

# Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

TCLC

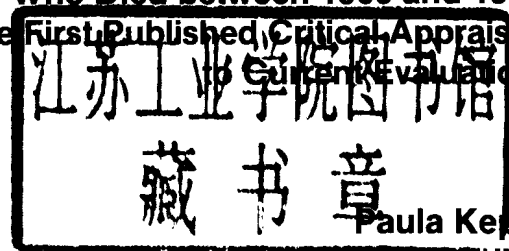
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Volume 39

# Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

**Excerpts from Criticism of the  
Works of Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,  
Short Story Writers, and Other Creative Writers  
Who Died between 1900 and 1960,  
from the First Published Critical Appraisals  
to Current Evaluations**



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# Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

# Guide to Gale Literary Criticism Series

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# Preface

Since its inception more than ten years ago, *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism* has been purchased and used by nearly 10,000 school, public, and college or university libraries. *TCLC* has covered over 500 authors, representing 58 nationalities, and more than 25,000 titles. No other reference source has surveyed the critical response to twentieth-century authors and literature as thoroughly as *TCLC*. In the words of one reviewer, "there is nothing comparable available." *TCLC* "is a gold mine of information—dates, pseudonyms, biographical information, and criticism from books and periodicals—which many libraries would have difficulty assembling on their own."

## Scope of the Series

*TCLC* is designed to serve as an introduction to authors who died between 1900 and 1960 and to the most significant interpretations of these authors' works. The great poets, novelists, short story writers, playwrights, and philosophers of this period are frequently studied in high school and college literature courses. In organizing and excerpting the vast amount of critical material written on these authors, *TCLC* helps students develop valuable insight into literary history, promotes a better understanding of the texts, and sparks ideas for papers and assignments. Each entry in *TCLC* presents a comprehensive survey of an author's career or an individual work of literature and provides the user with a multiplicity of interpretations and assessments. Such variety allows students to pursue their own interests; furthermore, it fosters an awareness that literature is dynamic and responsive to many different opinions.

Every fourth volume of *TCLC* is devoted to literary topics that cannot be covered under the author approach used in the rest of the series. Such topics include literary movements, prominent themes in twentieth-century literature, literary reaction to political and historical events, significant eras in literary history, prominent literary anniversaries, and the literatures of cultures that are often overlooked by English-speaking readers.

*TCLC* is designed as a companion series to Gale's *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, which reprints commentary on authors now living or who have died since 1960. Because of the different periods under consideration, there is no duplication of material between *CLC* and *TCLC*. For additional information about *CLC* and Gale's other criticism titles, users should consult the Guide to Gale Literary Criticism Series preceding the title page in this volume.

## Coverage

Each volume of *TCLC* is carefully compiled to present:

- criticism of authors, or literary topics, representing a variety of genres and nationalities
- both major and lesser-known writers and literary works of the period
- 14-16 authors or 4-6 topics per volume
- individual entries that survey critical response to each author's work or each topic in literary history, including early criticism to reflect initial reactions; later criticism to represent any rise or decline in reputation; and current retrospective analyses.

## Organization of This Book

An author entry consists of the following elements: author heading, biographical and critical introduction, list of principal works, excerpts of criticism (each preceded by an annotation and followed by a bibliographic citation), and a bibliography of further reading.

- The **author heading** consists of the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. If an author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the real name given in parentheses on the first line of the biographical and critical introduction. Also located at the beginning of the introduction to the author entry are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose languages use nonroman alphabets.

