Citation and Tradition: Hannah Arendt’s and Susan Sontag’s Walter Benjamin Portraits

Cosima Mattner

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Abstract

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This dissertation explores the relationship of two of the most prominent women intellectuals of the twentieth century, Hannah Arendt and Susan Sontag. While they are not commonly considered to be related figures – Arendt is mainly recognized as a political thinker, Sontag is an icon of postwar popular culture – it has been anecdotally noted that they lived and worked in the same intellectual environment in postwar New York City, where their paths crossed a few times. However, a comprehensive systematic study of their relationship is missing. Starting from their Benjamin portraits of 1968 and 1978, I argue that Arendt’s and Sontag’s relationship is significant in terms of the German and US American tradition of literary criticism: Both women acted as transatlantic critics invested in cultural transfer between postwar US and Germany, and they employed similar styles of citation and editorial strategies to create and inscribe themselves into an authoritative literary tradition. With Arendt and Sontag, I discuss the critic’s task in terms of citational style and as a matter of taking care of literary traditions beyond national borders.

As I demonstrate through comprehensive, in-depth archival analysis and close readings, Arendt and Sontag intervened with their Benjamin portraits in a heated debate about critical methods surrounding the editorial management of Benjamin’s estate and legacy through Theodor W. Adorno and Gershom Scholem in late 1960s Germany. Arendt’s portrait made Benjamin’s work available to an English-speaking audience for the first time and Sontag popularized his prominence in the US even further. Both stage Benjamin as a literary figure rather than a philosopher. Stylistically, they employ related strategies of citational mimicry to create an intimate connection
between their voices and Benjamin’s, granting even unfamiliar readers access to Benjamin’s complex writing. Through constant dialogue with his work, their affective and affirmative mediation has significant editorial qualities. By preserving and promoting Benjamin as a critic in the US, Arendt and Sontag created a transatlantic tradition of literary criticism in which they inscribed themselves to gain critical authority in singular yet similar ways.

Tracing the relationship between the portraits archivally, I argue that their similar citational creation of discursive authority results from Sontag’s comprehensive study of Arendt’s work and is thus an example of critical skill building through stylistic imitation. Rendering the hidden citational traces between the portraits transparent, I show how this line of influence ironically yields a lack of credit to Arendt on Sontag’s part. Like Arendt, Sontag reifies rather than breaks patriarchal citational chains. Illuminating what Arendt calls a “hidden tradition” ¹ – consisting in stylistically visible yet inexplicit commonalities – I draw on terminology gained from the current debate on critical method in Western literary studies to argue that the portraits afford a concept of criticism between such polemic poles as “surface” versus “depth” reading, “description” versus “interpretation” or “affirmation” versus “suspicion.” Characterizing this critical nuance with Arendt and Sontag as related critics, my study delineates a genealogy of a transatlantic mode of close reading with hermeneutic roots and a feminist twist.

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Abbreviations, Archival Information, Figures

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Abbreviations


Archival Information

For this study, I consulted four archival collections in four libraries:
  - Hannah Arendt Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress,
  - Hannah Arendt Personal Library, Stevenson Library at Bard College
  - Susan Sontag papers (Collection 612), UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles
  - University Seminars Records, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library

The references to each collection differ depending on whether the material was available digitally. While Arendt’s papers are largely digitized, her library is not. Sontag’s estate is not digitized. Columbia’s Rare Book Library holds most items in both forms.
I provide footnote references for every archival item I cite, including folder, box or doi information. Where I attend to mark ups or notes, I provide references to the screenshot of the photograph I took of the respective item. These screenshots are either provided in the main text or in the appendix, where they are listed by “Figure + Chapter. figure number.” (For instance: For
In footnote archive reference, I use the following short forms in order to reduce footnote length:

1. Arendt
   - Library of Congress references:

     Example:

   - Bard College library
     [item name], Hannah Arendt Personal Library, Stevenson Library at Bard College.


2. Sontag
   - [Item Name], Series, Box, Folder, SAP (= Susan Sontag papers (Collection 612). UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles).

     Examples:
     [Letter Sontag to Fredric Jameson, Sept 11, 1976], Series 1: Correspondence, Box 88, Folder 30, SAP.

