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Inheriting Walter Benjamin

Gerhard Richter

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The Task of the Inheritor: A Review of Gerhard Richter's *Inheriting Walter Benjamin*

Matthew Gannon

Gerhard Richter sets the stage for his insightful new study *Inheriting Walter Benjamin* (2016) by making the simple yet far from straightforward claim that "there is nothing at all self-evident about the notion that we should know how to inherit the thinking and writing of Benjamin today" (2). For Richter, to be an inheritor is not merely to be a successor, or one who can faithfully and directly carry out the (perceived) will of the deceased. The self-reflexivity of philosophy — and critical thought in general — precludes an easy and unproblematic inheritance. Instead, Richter surveys the complex poetic tropes of Benjamin's refractory and idiomatic passages, inheriting them through critical and close readings. To draw out Benjamin's rich legacy and its inheritability today, he puts Benjamin in dialogue with writers whose legacy Benjamin himself inherited, such as Kant, Nietzsche, and Kafka. He does the same with those who were contemporaneous with Benjamin or who inherited his legacy, including Heidegger, Derrida, and Richter himself.

There are high stakes and radical potentialities in inheriting a legacy such as Benjamin's. Inheriting is a task that, if performed responsibly, eschews the temptations of closure that a rigid and programmable interpretation would bring. To inherit a tradition entails a struggle to receive it and the necessity of transforming it in order to pass it on again. In his *Arcades Project*, Benjamin warns against a "transmission that is a catastrophe" (10). When Richter applies this notion to its author, he finds that avoiding catastrophe requires inheriting Benjamin as an "irreducible enigma" and prioritizing an "interminable resistance to closure and completion," making

inheritance a never-completed task that allows Benjamin's thought to enter into surprising and even revolutionary configurations with the concerns of the present and the future (10).

Inheritance is more than a useful concept through which Richter can explore the state of Benjamin's writings today; it is something that Benjamin himself was concerned with, which is unsurprising for a thinker so preoccupied with temporal ruptures, the power of the past, and the logic of latency and afterness. Richter devotes a chapter to Benjamin's concept of inheritance in his 1934 essay commemorating the tenth anniversary of Kafka's death. Making linguistic observations on a single passage from Benjamin's essay, several lines from Kafka concerning original sin, Richter notes that in the original German both Benjamin and Kafka use the term *Erbsünde*, which, rather than original sin, more literally means "inheritance sin," shifting the emphasis of the sin from the original act to its transmissibility and inheritability. This transmission of sin becomes archetypal for the burden of inheritance as such and the difficult position of the inheritor, who receives a legacy that he may not fully understand, making necessary a process of confronting, reading, and interpreting of the inheritance. Referencing Derrida, himself an inheritor of Benjamin and Kafka, Richter contrasts mere appropriation with inheritance, arguing that the latter is not about possessing a legacy as something fixed and stable, but rather keeping it alive.

It is in this spirit of closely reading particularly dense and theoretically rich passages that each of Richter's chapters sets out to inherit Benjamin. Rather than offering definitive statements on Benjamin's intellectual legacy, Richter instead delivers "a critical *constellation*" of open-ended readings that illuminate the central concerns of inheriting Benjamin today (13, emphasis added). The focal points of this constellation are key passages from Benjamin that are representative of his larger intellectual project. These are best described as "cool places" in Benjamin's writing, borrowing Richter's term from his chapter on Benjamin's relationship to Nietzsche and Kant. In that chapter, Richter argues that these cool places, a term Benjamin himself uses in the *Arcades Project*, are moments of unusually striking language that articulate his intellectual aims non-systematically through "densely figurative allusions and poetically mediated figures of thought" (110).

Benjamin's writing not only traffics in cool places, it, as a whole, also occupies a cool place by eschewing the systematic for the figurative, the definitive for the open-ended. Richter points to a letter Benjamin wrote to Scholem describing his writing as "always radical, never consistent with regard to the most important things" (101). To read Benjamin, to inherit him, says Richter, requires attending to the ways in which Benjamin is inconsistent and abounding with internal, unresolvable tensions. To follow Benjamin's apodictic and idiosyncratic logic is to embrace the irreducible literariness and textuality of his writing that breaks through traditional modes of reasoning to provide something genuinely and radically new. Richter demonstrates this by revealing how Benjamin negotiates between two major methodological

approaches to analyzing media and aesthetics: the historical/genealogical model typified by Nietzsche and the formal/structural model of Kantian aesthetics.

Richter shows how Benjamin inherited from both Nietzsche and Kant the specificity and irreducibility of aesthetic experience, and, like them, awarded the aesthetic great importance for its ability to suggest possibilities of experience and the potential for freedom. Though Benjamin never explains the connection between the formal and genealogical modes of thinking, the cool places in his writings effectively stage this relationship dialectically, leaving interpretation radically, if unsettlingly, open. Richter's identification of cool places in Benjamin has its corollary in Benjamin's locating the cool places in aesthetic experience, or the moment in an artwork that is not self-identical or assimilable into a whole but is "at odds with itself... interrupted by the unexpected emergence of a radical singularity" (111). This has immense political consequences, Richter argues, as the cool place of an aesthetic work is precisely where truth is rendered visible in ways not typically accessible to dominant ways of seeing or thinking.

