moment in history is merely a means to an end, and the progressive historicism which dominates nineteenth-century ideology does it in a leap. Smuggling in this Hegelian concept of 'mediation' and 'total social process' as authentic Marxism means nothing less than erasing, at a stroke, the Marxist critique of Hegelian dialectic as 'abstract, formal process' which constitutes the melodic theme on which there unfolds the counterpoint of the 1844 Manuscript. Why, then, does Adorno – who is certainly not unaware of this critique – call upon mediation 'through the total social process' precisely to interpret the relationship between structure and superstructure, which Marx nowhere constructs as a dialectical relationship? The reason is, once again, to be found in the wish to be forearmed against a danger which, perhaps, he had ample reason to fear. Precisely because Marx does not present the relationship between material base and superstructure as a dialectical one, and seems instead to conceive it as a relationship of causal determination, it is necessary to call upon a mediator as a safeguard against the possibility of a 'vulgar' interpretation. But since the fear of vulgarity betrays the vulgarity of fear, so the suspicion of a vulgar interpretation is a suspicion whose formulator has reason to nurture most of all about himself. It is a fear of this kind which inspired in Engels his famous theory of the 'final instance' which is, it must be admitted, a masterpiece of hypocrisy. He warns against vulgar materialism by stating:

According to the materialist conception of history, the *ultimately* determining element in history is the production and reproduction of real life. More than this neither Marx nor I have ever asserted. Hence if somebody twists this into saying that the economic element is the

only determining one, he transforms that proposition into a meaningless, abstract, senseless phrase.⁶

But it is clear that if there was indeed distortion, it had already happened at the point when the relationship between material base and superstructure was interpreted as a relationship of cause and effect. Once this distortion took place, the only way to save it from its own vulgarity was to wave the bogey of vulgar materialism in one hand while the other hand got ready to do battle against it.

It is time to speak out and say that this bogey, like all bogeys, exists most of all within those who conjure it up. If Marx is not concerned to specify the way in which the relationship between structure and superstructure is to be construed, and has no fear of being occasionally considered 'vulgar', it is because an interpretation of this relationship in a causal sense is not even conceivable in Marxist terms – a fact which renders superfluous the dialectical interpretation intended to remedy this. All causal interpretations are in fact consistent with Western metaphysics, and presuppose the sundering of reality into two different ontological levels. A materialism which conceived of economic factors as *causa prima*, in the same sense in which the God of metaphysics is *causa sui* and first principle of everything, would only be the obverse of metaphysics, not its rout. A similar ontological splitting irremediably betrays the Marxist concept of praxis as a concrete and unitary source reality, and it is this, rather than an alleged 'dialectical conception of cause and effect', which should be set against the vulgar interpretation. Praxis is not, in fact, something which needs a dialectical mediation in order to be represented as positive in the form of the superstructure, but is from the beginning 'what truly is', and from the beginning possesses wholeness and concreteness. If man finds his humanity in praxis, this is not because, in addition to carrying out productive work, he also transposes and develops these activities within a superstructure (by thinking, writing poetry, etc.); if man is human – if he is a *Gattungswesen*, a being whose essence is generic – his humanity and his species-being must be integrally present within the way in which he produces his material life – that is, within praxis. Marx abolishes the metaphysical distinction between *animal* and *ratio*, between nature and culture, between matter and form, in order to state

that within praxis animality is humanity, nature is culture, matter is form. If this is true, the relationship between structure and superstructure can neither be one of causal determination nor one of dialectical mediation, but one of *direct correspondence*. The hypocrisy implicit in the separation of economic structure and cultural superstructure remains exactly the same if the economic process is made the determining cause, and it is left to mediation to give it a bashful covering with its dialectical veil. The only true materialism is one which radically abolishes this separation, never seeing in concrete historical reality the sum of structure and superstructure, but the direct unity of the two terms in praxis.

'The direct inference from the duty on wine to *L'Ame du vin*' is possible and necessary precisely because it is based on this correspondence. Perhaps then 'vulgar materialism', which directly relates structure and superstructure, is not vulgar at all, because in such directness a causal relationship cannot even be reasonably posited. Vulgarity is, rather, the attribute of that interpretation which, conceiving the relationship between structure and superstructure primarily as a relationship of cause and effect, needs 'mediation' and the 'total social process' to give a semblance of meaning to this relationship, and at the same time save its own idealist coyness.

To return to Adorno's 'magic' language, it could be said that dialectical historicism, whose spokesman he is, is the witch who, after turning the prince into a frog, believes she holds within the magic wand of dialectics the secret of any possible transformation. But historical materialism is the maiden who kisses the frog right on the mouth, and breaks the dialectical spell. For whereas the witch knows that, since every prince is really a frog, every frog can become a prince, the maiden does not know this, and her kiss touches precisely what the frog and the prince have in common.

In the light of these reflections, we must now consider Benjamin's method and his defence of it in his reply to Adorno. In accordance with an only apparently cryptographic purpose which characterizes Benjamin's intellectual stance, this defence takes the form of a crisis of philology in a perspective where the object of historical knowledge is presented as a 'monad'. The demand he places upon this formulation is that the materialist point of view within history cannot consist in writing (Marxist)

history of art, (Marxist) history of philosophy, (Marxist) history of literature, etc., in which invariably structure and superstructure, perceived as distinct, are then theoretically connected in terms of the dialectics of the total social process; the only materialist point of view is that which radically overcomes the separation of structure and superstructure, because praxis is posited as the only single object in its original cohesion – that is, as 'monad' (the monad, according to Leibniz's definition, is a simple substance, 'without parts'). The task of guaranteeing the unity of this monad is entrusted to philology, whose object is in fact presented in a polar opposite of what, for Adorno, was a negative judgement: as an 'appearance of closed facticity' which excludes any ideological presupposition. Thus the monad of praxis is presented above all as a 'textual examination', as a hieroglyphic which the philologist must construct in its factitious integrity, in which elements of both structure and superstructure originally cohere in 'mythical rigidity'. Philology is the maiden who, without any dialectical precautions, kisses the frog of praxis on the mouth. What philology has thereby reaped in its closed facticity must, however, be construed in a historical perspective, by an operation which Benjamin defines as an *Aufhebung* of philology. The baselines of this perspective are not, however, to be found in the 'total social process' and 'good speculative theory', but 'in our own historical experience'. Only this has the potential to bring the object to life, detaching it from philology's mythical rigidity.