     [Walter Benjamin, Illuminations], Series 17: Selected Books from the Library of Susan Sontag, 1783-2001, Box 196, Folder 5 and box 211, folder 5, SAP.
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DEDICATION

To New York City –

Arendt’s and Sontag’s city, the place where they, after all, transported Walter Benjamin to, portraying them from their apartments in the Upper West Side and Chelsea. I never thought that “I love New York” would become true for me. This is what Benjamin must have felt for Paris. New York has become a Lovetown; the sound of my life.
Chapter 1: Introduction

“und wer spielt nicht gern mit Ähnlichkeiten!”
Charlotte in J. W. von Goethe, *Die Wahlverwandtschaften*

1.1 Relating Arendt and Sontag: Shared Interest in Interpretation

In one of her essays on Bertolt Brecht, Hannah Arendt states in 1966: “To talk about poets is an uncomfortable task; poets are there to be quoted, not to be talked about.”² Was Hannah Arendt *against interpretation*? Surely not exactly in the sense with which Susan Sontag invested the phrase when she published her notorious essay collection *Against Interpretation* in the same year, 1966.³ For what does the intellectual “icon” of US postwar popular culture have in common with one of the most eminent political theorists of the 20th century – beyond expressing skepticism about interpretation?⁴

An obvious commonality is a notable, unabating surge of scholarly and public attention devoted to both writers.⁵ But Arendt and Sontag are honored for very different achievements:

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Arendt is primarily praised as an apropos political thinker whose work is invoked to discuss such 21st-century phenomena as Trumpism, post-factualism, and the so-called “refugee-crisis.” In other words, “Why Arendt matters” has mostly been addressed in political terms and her recent “Renaissance” is explained by the political challenges of the contemporary moment. Susan Sontag, in turn, commonly known as an aestheticist champion of the autonomy of art, has become something like a byword for a simultaneously hip and hyper-literate intellectualism, and a role model for anyone committed to glamorously queering the canon while also paying tribute to it; by cherishing both “the Doors and Dostoyevsky,” rather than choosing between them, for instance. Given such apparently disparate profiles – why put Arendt and Sontag in conversation, let alone compare?

They have more in common than one might think at first sight. A significant commonality – which is at the center of this study – is that both published a great number of literary portraits, and specifically one (each) on Walter Benjamin. In this study, I argue that their portraiture shows how Arendt and Sontag are related. Not only do both use similar strategies to establish themselves as authoritative critics by professionalizing a certain citational style through which they inscribe themselves into an authoritative literary tradition. Also, this similarity can be traced back to Sontag’s reception of Arendt’s work and is thus illustrates how skill building in criticism happens through “imitation.” How “imitation” is key to the discipline of literary studies and its central

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8 AI, 309; Dieter, Sontag, 96.
method of close reading as a craft-like practice has been recently examined by scholars such as Jonathan Kramnick and Derek Attridge. With Arendt and Sontag, I explore how the professionalization of this skill of reading closely is also, if not even more, significant for independent critics who move beyond the academic discipline. In fact, I argue that Arendt and Sontag performed the key stylistic skill of close reading, namely citation, in a virtuoso manner, creating careful alternatives to the scholarly “talking-about” kind of interpretation that they were suspicious about.

A central quality of both respective Benjamin portraits is that both cite authoritative figures of the Western literary tradition as affiliates to Benjamin such as Homer, Shakespeare, Kafka and Brecht or Proust and Baudelaire. Both portraits also reference Benjamin’s essay on Johann W. von Goethe’s novel Wahlverwandtschaften as a paradigmatic intertext. This novel’s core concept of “elective affinity” helps to delineate the specificity of Arendt’s and Sontag’s relationship: Goethe adopts of “elective affinity” from chemistry, designating a “neue Zusammensetzung” based on the preference of one relationship over another, whose metaphorical correlate is “Geistes- und Seelenverwandte.”

The metaphor helps to illustrate how Arendt and Sontag are related in how they create for themselves, as independent Jewish women writers in the US a transatlantic lineage of literary criticism with their portraits, by linking Benjamin citationally to intellectual authorities of an authoritative Western canon. However, Goethe’s poetic principle of elective affinity is ultimately insufficient because of a fundamental asymmetry: Arendt and Sontag are related in this

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sence only because Sontag, the younger writer, elected Arendt, of one generation older, as her intellectual role model.

