

Walter Benjamin and John Donne
Constellations of Past and Present

Benjamin, Donne, and the Era of the Baroque

This book began with an intuition about a certain “fit” between the lyric poetry of John Donne and the account of baroque aesthetics that Walter Benjamin gave in both his *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* and later in his work on Baudelaire in the Arcades Project. I had been immersed in Benjamin’s theory of allegory in working on the second part of my 2009 book, *Shakespeare and Impure Aesthetics*, “The Aesthetics of Death and Mourning,” and in the course of this work, it began to occur to me that there was another application of this theory, beyond the dramas that Benjamin emphasized and on which I concentrated in that study, to the lyric as well. Benjamin had also seen the opening to lyric poetry, and he went on to apply aspects of his theory to the Symbolist poetry of Charles Baudelaire in a different era. What occurred to me was that there was a similar application of the theory to Donne’s poetry, another product of the baroque age that Benjamin had explored in *The Origin*. And I was surprised to discover that no previous critic had ever pursued the connection, despite a burgeoning literature in recent years on Benjamin’s literary-critical ideas.

This new interest in Benjamin has in part resulted from the persistence and labors of Harvard University Press, which has over the last twenty years brought out English translations of major works from Benjamin’s entire career, so that it is now possible to gain a much fuller understanding and appreciation of the extent and range of his critical and philosophical writings in a tragically short career as a socially critical man of letters.¹

Benjamin has been most appreciated for his contributions to understanding consumer culture and modernity more generally in a series of well-known essays – and in greater detail in the notes to his never completed work on Baudelaire and his nineteenth-century context, posthumously published as *The Arcades Project*.² There has also been sustained

attention for some time to the difficult prose of his 1928 “*Trauerspielbuch*,” *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*,³ with its theory of baroque allegory, which was a major influence on the early deconstructive criticism of the Yale School critics and which has subsequently found other applications. It is a unique work and one that is widely acknowledged to be both a rich resource for subsequent critical theory and a challenge to read and comprehend. Its belated reception has unfolded slowly and unevenly – and relatively selectively, with the theory of allegory, again usually in relation to Modernism/Postmodernism, getting the most attention.

This work in particular (and the many other aspects of his larger body of writings), however, are also highly relevant to early modern literature – and to the works of John Donne specifically – for two principal reasons. First, Benjamin developed the theory of allegory precisely for the age of the German baroque in the early to mid-seventeenth century, and he included aspects of the plays of the roughly contemporary playwrights Shakespeare and Calderón as well, so it is specifically crafted for Donne’s era and its baroque connections. Second, its discussion of a unique idea of the allegory and its differentiation from the symbol, and its speculation on how the form arose in English Renaissance plays (as well as in the later seventeenth-century German baroque drama, which is Benjamin’s main topic), is particularly germane here.⁴ In addition, while it is obviously less directly relevant to seventeenth-century literature than is the work on the *Trauerspiel*, Benjamin’s intensive study of Baudelaire in his work on the Arcades Project in the 1930s⁵ is connected to the earlier theory in several ways and will be brought to bear from time to time in what follows as well. Baudelaire, I should note, was of course often compared with Donne – even before Eliot’s theory of the dissociation of sensibility in 1921 (and thereafter quite frequently). Thus, Benjamin’s interest in and work on Baudelaire is another reason for seeing him as relevant to a study of Donne. For all these reasons and others to be developed below, this book argues that Walter Benjamin’s literary theories can help illuminate the poetry of John Donne and contribute to developing new directions in Donne studies.

While the many details will be developed below in the individual chapters, I want to note here the way Benjamin synthesizes *avant la lettre* two strains within contemporary early modern studies that have usually been seen as opposites, even opponents: historical, political, and cultural criticism, on the one hand, and formalism, on the other.⁶ Benjamin affiliated intellectually with Marxism in the late 1920s and throughout the ’30s, and in tandem with Marxist cultural analysis he was committed to the idea of situating the artwork in its historical context and striving to

bring out its political implications, particularly for his present (as I will discuss shortly). He could easily be credited, in fact, as the inventor of cultural studies, with his career-long innovations in the study of photography (beginning as early as 1926), film, children's literature and toys, and radio. His famous essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" has been among the most influential contributions to cultural studies (and beyond) ever written.⁷

