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Author(s): Karlheinz Barck and Anthony Reynolds

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WALTER BENJAMIN AND ERICH AUERBACH: FRAGMENTS OF A CORRESPONDENCE

KARLHEINZ BARCK

The hundredth birthdays last year of Walter Benjamin and Erich Auerbach were seldom regarded as anything more than a mere fortuitous correspondence. But this supplement to the personal relationship of the two Berliners brings to light aspects of an intellectual configuration of the twenties and thirties that situates the two as academic outsiders who found themselves increasingly marginalized. In an exchange of letters between Benjamin and Auerbach which is yet to be fully recovered, we find traces of an intellectual dialogue and an overlapping of interests drawing the two into a correspondence whose implications, previously only intimated, can now begin to be explored.

In a letter to Auerbach, who was working as Professor of Romance Languages at the Turkish State University in Istanbul after having been dismissed from his teaching position in Marburg in 1935 “on racist grounds,” Benjamin reflects on their friendship:

Lieber Herr Auerbach,

Your letter was a source of great pleasure for several reasons. First, it told me that you had succeeded in solving the problem of an increasingly oppressive situation. Second, it enables me to enter once again into a direct exchange of thoughts with you.

It certainly will not surprise you to learn that I welcome this new constellation of circumstances with the most heartfelt and repeated thanks for that by which you had assured me of your friendship in a previous and more troubled set of circumstances. I refer in this respect just as much to the indirect personal contact that you maintained with me as to the direct, practical help that you offered me.

A small book that I have recently allowed to be pseudonymously published in Switzerland will express this to you in its own way. [21 Dec. 1936]

The book that Benjamin sent to Auerbach was his discreetly counternationalistic anthology of letters, *Deutsche Menschen*, which had been brought out in 1936 in Lucerne. Auerbach expressed his gratitude in the following words: “It is a truly wonderful selection you have made, and I ask you to write me—immediately if possible—to tell me whether

Editors' note: We are grateful to Anselm Haverkamp for making this text available to us. Karlheinz Barck is research director of the division of Literary Theory at the Central Institute for Literary Research of the former East German Akademie der Kunst. The founder of the Institute, Werner Krauss, was himself the successor of Erich Auerbach in Marburg before he became the Chair of Romance Philology in Leipzig. Through his and Ernst Bloch's initiative, the Chair of Romance Philology at Humboldt University in the east part of the city of Berlin was offered in 1949 to Auerbach, who in 1950 was to accept an offer from Yale University, where he remained until his death in 1959.

this book can be ordered in Germany or at least sent there; I would like to make it accessible to several people" [28 Jan. 1937].

To Benjamin's impatient request "to learn more about the interesting and intellectually valuable experiences that Auerbach was having in Turkey" came a reply in the form of a somewhat longer letter in which Auerbach characterizes the personally distressing autocratic reforms of Kemal Atatürk, whose form of nationalism he linked to the "present international situation":

But he [Kemal Atatürk] had to force through everything he did in the struggle against the European democracies on the one hand and the old Mohammedan-Pan-Islamic sultan's economy on the other; and the result is a fanatically anti-traditional nationalism: rejection of all existing Mohammedan cultural heritage, the establishment of a fantastic relation to a primal Turkish identity, technological modernization in the European sense, in order to triumph against a hated and yet admired Europe with its own weapons: hence, the preference for European-educated emigrants as teachers, from whom one can learn without the threat of foreign propaganda. Result: nationalism in the extreme accompanied by the simultaneous destruction of the historical national character. This picture, which in other countries like Germany, Italy, and even Russia (?) is not visible for everyone to see, shows itself here in full nakedness. . . . It is becoming increasingly clear to me that the present international situation is nothing but a ruse of providence, designed to lead us along a bloody and tortuous path to an International of triviality and a culture of Esperanto. I have already suspected this in Germany and Italy in view of the dreadful inauthenticity of the "blood and soil" propaganda, but only here has the evidence of such a trend almost reached the point of certainty. [3 Jan. 1937]

Auerbach attempted to outwit the forces of providence by getting Benjamin out of Nazi-threatened Europe. One discovers from the letters that Auerbach had recommended Benjamin for a professorship in the German department of the University of São Paulo in Brazil, which had been founded in 1934:

I thought of you approximately one year ago, when a search was being made for a professor to teach German literature in São Paulo. I found your Danish address at that time through the Frankfurter Zeitung and informed the proper authorities of how you could be reached—but nothing came of the matter, and to have written to you from Germany would have been senseless. [23 Sept. 1935]

One can very well imagine the intellectual milieu, including Claude Lévi-Strauss and Antonio Cândido, in which Benjamin would have taken part. But one can imagine another scenario, in which Benjamin would have perhaps fallen under the dictatorship of Getúlio Vargas, whose secret police assisted in the 1939 extradition of Olga Benario to Germany, where she was later executed in a concentration camp.

On the less speculative side, this exchange of letters draws attention to the role Auerbach played in the theoretical writings of Benjamin. In conversations about the *Passagen-Werk*, we discover that Auerbach had been drawn into this project at an early stage:

Lieber Herr Benjamin,

We found your letter awaiting us upon our arrival yesterday. I too regret that we are not getting to see the full publication of your "Childhood" book, being of course the book of our own childhood as well [Berlin Childhood around 1900, of which only the first twelve segments had appeared, in February and

March 1932 in the *Frankfurter Zeitung*]. *I do hope it eventually succeeds. As for the Paris book, I have known about it for quite some time—once it was supposed to have been called Pariser Passagen. That is going to turn into a real document, provided that there are still people about who read documents.* [6 Oct. 1935]

It is evident from his 1929 essay “Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of European Intelligence” and from his review of Rolland de Renéville’s “L’expérience poétique” in 1938 that Benjamin saw a surprising correspondence between Auerbach’s descriptions of esoteric love in his early work *Dante, Poet of the Secular World* and the “surrealist conception of love,” to be found for instance in André Breton’s *Nadja*. Moreover, it seems that Benjamin discovered traces of a reading of esoteric poetry in Auerbach’s early Dante book:

It is tangibly evident in this reading [by Auerbach]—and the author himself makes explicit note of this in another passage—exactly how little the esoteric schools of poetry allowed themselves to be taken in by l’art pour l’art, which had been held up so often as the very principle of their extravagance. It is precisely in the form of this extravagance that poetry raises its most radical demand for the transformation of all life, of daily existence and its conditions. [GS 2: 3.1037]

Upon further interrogation of these traces, correspondences of another order between the works of Benjamin and Auerbach begin to unfold. These correspondences, which are too multifarious to be reduced to a series of influences, can be witnessed in the efforts of both to articulate a rhetorically mediated theory of history.

The author of *Mimesis*, a book Geoffrey Hartman describes as “perhaps the only true literary history we have” [*Criticism in the Wilderness* 235], had laid the cornerstone for this investigation in his early work on Dante, figuring the latter as the discoverer of the “modern European form of mimesis of historical occurrence through art” [*Dante* 212]. Only a few years after the 1929 appearance of the Dante book, Benjamin began to elaborate similarly profane perspectives on language or the letter [*Schriftzeichen*] as the material deposit of historical contexts [GS 2: 3.953], in his essays “Doctrine of the Similar” and “On the Mimetic Faculty,” both written in 1933, after Hitler had come to power.

The fragments of this correspondence, which I recovered from the archives of the former East German Akademie der Kunst, present us with the task [*Aufgabe*] not only of retracing the path of Benjamin and Auerbach’s relationship but also of rethinking the correspondences between their theoretical projects.

Translated by Anthony Reynolds

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