- The **biographical and critical introduction** outlines the author's life and career, as well as the critical issues surrounding his or her work. References are provided to past volumes of *TCLC* and to other biographical and critical reference series published by Gale, including *Short Story Criticism*, *Children's Literature Review*, *Contemporary Authors*, *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, and *Something about the Author*.
- Most *TCLC* entries include **portraits** of the author. Many entries also contain reproductions of materials pertinent to an author's career, including manuscript pages, title pages, dust jackets, letters, and drawings, as well as photographs of important people, places, and events in an author's life.
- The **list of principal works** is chronological by date of first book publication and identifies the genre of each work. In the case of foreign authors with both foreign-language publications and English translations, the title and date of the first English-language edition are given in brackets. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication.
- **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each author entry to provide a perspective on changes in critical evaluation over the years. All titles of works by the author featured in the entry are printed in boldface type to enable the user to easily locate discussion of particular works. Also for purposes of easier identification, the critic's name and the publication date of the essay are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the journal in which it appeared. Some of the excerpts in *TCLC* also contain translated material. Unless otherwise noted, translations in brackets are by the editors; translations in parentheses or continuous with the text are by the critic. Publication information (such as publisher names and book prices) and parenthetical numerical references (such as footnotes or page and line references to specific editions of works) have been deleted at the editors' discretion to provide smoother reading of the text.
- Critical excerpts are prefaced by **annotations** providing the reader with information about both the critic and the criticism that follows. Included are the critic's reputation, individual approach to literary criticism, and particular expertise in an author's works. Also noted are the relative importance of a work of criticism, the scope of the excerpt, and the growth of critical controversy or changes in critical trends regarding an author. In some cases, these annotations cross-reference excerpts by critics who discuss each other's commentary.
- A complete **bibliographic citation** designed to facilitate location of the original essay or book follows each piece of criticism.
- An annotated list of **further reading** appearing at the end of each author entry suggests secondary sources on the author. In some cases it includes essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights.

### Cumulative Indexes

- Each volume of *TCLC* contains a cumulative **author index** listing all authors who have appeared in the following Gale series: *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*, *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism*, *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800*, and *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism*. Topic entries devoted to a single author, such as the entry on James Joyce's *Ulysses* in *TCLC* 26, are listed in this index. Also included are cross-references to the Gale series *Poetry Criticism*, *Short Story Criticism*, *Children's Literature Review*, *Authors in the News*, *Contemporary Authors*, *Contemporary Authors Autobiography Series*, *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, *Concise Dictionary of American Literary Biography*, *Something about the Author*, *Something about the Author Autobiography Series*, and *Yesterday's Authors of Books for Children*. Useful for locating authors within the various series, this index is particularly valuable for those authors who are identified by a certain period but who, because of their death dates, are placed in another, or for those authors whose careers span two periods. For example, F. Scott Fitzgerald is found in *TCLC*, yet a writer often associated with him, Ernest Hemingway, is found in *CLC*.
- Each *TCLC* volume includes a cumulative **nationality index** which lists all authors who have appeared in *TCLC* volumes, arranged alphabetically under their respective nationalities, as well as Topics volume entries devoted to particular national literatures.
- Each new volume in Gale's Literary Criticism Series includes a cumulative **topic index**, which lists all literary topics treated in *NCLC*, *TCLC*, *LC 1400-1800*, and the *CLC* Yearbook.
- Each new volume of *TCLC*, with the exception of the Topics volumes, contains a **title index** listing the titles of all literary works discussed in the volume. The first volume of *TCLC* published each year contains an index listing all titles discussed in the series since its inception. Titles discussed in the Topics volume entries are not included in the *TCLC* cumulative index.

### A Note to the Reader

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume in Gale's Literary Criticism Series may use the following general forms to footnote reprinted criticism. The first example pertains to material drawn from periodicals, the second to material reprinted from books.

<sup>1</sup> T. S. Eliot, "John Donne," *The Nation and the Athenaeum*, 33 (9 June 1923), 321-32; excerpted and reprinted in *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800*, Vol. 10, ed. James E. Person, Jr. (Detroit: Gale Research, 1989), pp. 28-9.

<sup>2</sup> Clara G. Stillman, *Samuel Butler: A Mid-Victorian Modern* (Viking Press, 1932); excerpted and reprinted in *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*, Vol. 33, ed. Paula Kepos (Detroit: Gale Research, 1989), pp. 43-5.