But like his friend and sometime critic Theodor Adorno, he held that the form of the work of art was essential to its existence and must be a central aspect of the criticism thereof. This is obvious in *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* – known in English under the slightly mistranslated title *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. That work was written before he had decided to affiliate with Marxism, and it was prepared (in vain, as it turned out) to fulfill academic requirements, but Benjamin always claimed it as relevant to his more obviously Marxist writings in later life that clearly built on it. Its central pursuit is the understanding of how a group of seventeenth-century German dramas traditionally called *Trauerspiele* constituted a new literary form, separate from tragedy proper (hence the mistranslation in the English title), and profoundly connected to the history of culture in the baroque era. Central to its argument was a highly original theory of allegory in a special sense defined by Benjamin in the course of the study.

I will return to these issues in much greater detail below. My point here is to underline how much of his argument is formalist in nature. This interest in formalism did not end with his affiliation with Marxism but deepened and became explicitly materialist. Benjamin became interested in developing understandings of how aesthetic forms were related to the rise of capitalism and the complex interactions of historical-cultural development. This interest can be seen in almost all the major works of his later writings: in his analyses of Proust, Baudelaire, and Brecht and in his pioneering work in photography and film in particular.

It is because of this combination, I think, that Benjamin (and related theorists along the same lines such as Theodor Adorno and Fredric Jameson) can help mediate between competing impulses in contemporary Donne and early modern studies. I hope to exemplify this impulse in what follows, as I try to give due attention to important issues of form in Donne as well as his social and political connections. As we will see, this is an impulse that others in the field are following up on in different ways as well, as Heather Dubrow noted in her Presidential Address to the John Donne Society in 2016, to which I will return briefly below.

This emphasis on form and its connection to its cultural context is a quality of his work that Benjamin shared with Theodor Adorno. Despite the many differences that emerged over the course of their years of intellectual friendship, this fundamental approach to art criticism never wavered for either. In Benjaminesque baroque allegory, as in Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*, the function of artistic form is "to make historical content ... into a philosophical truth."⁸ Benjamin's work is fundamentally formalist and historicist⁹ – and presentist as well, as we will see.

It is to this last, presentist dimension I want to turn now. Benjamin's thinking on the relation of past and present in the production of the work of art, his theory of the "now" (*Jetztzeit*), in particular, can help clarify Donne's reception history. As I have written previously, Benjamin is (in the terms of today's critical lexicon) a "presentist," a critic committed to the idea that our readings of the past need to acknowledge and affirm our own situation in the contemporary world.¹⁰ This means, among other things, that our views of the past will change and develop as our own culture changes – and so of course must our views and interpretations of the great writers of the past. Necessarily, we need to think about what kind of Donne the twenty-first century will give us; or perhaps, it is better to say, what twenty-first century Donne we will ourselves construct.

Walter Benjamin's Presentism

The recent publication of what is likely to be for the indefinite future the definitive critical biography of Benjamin makes the task of getting at some of the subtleties of Benjamin's theory of the now-time easier than ever before.¹¹ He meditated on the problems of the relation of past and present in the work of art (and knowledge in general) from his earliest days as a philosopher-critic to his very last work, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," and some knowledge of the beginning does indeed help clarify the enigmatic terms of his last writing on the subject.

In Eiland and Jennings's account, the theory begins in the young Benjamin's reactions in his early university years to a version of neo-Kantianism that tended to historicize the categories of knowledge and critiqued the positivistic historicism of Leopold von Ranke, with its well-known goal of writing history "as it was."¹² Like anyone educated in the German university system of the day, he was instinctively Hegelian (since the whole enterprise of cultural history pursued in the German literature and aesthetics departments of that time was organized according to Hegelian notions of culture unfolding historically). But of particular

importance was his reading of the philosophy of Henri Bergson, especially his *Creative Evolution* and *Matter and Memory*.¹³ It was Bergson's idea of lived experience, and of the prolongation of the past in the present, that helped set off the sparks of Benjamin's later notion of the importance of the segmented time in memory and the crucial importance of the present moment in our experience.¹⁴

The ideas of Nietzsche were also part of the inspiration for Benjamin, particularly Nietzsche's criticism of nineteenth-century positivist approaches to history such as von Ranke's.¹⁵ Eventually in the 1930s, some ideas of the young Marx ("The world has long dreamed of something of which it has only to become conscious in order to possess it in actuality"¹⁶) helped fructify Benjamin's thinking along these lines. Benjamin continued throughout his career to critique the idea that the past can be reconstituted objectively and definitively separated from the present in which the historian lives.