Richter's consideration of Benjamin's Kantian inheritance is further fleshed out when he puts Benjamin in conversation with Heidegger on the concept of the "thing." At stake in the post-Kantian legacy of critique is the critical perspective on the object, and even the necessity for critique to take itself as its own object. Richter contends that while it is typically unorthodox to read Benjamin alongside Heidegger, it is perfectly appropriate to do so in considering how they both inherited this thingness of Kantian critique. Richter describes them as both drawing from Kantian critique in their role as concrete thinkers, or, as Benjamin put it, "physiognomists of the world of things" (65).

This concern with thingness in Benjamin and Heidegger is also manifested in both thinkers' linguistic and textual approaches to materiality. Language offers mediacy, and, drawing on Schlegel's notion of critique as a mediation of history and philosophy, Richter highlights how thingness must be understood textually, making it necessary for the critic to read the things that inhabit his world. Heidegger's consideration of the materiality of things and language places him within the orbit of a certain kind of Marxian materialism for Richter. Furthermore, his ontological inquiry into the beings that surround us can be understood as taking into account our relation to things, one that seeks out hitherto unthought modes of being. Such a critique of the thing leads to a rejection of a scientific rationality that seeks a stable determinacy, and instead leaves the thing open to endless possibility in which the unthought and the nonexistent may yet come to be thought and to exist. This line of thought suggests a potentiality and futurity in the critique of things that carries significant ethico-political stakes. Richter is understandably cautious in yoking the politics of the Marxist and German-Jewish Benjamin to Heidegger, whose affiliation with Nazism is notorious. Yet he does so sensitively and sensibly enough to simultaneously avoid overstating his claim of their affinity while opening up Heidegger's corpus to radical political readings.

Analyzing one of Benjamin's most challenging cool places, and one that employs a very concretely material thought-figure, Richter tackles the issue of Benjamin's self-described, and highly contested, theological orientation by way of a passage from the *Arcades Project* in which Benjamin writes: "My thinking is related to theology as blotting paper is related to ink. It is saturated with it. Were one to go by the blotter, however, nothing of what is written would remain" (42). In his reading of this passage, Richter rejects those who would dismiss Benjamin's theology as the residue of an outdated and unacknowledged metaphysics, and he similarly opposes those who seek to extract Benjamin's thought from his theologically and often mystically inflected language. Richter's argument is grounded in the fact that to inherit Benjamin readers must accept that his writing is indissociable from theological tropes and categories.

At the same time as he defends Benjamin's theology, Richter endeavors to make sense of how Benjamin's politico-theological orientation can coexist with his simultaneous commitment to a radical secularizing that involved dismantling the manifestations of theological in contemporary life. It is this paradox between secular and theological that is the concern of that seemingly contradictory blotting paper passage. The linguistic difficulties in interpreting Benjamin's rhetorical figures are tied to the conceptual difficulties of his writing. Homing in on how Benjamin describes a process of *relating* in the passage, Richter highlights how self-reflexivity and openness is at work in the text, and in Benjamin's thinking as a whole. The relational character of Benjamin's thinking is, in short, the dialectical quality of his writing. The blotting paper, which erases in order to preserve the text, carries out a dialectical transcendence, an *Aufhebung*, which Richter reminds us means both cancellation and preservation. The constant erasure and preservation of the blotting paper thus embodies Benjamin's atheological theology, and reflects the restless dialectic of the openness and closedness of history itself.

While such attention to Benjamin's complex philosophy of history is illuminating, it also shies away from its more explicit political implications. It comes as something of a disappointment that Richter does not, for the most part, turn his attention to inheriting Benjamin's highly original articulations of Marxism. Richter's politicized readings of Benjamin's less obviously political writings are admirable, as is his opening up of seemingly apolitical writings (especially those of Heidegger's) to potentially radical politics. Yet Richter is curiously reluctant to even address the possibility of a Marxist inheritance from Benjamin, largely dismissing his "later, admittedly unorthodox, Marxian commitments" (37) and describing his politics as simply "anti-fascist" and "dialectically oriented" (62). Yet the benefits of inheriting a Benjaminian Marxism are all the more striking at this current moment in history, in which crises in the global economy and climate, among others, pose challenges that a resurgent and nuanced communism could provocatively address. This omission highlights the persistent need, and high stakes, of elaborating Benjamin's political inheritance.

While Richter concludes his book without engaging Benjamin's explicit politics, his

final chapter, a brief meditation on the temporality of photography, clearly indicates that any inheritance of Benjamin, including its political dimensions, is necessarily always ongoing. This final chapter, unlike the others, does not deal with a particular aspect of inheriting Benjamin; in fact it barely mentions him. Yet the chapter is populated by Benjaminian motifs, tropes, and concerns. Richter, presumably, is inheriting Benjamin not by discussing his inheritance, but by enacting it. He is keeping Benjamin's legacy alive, not by merely preserving it, but by continuing to deploy it, reworking it for the concerns of the present. Like the blotting paper that erases in order to preserve, signaling a dialectical transcendence and the possibility of genuinely, radically new knowledge, in this last chapter Richter effaces Benjamin's overt presence precisely as a way of inheriting him. Richter's thinking is saturated with Benjamin, as the blotting paper is saturated with ink. His presence, then, is felt most sharply by his absence, a cancellation that allows him to be not sterilely preserved, but living on in the text as an inheritance.