Benjamin illuminates this passage, in which philology and history find their most authentic connection, with a reference to his essay on 'Elective Affinities'.⁷ It is worth quoting this passage at length, since it defines the relationship between the two fundamental concepts of 'subject matter' [*Sachgehalt*] and 'truth content' [*Wahrheitsgehalt*].

Critique is concerned with the truth content of a work of art, the commentary with its subject matter. The relationship between the two is determined by that basic law of literature according to which the work's truth content is the more relevant the more inconspicuously and intimately it is bound up with its subject matter. If therefore precisely those works turn out to endure whose truth is most deeply embedded in their subject matter, the beholder who contemplates them long after their own time finds the *realia* all the more striking in the work as they have faded away in the world. This

means that subject matter and truth content, united in the work's early period, come apart during its afterlife; the subject matter becomes more striking while the truth content retains its original concealment. To an ever-increasing extent, therefore, the interpretation of the striking and the odd, that is, of the subject matter, becomes a prerequisite for any later critic. One may liken him to a paleographer in front of a parchment whose faded text is covered by the stronger outlines of a script referring to that text. Just as the paleographer would have to start with reading the script, the critic must start with commenting on his text. And out of this activity there arises immediately an inestimable criterion of critical judgment: only now can the critic ask the basic question of all criticism – namely, whether the work's shining truth content is due to its subject matter or whether the survival of the subject matter is due to the truth content. For as they come apart in the work, they decide on its immortality. In this sense the history of works of art prepares their critique, and this is why historical distance increases their power. If, to use a simile, one views the growing work as a funeral pyre, its commentator can be likened to the chemist, its critic to an alchemist. While the former is left with wood and ashes as the sole objects of his analysis, the latter is concerned only with the enigma of the flame itself: the enigma of being alive. Thus the critic inquires about the truth whose living flame goes on burning over the heavy logs of the past and the light ashes of life gone by.

The relationship delineated here between subject matter and truth content provides the model for what, in Benjamin's terms, could be the relationship between structure and superstructure. The historian who sees before him a divided structure and superstructure, and tries to give a dialectical explanation of the one as base for the other (either way, depending on whether he is an idealist or a materialist), can be likened to the chemist whom Benjamin describes, who sees only wood and ashes, while the historical materialist is the alchemist, his eyes fixed on the pyre, in which, like subject matter and truth content, structure and superstructure also become the same thing. And just as subject matter and truth content are originally unified in the work, and appear separate only within temporal duration, so structure and superstructure, unified in praxis, are separate in the work that survives through time. What looks upon us from the monuments and the rubble of the past and seems in them to refer, almost allegorically, to a hidden meaning, is not, then, a relic of the ideological superstructure, which, in order to be

understood, has to be traced back, by a painstaking work of mediation, to the historical structure which determines it; quite the contrary – what we now have before us is praxis itself as origin and monadic historical structure. In becoming the nature of history, it splits (just as subject matter and truth content are separated in the work) and is enigmatically present as nature, as a petrified landscape which is to be brought back to life. The task of the critic is to recognize in the amazed facticity of the work, which is there as a philological exhibit, the direct and fundamental unity of subject matter and truth content, of structure and superstructure embedded in it.

The statement 'the structure is the superstructure' is not just a deterministic proposition in the causal sense; it is not even a dialectical proposition in the ordinary sense, where, in place of the predicate, should be set the slow process of negation and of the *Aufhebung*. It is a speculative proposition – that is to say, immobile and immediate. This is the meaning of the 'dialectic at a standstill' which Benjamin leaves as a legacy to historical materialism, and with which it must reckon sooner or later. For the time has come to end the identification of history with a conception of time as a continuous linear process, and to understand thereby that the dialectic is quite capable of being a historical category without, as a consequence, having to fall into linear time. It is not the dialectic which has to be adequate to a pre-existing, vulgar conception of time; on the contrary, it is this conception of time which must be adequate to a dialectic that is truly freed from all 'abstractness'.

NOTES

1. These letters, translated by Harry Zohn, appear in *Aesthetics and Politics*, London: Verso 1980, pp. 126–37.
2. In Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire – A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, transl. Harry Zohn, London: Verso 1983.
3. Theodor Adorno, 'A Portrait of Walter Benjamin', in *Prisms*, transl. Samuel and Shierry Weber, London: Neville Spearman 1967, p. 229.
4. *ibid.*, p. 236.
5. G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, transl. A.V. Miller, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1977, p. 11.

INFANCY AND HISTORY

6. Engels to J. Bloch, London to Königsberg, 21–22 September 1890, in *Marx–Engels Selected Works*, in one volume, London: Lawrence & Wishart 1968, p. 498.
7. This essay, ‘Goethe’s Elective Affinities’, remains as yet untranslated in full. It first appeared in Hoffmannsthal’s *Neue Deutsche Beiträge* (1924–5). The passage quoted here is translated in Hannah Arendt’s Introduction to *Illuminations*, transl. Harry Zohn, Glasgow: Fontana 1973.

FABLE AND HISTORY

Considerations on the
Nativity Crib