There are obvious lessons to be drawn here that apply to some of today's deradicalized historical criticism, including much of the "old" historicism now making something of a comeback, as well as the "new materialism" of recent years.¹⁷ Attempts within these critical schools to reproduce the past "just as it was" would amount, in Benjamin's terms, to an impossible attempt to restore to the work of art (in this case the work of literature) its lost aura, its embeddedness in an original ritual-like context that contributed significantly to the work's uniqueness, its nonreproducibility. In one of his most famous essays, Benjamin argues that however valuable the aura once was, it must give way in our times to the reality of "technological reproducibility"¹⁸ (or "mechanical reproduction" in an older translation).

"Words, too, can have an aura of their own," Benjamin wrote in a different essay.¹⁹ The aura, strictly speaking, is not the property of the object, but rather it is a quality of the act of perceiving it — a quality based on distance, and productive of a sense of uniqueness, of authenticity. Natural objects also have an aura, Benjamin writes, and we endow them with it.²⁰

In effect, positivist historical criticism attempts in its readings to reproduce the aura of poetry (and other forms of literature), in the process creating false essences, losing the immediacy of the artwork, that is, its potential for achieving legibility (to use Benjamin's term) in our present. This kind of search for aura, Samuel Weber writes, is one whose goal is to define for the artwork its "fixed place, that would take its place in and as a world picture."²¹ Instead, I argue, we ought to search for the possibility of new legibilities, new constellations of meaning created by the aging of the work and the emergence of the future in our present.²²

Benjamin nurtured these and similar ideas in his long work with and translation of Proust, his writing about Kafka, and his study of Baudelaire. It is also a central motif in his study of the seventeenth-century German baroque dramas or *Trauerspiele*, as we see, for example, in his famous dictum from that study, “Allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things.”²³ Time is sedimented in the baroque plays in a way analogous to its complex sedimentation in key works of Modernism such as Proust’s *In Remembrance of Time Past*, Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Eliot’s and Pound’s poetry, or Faulkner’s novels.²⁴ Benjamin was in *The Origin* explicit about the connection between the seventeenth-century dramas he was analyzing and the works of contemporary German Expressionism – he mentions specifically a 1915 adaptation of Euripides’ *The Trojan Women* by Franz Werfel, *Die Troerinnen*.²⁵

But Benjamin went on to contemplate what happens to the work of art as it enters history, as it ages and is read and reinterpreted from epoch to epoch. For him, the afterlife of the work of art is crucial to its meaning for us, as crucial as is its meaning at its point of origin. Indeed, since the latter is essentially unrecoverable by us (a fortiori in the case of centuries-old works) because the original social situation and context have vanished, the afterlife is even more important – though Benjamin also believed (unlike some contemporary poststructuralists) that something of the original meaning always survived, and got recontextualized in subsequent ages. This is one of Benjamin’s most central ideas, and he returns to it in a variety of formulas over many years. One of its fullest expressions is found in the collection of notes for the Arcades Project:

What distinguishes images from the “essences” of phenomenology is their historical index. (Heidegger seeks in vain to rescue history for phenomenology abstractly through “historicity”). These images are to be thought of entirely apart from the categories of the “human sciences”: from so-called habitus, from style, and the like. For the historical index of the images not only says that they belong to a particular time; it says, above all, that they attain to legibility only at a particular time. And, indeed, this acceding “to legibility” constitutes a specific critical point in the movement at their interior. Every present day is determined by the images that are synchronic with it: each “now” is the now of a particular recognisability. In it, truth is charged to the bursting point with time. (This point of explosion, and nothing else, is the death of the *intentio*, which thus coincides with the birth of authentic historical time, the time of truth). It is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words: image is dialectics at a