While Sontag admired a variety of other writers and artists, her relationship to Arendt is specifically significant because it remains largely implicit in her publication strategy and citational style. In contrast to prolific portraits celebrating her admiration such as “On Paul Goodman” or “Remembering Barthes,” Sontag never published on Arendt. Based on archival research, Kai Sina recently noted the striking fact that although Sontag read Arendt intensely, she never actually wrote about Arendt. Moreover, as I will demonstrate, Sontag neglected crediting Arendt in significant cases – such as in her Benjamin portrait – despite her comprehensive reading of Arendt’s work. Ironically, Arendt’s Benjamin portrait and large part of her overall work is characterized by a similar citational negligence towards women, in favor of an authoritative male literary tradition.

Arendt and Sontag share this quality of citational neglect through which both reify – indifferently if not inadvertently rather than willingly – the patriarchal power dynamic of the debates they engaged in with their Benjamin portrait and other works. Therefore, tracing and making transparent the citational traces between Arendt and Sontag has feminist urgency because their lack of transparency has yielded a public and scholarly oversight of their relationship in contrast to both writers’ connections to male artists and intellectuals. Attending to Arendt’s and Sontag’s relationship means exploring what Arendt calls a “hidden tradition”:

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commonality that surfaces in textual qualities like “forms,” “types” or, in this case, in citational style.

Rehabilitating Arendt’s and Sontag’s relationship through archival reconstruction and close reading, I argue that they defy what Goethe’s novel claims about women: “immer steht sie isoliert, immer ist sie allein und will allein sein. [...] Jede Frau schließt die andre aus, ihrer Natur nach.” Such an essentialist view, as uttered by one of the novel’s male characters, indicates the patriarchal culture of the time (early 19th century), which to challenge with mid-twentieth-century women writers would be ahistorical and not very surprising. However, to the degree that Arendt and Sontag have mostly been considered independent and autonomous writers – emancipated from institutional protection by universities, institutes, or schools, like the Frankfurt School – acknowledgment for the actual impact they had in pivotal academic and public debates on criticism has been withheld from them. This impact becomes clear when considering how Arendt and Sontag inaugurated and inscribed themselves citationally into a common transatlantic lineage of criticism for which Walter Benjamin was a key figure.

So far, Arendt and Sontag have largely only been anecdotally related, and mostly based on biographical overlaps: Both lived and worked for a short while in the orbit of the same sphere of the so-called “New York Intellectuals,” which I elaborate on below. Moreover, it has been speculated that Arendt, one generation older, was potentially a significant role model for Sontag as an independent Jewish woman intellectual. Sina hypothesizes that Sontag’s fascination with Arendt was grounded in their shared identities as Jewish women writers and so deeply personal that Sontag could not establish the critical distance necessary to write about Arendt. Such a

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18 Moser, *Sontag*, 5, 64, 204, 393, 403, 565; Dieter, *Sontag*, 37f.
20 Kai Sina, “Worin unsere Stärke besteht.”
hypothesis calls for corroboration – for further exploration through comprehensive archival tracing of points of historical contact between Arendt and Sontag, as well as for a systematic study of the relationship of both writers’ work.

Starting points for systematic comparisons of their work have been delineated but most remain rather broad.21 No comparative close reading of both writers’ work has been done to explore systematic similarities or differences in stylistic qualities or argumentative foci. Building on and hopefully further feeding the substantial academic and public interest in Arendt’s and Sontag’s lives and works, this dissertation inquires into the anecdotally noted affinities between Arendt and Sontag. While I attend to biographical crossings, the focus of this study lies on affinities between Arendt’s and Sontag’s work, consisting in their editorial and interpretive interventions as critics. As I argue, attending to analogies in their work allows for delineating a genealogy of a transatlantic genre of criticism with hermeneutic roots and a feminist twist. In the following sections of this introduction, I sketch the broader historical context of mid-twentieth-century New York City in which Arendt’s and Sontag’s paths crossed, motivate the text corpus of their work on which I focus in this study, and the methods whereby I approach them.