### Suggestions Are Welcome

In response to suggestions, several features have been added to *TCLC* since the series began, including annotations to excerpted criticism, a cumulative index to authors in all Gale literary criticism series, entries devoted to criticism on a single work by a major author, more extensive illustrations, and a title index listing all literary works discussed in the series since its inception.

Readers who wish to suggest authors or topics to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to write the editors.



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# Walter Benjamin

1892-1940

German philosopher, critic, essayist, and cultural theorist.

One of the most influential thinkers of the period between the First and Second World Wars, Benjamin is best known for his works of cultural criticism and his insightful studies of language and literature. Addressing such issues as the social function of the arts, the metaphysical implications of language, and the history of society as it is affected by technology, Benjamin's works are considered challenging and controversial texts that resist classification and invite critical debate, leading Julian Roberts to characterize Benjamin as a "highly respected enigma."

Born in Berlin to affluent Jewish parents, Benjamin received an elite, progressive education. In 1912 he began his postsecondary studies at the University of Freiburg and became a member of the popular German Youth Movement, which denounced modern society and advocated an ethical code based on such traditional values as heroism, nationalism, and the preservation of racial purity. One of the movement's strongest speakers, Benjamin represented a radical branch whose largely Jewish membership, rather than promoting a unified struggle for ethical improvement of society, stressed the spiritual refinement of the individual. Becoming disenchanted with the demand for consensus within the Youth Movement, even within the radical faction to which he belonged, Benjamin discontinued his involvement in 1914.

During World War I, Benjamin studied philosophy at universities in Munich and Berlin, and completed his doctorate in 1919 at the University of Bern in Switzerland. His dissertation on German Romantic art criticism, *Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik*, considered the nature of art, literature, and criticism, concerns that persisted throughout his career. After graduation, Benjamin published reviews and articles in German periodicals, most notably his essay *Goethes "Wahlverwandtschaften"* (Goethe's "Elective Affinities") and wrote *Der Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (*The Origin of German Tragic Drama*), a study intended to fulfill an application requirement for a teaching position at the University of Frankfurt. The university rejected the work in 1925, one professor finding it an "incomprehensible morass"; most critics cite this incident as a turning point in Benjamin's career. Unable to continue his research and writing under the sponsorship of a university, he was compelled to free-lance during a period of financial difficulty for most Germans and in an atmosphere of increasing hostility towards Jews. During his years in Berlin, Benjamin established a friendship with the German dramatist Bertolt Brecht, whose plays he admired for their avant-garde presentation of communist philosophy. Attracted to the ideology and revolutionary nature of communism, bolshevism, and Marxism, Benjamin became a prominent figure in leftist circles, while refusing to be recognized as a member of any political party.

With Adolf Hitler's rise to power in 1933, Benjamin went



into exile. Living intermittently in Paris and Denmark, he published essays and reviews under pseudonyms in German journals. In 1935 Benjamin began contributing essays to the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, the publication of the Institute for Social Research, whose primary advocates, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, offered him a generous annual stipend. While his interest in documenting and interpreting cultural phenomena was pertinent to the Institute's goal of effecting social change through intellectual enlightenment, Adorno considered many of Benjamin's writings more politically pragmatic than theoretical, and their ensuing debate over the acceptability of Benjamin's works became known as the Benjamin-Adorno dispute. Despite the attempts of several of his colleagues to persuade him to leave Europe, Benjamin settled in Paris in 1939. After the German invasion of France in 1940, however, he resolved to relocate to the United States. That autumn, he and a small group of refugees were apprehended in their attempt to leave Europe, whereupon Benjamin committed suicide.