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standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is purely temporal, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: not temporal in nature but figural <*bildlich*> [*sic*]. Only dialectical images are genuinely historical – that is, not archaic – images. The image that is read – which is to say, the image in the now of its recognisability – bears to the highest degree the imprint of the perilous critical moment on which all reading is founded.²⁶

This quote – and particularly the striking, Donne-like oxymoron “dialectics at a standstill” – has become rightly celebrated,²⁷ and I will return to it in Chapters 4 and 5. But Benjamin’s preoccupation with the importance of the “now” in the understanding of art and culture recurs continually in his writings. In his last work, “On the Concept of History” (1940), he put it this way:

History is the subject of a construction whose site is not homogenous, empty time, but time filled full by now-time [*Jetztzeit*]. Thus, to Robespierre, ancient Rome was a past charged with now-time, a past which he blasted out of the continuum of history. The French Revolution viewed itself as Rome incarnate. It cited ancient Rome exactly the way fashion cites a by-gone mode of dress.²⁸

Benjamin is thus particularly a theorist of a presentism interested in mediating constantly between the past of the work’s construction and the present of the moment of reading. His idea is both to avoid facile parallels between past and present and to avoid an attempt to isolate the past from the present. What he calls for is a kind of creative violence (as the use of the term “blast” in the above quote indicates), a simultaneous, interpenetrating moment of perception in which past and present reveal each other in each other:

The true image of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image that flashes up at the moment of its recognisability, and is never seen again. “The truth will not run away from us”: this statement by Gottfried Keller indicates exactly that point in historicism’s image of history where the image is pierced by historical materialism. For it is an irretrievable image of the past which threatens to disappear in any present that does not recognize itself as intended in that image.²⁹

To be sure, some caveats and qualifications need to be made in our sober present concerning Benjamin’s ecstatic language in the last quote. First is his reference to “historical materialism,” a common synonym for Marxism. It is clear to any student of Marxism that this particular version is one that is unique to Walter Benjamin and has never been universally

embraced by adherents of what has become a hugely variegated, non-unified set of ideas. As readers of Benjamin, we need to mentally insert a kind of “translation,” so that “historical materialism” means in Benjamin something like the “in-process version of Marxist thinking I am constructing.” Second is the issue of the sense in which it can be said that the past work’s meaning for us in a later time is “intended.” I take this formula as a rule of Benjamin’s hermeneutics of the construction of the “legibility” of a work in a later epoch: we must take its meaning as intended for us because only thus can we grasp what it means now in the *Jetztzeit* as an inescapable meaning – one inherent in the socio-historical process in which the work has been reproduced and refunctioned over the ages. Such meanings are “intended” because they are the inevitable outcomes of the aging of the artwork.

In what follows, I want particularly to apply these ideas of the unfolding of the meaning of the artwork in history to the complicated and virtually unique case of Donne’s extremely varied reception in history – and particularly to the invention of the “Modernist Donne” of the post-World War I era³⁰ epitomized by T. S. Eliot’s famous championing of Donne and “Metaphysical poetry” in his 1921 article “The Metaphysical Poets.” It will be necessary as well to review the contemporaneous but quite distinct development of the idea of the baroque over the same years in order to properly contextualize one of Benjamin’s key terms and to lay the basis for one of the latest developments in our understanding of Donne in the present. This leads to the inevitable issue of what has been and what should be the contours of a still evolving Donne.

Donne’s Afterlife

The bare outlines of the story of Donne’s reception are well known, although there have been some fairly recent discoveries that have not circulated widely beyond Donne specialists. In his early writing career, Donne cultivated a limited, “coterie” audience but found a wider readership and became known by a segment of the reading public of his day through copied manuscripts. In the process, as Ernest Sullivan wrote in an important study of the issue, “Donne lost all control over his manuscript readers” because of all the unauthorized copying.³¹ Many of the poems also found their way into print during his lifetime (and well after) as Sullivan also discovered in his ground-breaking study of Donne’s “uncollected seventeenth-century printed verse” from 1993.³² As a result Donne became a popular poet despite his apparent intentions not to be, and he

earned a reputation as the great exemplar of the poetry of wit or mental acuity during his lifetime and for the rest of the seventeenth century and beyond.