1.1.1 A University Seminar on Interpretation

Arendt’s and Sontag’s shared interest in interpretive method was not coincidental but embedded in transdisciplinary debates about the state of criticism that were happening in their immediate academic and broader intellectual environment in New York City. In the 1959 to 1960 academic year, Arendt and Sontag participated in a University Seminar on “The Problems of

Interpretation” held at Columbia University. This seminar was initiated in May 1959 and concluded about two decades later. Arendt was a sporadic participant while Sontag was the seminar’s “Executive Secretary.” Sontag taught at Columbia from 1960 to 1964 in the department of religion, after other teaching appointments at City College and Sarah Lawrence.

One of the seminar’s initiators, Jacob Taubes, had been a friend and mentor to Sontag since philosophy and history of religion had become the focus of her graduate work at Harvard and Oxford in the late 1950s. Arendt was affiliated with Columbia since her first contact to historian Salo Baron upon her arrival in New York in 1941 but only had a salaried visiting professor position (“of Government”) at the university for one semester in 1960.

Participants of the seminar on interpretation included established academic and popular literary critics like Paul Goodman, Michael Riffaterre, Susan Taubes, and Kenneth Burke apart from

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24 Carl Rollyson, Understanding Susan Sontag (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2016), 5, 12, 91, 94; Moser, Sontag, 110.
26 Meyer, Arendt, 208, 211, 215.
27 [Appointment Card Hannah Arendt], Academic Appointment records, Box 2, University Archives, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries; [Appointment Card Susan Sontag], Academic Appointment records, Box 54, University Archives, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.
Sontag and “Drs. Hannah Arendt.” That Sontag listed only Arendt as having a doctorate in her protocol suggests that her presence was significant to her or that she perceived Arendt as more of a stranger to the group than the others. Based on the archival documentation of the seminar, Sontag and Arendt did not engage with one another much in this context beyond being present in the same room and exposed to the same interpretive questions. The seminar constituted a shared academic context for their respective thoughts on criticism.

The seminar’s goal was to identify shared, recurring questions about interpretive methods across disciplines through canonical “case studies” presented by the participants. In an “Introductory Statement,” Taubes suggested a heuristic framework for the seminar. Taubes’ statement is a significant document for this dissertation. It shows how Arendt and Sontag were part of a debate on critical method that addressed interpretive questions which are still at the core of a current heated debate on criticism in US American and German literary studies departments, which I elaborate on below.

Differentiating two main disciplinary approaches to the problem of interpretation, a philosophical and a philological concern with meaning, Taubes contrasts the philosophical, ahistorical concern with meaning per se, the “meaning of meaning,” with the philological study of literature as “record of past experience.” While the former forgets about the “actual historic context of human experience,” he argued, the latter neglects the “philosophic problems involved in the art of interpretation.” To bridge these two approaches and integrate historical and philosophical

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30 Ibid. For all previous references concerning the Charter Meeting Report.
reading, Taubes suggests exploring “hermeneutics” as a tradition that links allegorical moves “away from the text” to historical reading that literally “sticks to the text.”

As I will show, Taubes’ polemical diagnosis of an unproductive “dichotomy” between historical and ahistorical reading is still very apropos to the current debate on criticism and the quest for a nuanced critical approach I elaborate on below. This dichotomy yields, as Taubes argues, phases of strong dominance of one over the other approach in the history of these debates. For his contemporary moment, Taubes observes a corrosion of the historical approach, for which he considers Martin Heidegger a main culprit. Taubes calls for attending to the “crisis of historicism” to account for the Diltheyan “task” of developing a distinctive hermeneutic methodology for literary criticism without falling back on positivist, scientific standards.

### 1.1.2 The Current Crisis in Criticism

This “Dilthean task” is still at the core of a current debate on critical methods that has surged over the past two decades in Anglo-American and increasingly also in German literary studies departments. The core concern articulated in this debate on criticism is very similar to what Taubes observed in 1959, albeit with inverted hierarchies, corroborating Taubes’ observation of the pendulum dynamic implied in the dichotomy of philosophy versus philology: While Taubes called for more historical contextualization, the current concern is that a certain kind of contextual approach – Rita Felski calls it “critique” or, with Ricoeur, “hermeneutics of suspicion” – has

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31 [Introductory Statement by Professor Jacob Taubes at the Preliminary Meeting of the University Seminar on the Problems of Interpretation], *HAP: Correspondence, Universities and Colleges, 1947 to 1975, Columbia University, New York, N.Y.; University seminars; 1957 to 1968*, Manuscript/Mixed Material, https://www.loc.gov/item/mss1105600628/. For all preceding references.

become dogmatic. Beginning with Eve Sedgwick and Bruno Latour in the 1990s and early 2000s, scholars like Felski, Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, or Joseph North have been searching for new critical alternatives to the suspicious affect, historical focus, and scholarly orientation they associate with *critique*.