Benjamin's works may be divided into three categories: autobiographical writings and familiar essays, literary criticism, and philosophical essays. In the autobiographical *Berliner Kindheit um Neunzehnhundert* Benjamin

evaluates the effects of the political and religious attitudes prevalent in turn-of-the-century Germany on his childhood experiences. *Einbahnstrasse* (*One-Way Street*) consists of aphoristic, reflective essays that comment on modern society through the examination of commonplace events in everyday life and the observation of the dynamics of city life. More complex in both style and content, Benjamin's literary criticism often both interprets a work of literature and theorizes on the nature of criticism, language, and translation. In *Goethe's "Elective Affinities,"* for example, Benjamin not only discusses Goethe's understanding of myth as displayed in *Elective Affinities*, but also uses his discussion of the novel to emphasize his own rejection of biographical criticism and to suggest his theory on the degeneration of language in modern society. Similarly complex is the methodology of his philosophical writings. *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, considered one of Benjamin's most important works, analyzes allegory in the German baroque drama, or *Trauerspiel*, and the ways in which it informs aesthetic theory. While literary in nature, the essay is praised primarily for its philosophical examination of the function of *Trauerspiel* as stoic commentary on material transience. In "Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit" ("The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction") Benjamin discusses the relationship between art and technology. Defining his concept of "aura" as a quality of uniqueness and authenticity specific to a work of art, Benjamin contends that the ability to reproduce art mechanically (in photographs and film) diminishes the "aura" of art, freeing it from the "fabric of tradition" and changing its nature from aesthetic to political. Benjamin also focused specifically on the philosophy of history in several highly regarded essays later in his career.

Characterized by most critics as convoluted and problematic, Benjamin's works incorporate aspects of several ideologies, but the depth of Benjamin's commitment to any one of them remains controversial. Some critics, particularly René Wellek and Julian Roberts, find that Benjamin's career represents a gradual adoption of the principles of Marxism. The issue of Benjamin's commitment to Marxism centers on his espousal of dialectical materialism, the Marxist worldview that defines attitudes and ideas as the result of material conditions and emphasizes the power struggle between classes in society, which produces a constant process of change known as the "dialectic." Wellek and Roberts argue that Benjamin became dedicated to this philosophy and to Marxism during the last decade of his life. Wellek states that "Marxist themes—the alienation of man, 'reification,' the work of art as commodity—permeate his later work," while Roberts has described Benjamin as a "revolutionary specialist."

In opposition to the view of Benjamin as a Marxist, some commentators emphasize the importance of spiritual values in Benjamin's work. Prominent among these critics are Gershom Scholem and Hannah Arendt, who focus their criticism on Benjamin's commitment to Judaism. Scholem characterizes Benjamin as a "metaphysical genius" and dismisses Marxism as a passing interest resulting from his friendship with Brecht. Scholem also believed that Benjamin's works on the philosophy of language, with their references to sacred texts, as in his "Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers" ("The Task of the Translator"), indi-

cate the strong influence that the ideas of messianism and spiritual redemption had on his critical thinking. Arendt argues that Benjamin believed language to be imbued with public values and that this belief is a manifestation of his espousal of Zionism, which for him was a form of protest against the oppression Jews endured in European society, much in the same way as his interest in Marxism was a reaction to an oppressive social structure.

Several commentators maintain that the resistance of Benjamin's work to categorization reflects his absolute refusal to confine himself to a single ideology. Adorno believed his colleague's position to be that of a nonconformist whose interest in cultural phenomena supplanted the conventional approaches to philosophy. Critics generally regard Benjamin as an original, perceptive, and important thinker. Concerning his sometimes contradictory and obscure writings, Bernd Witte suggests that "the esoteric itself needs to be comprehended as a constitutive element of Benjamin's thought."