In addition, Donne found imitators in the next generation, most notably his champion Abraham Cowley, and more remotely perhaps, in the other so-called Metaphysical poets George Herbert, Andrew Marvell, Thomas Traherne, and Henry Vaughn. But the triumph of neoclassical poetics in Restoration culture eventually worked against Donne — as epitomized in Dryden’s famous criticism of Donne’s style, that “he affects the metaphysics, not only in his satires, but in his amorous verses, where nature only should reign; and perplexes the minds of the fair sex with nice speculations of philosophy, when he should engage their hearts, and entertain them with the softnesses of love.”³³ A whole paradigm shift in a culture’s poetic sensibility, its instinct for what should and should not be part of poetry, is encapsulated here. It was a shift of taste that was destined to decrease Donne’s prestige as a poet during the entire “long” eighteenth century and well into the nineteenth.³⁴

But again, Sullivan’s work complicates any simple, one-dimensional account of this shift in aesthetic taste by documenting that Donne’s poems found readers and, indeed, publishers in a variety of usually ignored uncollected printings of Donne’s verse, not only in the first six decades of the century, but also after the Restoration. His examination of the great variety of works that included Donne lyrics surprisingly shows that he was a popular poet throughout the century and found readers among the nonelite portions of the population, including women, and even young scholars in grammar schools. Sullivan does not extend his study beyond the year 1700, but he does show that Donne had many readers well after Dryden’s critique of him,³⁵ as does A. J. Smith in his *John Donne: The Critical Heritage*.

This important qualification does not, however, fundamentally alter the big picture of a long-term change in the perception of Donne in the eighteenth century. Samuel Johnson greatly amplified the new taste exemplified by Dryden in his much quoted and pejorative remarks on a group he called (coining the phrase) “the metaphysical poets,” of whom Donne is the earliest. Johnson, in an opinion that would dominate the reception of Donne until well into the nineteenth century, wrote, “The metaphysical poets were men of learning, and to show their learning was their only endeavor; but unluckily, resolving to show it in rhyme, instead of writing poetry they only wrote verses, and very often such verses as stood the trial of the finger better than that of the ear.”³⁶

Johnson's opinion was still prevalent in the nineteenth century, despite the efforts of a few early admirers such as Coleridge, Browning, or (in the United States) Emerson, Thoreau, and Margaret Fuller. The details can be studied in an excellent investigation into Donne's reception in the nineteenth century by John Haskin.³⁷ Haskin demonstrates that despite the strength of the Donne renaissance of the 1920s, it was during the Victorian era that the tide began to shift, and a Donne revival can be said to have begun (though climaxing late in the era, in the 1890s) after an approximately 200-year eclipse.³⁸

This revival, however, turned into a political-aesthetic revolution with the publication – and subsequent vast influence of – T. S. Eliot's brief review of Herbert Grierson's anthology *Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the Seventeenth Century* (1921). The review was titled "The Metaphysical Poets" and was first published in the *Times Literary Supplement* (Oct. 20, 1921: 669–70).³⁹ Thereafter, as Haskin notes, "The vogue for Donne that arose in the 1890s was superseded in the twentieth century by a sustained critical scrutiny that led to Donne's establishment as a major poet."⁴⁰

Eliot's essay was one of the most prominent signposts of a complex cultural process through which Donne's poetry became a major vehicle for and outcome of the Modernist aesthetic revolution of the twentieth century – and exemplified precisely what Benjamin means when he wrote: "It is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation ... The image that is read – which it to say, the image in the now of its recognisability – bears to the highest degree the imprint of the perilous critical moment on which all reading is founded."⁴¹ The moment of the "Modernist Donne" is precisely such a constellation formed by the cultural products of two eras brought into close juxtaposition, each stimulating the other. It is a prime example of "dialectics at a standstill" – two cultural moments in dynamic interaction but focused in one perceptual moment.

T. S. Eliot: Presentist Critic

T. S. Eliot, who serves so often as an example of conventionality and conservative thinking is, perhaps surprisingly, closer to Walter Benjamin than to a more academic critic like Rosemund Tuve⁴² in his evaluation of the aesthetic paradigm shifts as they impact our reception of Donne's poetry. Such a view was already implied, if not stated directly, in his 1921 "The Metaphysical Poets," when Eliot linked Donne with contemporary