### PRINCIPAL WORKS

- Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik* (criticism) 1920
- Goethes "Wahlverwandtschaften" (essay) 1924-25
- Einbahnstrasse* (aphorisms) 1928
- [*One-Way Street*, published in *One-Way Street, and Other Writings*, 1979]
- Der Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (criticism) 1928
- [*The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 1977]
- Kleine Geschichte der Photographie* (essay) 1931
- [*A Short History of Photography*, 1972]
- Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit* (essay) 1936
- [*The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, 1968]
- Über den Begriff der Geschichte* (criticism) 1942
- [*Theses on the Philosophy of History*, 1968]
- Berliner Kindheit um Neunzehnhundert* (memoirs) 1950
- Schriften*. 2 vols. (essays, addresses, and letters) 1955
- Zentralpark* (aphorisms) 1955
- [*Central Park* published in journal *New German Critique*, 1985]
- Illuminationen: Ausgewählte Schriften* (essays) 1961
- [*Illuminations*, 1968]
- Zur Kritik der Gewalt und andere Aufsätze* (essays) 1965
- [*Critique of Violence, and Other Essays*, 1978]
- Briefe*. 2 vols. (letters) 1966
- Versuche über Brecht* (criticism) 1966
- [*Understanding Brecht*, 1973]
- Charles Baudelaire: Ein Lyriker im Zeitalter des Hochkapitalismus* (essays) 1969
- [*Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, 1973]
- Gesammelte Schriften*. 6 vols. (essays, criticism, and letters) 1972-88
- Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings* (essays and aphorisms) 1978
- Briefwechsel, 1933-40* (letters) 1980
- [*The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem, 1932-1940*, 1989]

Moskauer Tagebuch (diary) 1980  
[Moscow Diary, 1986]

Gershom Scholem (lecture date 1964)

[A German-born Jewish scholar, Scholem was the author of over five hundred books and articles. Much of his work concerns the Cabala, the traditional system of Jewish mysticism, and Scholem is generally credited with raising the study of the Cabala from a state of disreputability to what the London Times has called "a position of central importance" in Jewish thought. In the following excerpt from the transcript of a lecture first delivered in 1964, Scholem offers an appreciative discussion of Benjamin's philosophical and theological principles, emphasizing the importance of Judaism in his critical thought.]

In the years that have passed since the publication of his *Schriften*, a good deal has been written about Benjamin, much of it silly or petty. He had too strong an element of the enigmatic and unfathomable in his mental makeup not to provoke that sort of thing. And his critics' misunderstandings would surely have been a source of amusement to him who even in his brightest hours never abandoned the esoteric thinker's stance. As Adorno said very aptly about him, "What Benjamin said and wrote sounded as if born of mystery, yet its force derived from cogency." The peculiar aura of authority emanating from his thought, though never explicitly invoked, tended to incite contradiction, while the rejection of any systematic approach in all his work published after 1922—a rejection that he himself proclaimed boldly from the hoardings—screened the center of his personality from the view of many.

That center can be clearly defined: Benjamin was a philosopher. He was one through all the phases and in all the fields of his activity. On the face of it he wrote mostly about subjects of literature and art, sometimes also about topics on the borderline between literature and politics, but only rarely about matters conventionally considered and accepted as themes of pure philosophy. Yet in all these domains he derives his impulse from the philosopher's experience. Philosophical experience of the world and its reality—that is how we can sum up the meaning of the term *metaphysics*, and that is certainly the sense in which it is used by Benjamin. He was a metaphysician; indeed, I would say, a metaphysician pure and simple. But it was borne in on him that in his generation the genius of a pure metaphysician could express itself more readily in other spheres, any other sphere rather than in those traditionally assigned to metaphysics, and this was precisely one of the experiences that helped to mold his distinctive individuality and originality. He was attracted more and more—in a fashion strangely reminiscent of Simmel, with whom otherwise he had little in common—by subjects which would seem to have little or no bearing on metaphysics. It is a special mark of his genius that under his gaze every one of these subjects discloses a dignity, a philosophic aura of its own which he sets out to describe.

His metaphysical genius flowed from the quality of his relevant experience, its abounding richness pregnant with

symbolism. It was this latter aspect of his experience, I believe, which invests many of his most luminous statements with the character of the occult. Nor is this surprising. Benjamin was a man to whom occult experiences were not foreign. Rarely though—if ever—do they appear in his work in their immediate unprocessed form. (This is presumably why he was able to recapture the occult character of Proust's decisive experience with unsurpassed precision.) In his personal life, incidentally, this trait found expression in an almost uncanny graphological gift of which I witnessed a good many instances. (Later on he tended to conceal this gift.)

Even where he takes up controversial topics of literary and general history or politics as his starting point, the metaphysician's eye penetrates deep below the surface, and reveals in the objects of his discourse fresh layers bathed in a light of strange radiance. In his earlier works he seems to describe the configuration of such layers as if writing under dictation, while later on this immediacy gives way to an increasingly precise understanding of the tension and the dialectic motion astir in his subjects. He proceeds from the simplest elements, and entirely unexpected vistas open themselves up to him; the hidden inner life of his subjects is manifest to him. His discursive thinking commands great trenchancy, as displayed, for instance, in his first book, on the concept of art criticism among the early German romantics. In most of his work, however, this discursive element of strict conceptual exposition takes second place to a descriptive method by which he seeks to let his experience speak. It is this descriptive method which seems so strangely to open his subjects up to him, and which invests even short papers and essays of his with a character at the same time fragmentary and final.

To say that Benjamin is a difficult author would be an understatement. His major works demand an unusual degree of concentration from the reader. His thought was greatly compressed and inexorable in the often excessive brevity of exposition. Accordingly, his works—if I may say so—need to be meditated upon. At the same time they are written in a masterly prose of rare incandescence. His essay on Goethe's "*Elective Affinities*" [Goethe's "*Wahlverwandtschaften*"], which moved Hofmannsthal to enthusiasm, combines in a manner unique in aesthetics the highest elevation of style with the deepest thought. The same applies to the last section of his book on the *Trauerspiel*. By contrast many of his smaller and smallest pieces—especially the essays in *Die Literarische Welt*, *Die Gesellschaft*, and *Frankfurter Zeitung*—are written with a gusto and facility of expression that seem to veil the profundity of interpretation. As his masterpiece in this genre I would rate the essay on Gottfried Keller, although others—for instance those on Johann Peter Hebel, Paul Scheerbart, Robert Walser, Nikolai Leskov, and Max Kommerell—come close to it. No wonder that the combination came off, sprang into life spontaneously as it were, where he was able to pay homage. (pp. 177-79)

His metaphysical genius dominates his writings, from the unpublished "*Metaphysics of Youth*," which he wrote in 1913 at the age of twenty-one, to the *Theses on the Philosophy of History* of 1940, his latest extant piece of writing. It is manifested especially in two spheres that increasingly interpenetrate in his work: the philosophy of language and the philosophy of history. The one bent led to a growing

preoccupation with literary critical analysis, the other similarly to social-critical analysis. But throughout it was always the philosopher speaking, unambiguous, an unmistakable voice. For about ten years he upheld the concept of the philosophic system as the form proper to philosophy, after which he himself was groping. Kant exerted a lasting influence on him, even where—as in the recently published **“Program of the Coming Philosophy”**—he passionately challenges the validity of the experience expressed in that philosophy. He expected that an experience of infinitely greater richness would still have to be fitted into what was basically Kant's frame of reference, however great the necessary modifications. But this ideal of the system, reflecting the traditional canons of philosophy, was corroded and eventually destroyed in his mind by a skepticism that stemmed in equal proportions from his study of neo-Kantian systems and from his own specific experience.

Margarete Susman has referred to an “exodus from philosophy” said to have occurred in Germany after World War I and to have ushered in a completely new mode of thinking. What she meant, to judge from her examples, was the tendency to turn from idealism to existentialism and theology. Few men can have provided more drastic an illustration of this exodus than Walter Benjamin, who forsook systematic philosophy to dedicate himself to the task of commenting on the great works, a task which at that time—with his prime interests still belonging to theology—he considered preliminary to commenting on sacred texts. This goal, though clearly envisaged, he never reached; the provisional, halfway stage remained the ever-changing and yet enduring field for his productivity, and the form of his philosophy was determined by the method of commentary. After the liquidation of the driving force of system, a dialectic unfolds in his commentaries that seeks to record the intrinsic movement of each object of contemplation at its specific historical locus. True, everything is still viewed from one common angle of vision here, but the separate pieces can no longer cohere into a unified system, which in his eyes became increasingly suspect of brutality.

The themes of most of his papers now become those of literary criticism, different though Benjamin's writings in this field are from the customary ingredients of that genre. Only rarely are his analyses and reflections literary in the conventional sense of being concerned with the structure and value of an important work. They are almost invariably philosophical probings of their specific and in particular their historical aura, to use a concept that often recurs in his writings, seen from many different angles. Each of his pieces outlines, as it were, an entire philosophy of its subject. Clearly, having set himself the task of interpreting and plumbing the depths of the great works of literature—in his eyes, incidentally, greatness did not always coincide with public fame—the philosopher did not surrender to the methods of literary history he had come to recognize as more than dubious, but worked all the time with the inheritance of the philosophical inspiration that never deserted him. He was at his most inspired where he felt the appeal of a kindred impulse or an inspiration close to his own—nowhere more so than in the cases of Marcel Proust and Franz Kafka to whose world he devoted years of intense exploration, of impassioned reliving and detached rethinking. In such cases there were virtually no limits to

the overflowing metaphysical richness at his command in recapturing the unique historical situation that he saw reflected in these works, its very uniqueness manifesting complete universality. It is nearly always this combination of historical cum philosophical insight with a wide-awake and highly articulate awareness of artistic values that turns his essays—and sometimes the shortest among them in particular—into true masterpieces. What was the anatomy of the imagination of “his” authors—though in fact he was theirs, possessed rather than self-possessed—and how was the mainspring of their imagination connected in each case with the characteristic tension of the historical and social ambience that determined their production? These were the questions that fascinated him.

To Benjamin, mystics and satirists, humanists and lyricists, scholars and monomaniacs are equally worthy of philosophical study in depth. As he proceeds he is liable without warning to switch from the profane to the theological approach, for he has a precise feel for the outline of theological substance even when it seems dissolved altogether in the world of the wholly temporal. And even where he thinks that he can successfully avail himself of the materialist method, he does not close his eyes to what he has perceived with the utmost clarity. For all his renunciation of system, his thought, presented as that of a fragmentarian, yet retains a systematic tendency. He used to say that each great work needed its own epistemology just as it had its own metaphysics. This constructive tendency in his mode of thinking—constructive even where applied to destructive facts or phenomena—also conditions his style. Meticulously pointed, shining with a contemplative luster that refuses the slightest concession to the fashionable expressionist prose of those years, this style is deeply embedded in the processes of a mind striving after order and cohesion. Benjamin's “texts” really are what the word says: “woven tissues.” Although in his youth he was in close personal contact with the rising expressionism which celebrated its first triumphs in Berlin at that time, he never surrendered to it. In his best works the German language has achieved a perfection that takes the reader's breath away. It owes this perfection to the rare achievement of blending highest abstraction with sensuous richness and presentation in the round, and thus bears the hallmark of his notion of metaphysical knowledge. In a wonderful fashion his language, without abandoning depth of insight, closely and snugly fits the subject it covers and at the same time strives in competition with the subject's own language from which it keeps its precise distance. I know very few authors of this century whose writings include a comparable number of pages of sheer perfection. The tension between the language of Benjamin's analyses or interpretations and the texts on which they are based is often stupendous. The reader—if I may use a mathematical simile—finds himself between two transfinite classes reciprocally related, though not by a one-to-one correspondence. The perfection of language in Goethe's *Elective Affinities* or in Karl Kraus's polemical pages is matched in Benjamin's treatment of those works by the new beauty of the interpreter's language, which seems to descend from the language of a recording angel. Small wonder, then, that Hofmannsthal was overwhelmed by the long essay on [Goethe's *“Elective Affinities”*]; small wonder, too, that Kraus, while acknowledging that the essay devoted to him was “well meant,” did not understand a word of it. (pp. 180-83)