Where Arendt and Sontag participated in an academic seminar on interpretive methods that can be considered a significant precursor to the current debate, their individual responses to these interpretive questions provide novel perspectives also on the current debate, consisting in a nuanced notion of criticism between the polemic poles of *criticism* versus *critique*. In order to bring these contributions to light, I elaborate on the main points of the current debate in my first chapter, in which I provide a historical and systematic frame for the question of what *criticism* is.

**1.1.3 The New York Intellectuals**

Apart from the academic context, Arendt and Sontag were both involved in the same intellectual milieu in New York City that was generally invested in interpretive and critical questions concerning political and aesthetic judgment. They are both considered members of the so-called New York Intellectuals, a “specific group of individuals instead of intellectuals in New York generally.” Neil Jumonville defines “public intellectual” as a cross-disciplinary, generalist writer invested in contemporary culture and politics but well-versed in canonical literature and the tradition of ideas. Arendt and Sontag frequently contributed to the main publication outlets of

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the New York Intellectuals, which were mostly magazines featuring reviews, articles or columns, like *Partisan Review, Dissent, Commentary* or *The Menorah Journal.*\(^{36}\) These magazines were central to the group identity of the New York Intellectuals, which, as any non-institutionalized group, had some central and some peripheral members.\(^{37}\)

The first generation of the group were children of Jewish immigrants who had immigrated around the turn of the century mostly from Russia or Eastern Europe.\(^{38}\) Trained at City College, and some Ivy League schools, this group inaugurated a new kind of intellectualism after the mostly patrician Protestant intellectual culture dominant in the US pre-1930, based on the European socialism and cultural tradition they had inherited from their parents. This first generation – amongst them Sidney Hook, Lionel Trilling, Philip Rahv, and Clement Greenberg – founded some of the aforementioned periodicals.\(^{39}\)

Confronted with the totalitarian catastrophes of the twentieth century, the New York Intellectuals increasingly gravitated away from committed socialism toward liberalism – however, with members embracing positions left and right of center on the liberal spectrum.\(^{40}\) In the 1940s and 50s, the group held views typical of the American middle class, endorsing more or less capitalist, conservative American values but also support of the New Deal and conflicted positions on political issues of social justice such as affirmative action.\(^{41}\) Marked by the experience of the Great Depression, the group focused on economic and political issues rather than cultural politics, maintaining a distance from the 1960s social justice movements for civil rights and women’s rights.\(^{42}\)

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\(^{37}\) Ibid., 3.


\(^{39}\) Ibid.

\(^{40}\) Jumonville, *New York Intellectuals*, 9

\(^{41}\) Ibid., 9

\(^{42}\) Ibid.
Skeptical of the New Left’s counterculture and its romanticist and communist tendencies, the New York Intellectuals endorsed modernist high-art like abstract expressionism based on a canonical concept of art and, for the most part, did not embrace the broader notion of culture as inclusive of ordinary life that arose in the 1960s.\textsuperscript{43} In contrast to the New Critics (such as Kenneth Burke and Cleanth Brooks), the New York Intellectuals were critical of a decontextualized emphasis on form and aesthetics. Like Jacob Taubes for academic criticism, they advocated historical contextualization and prioritized historical and biographical approaches over aestheticist and immanent reading.\textsuperscript{44}

While Arendt and Sontag are considered part of the group, their examples show significant differences and disagreements between its members.\textsuperscript{45} Sontag, for instance, was more involved than other, older members of the group in the counter-culture of the New Left, despite her strong commitment to high modernism – and she was politically active against the Vietnam war, while never considering herself a communist.\textsuperscript{46} In a short correspondence with Fredrick Jameson in 1976 regarding his planned journal project “The Social Text,” her hesitant, ambivalent relationship to Marxism shines through: “I don’t (can’t, don’t dare) think of myself as a Marxist, though Marxist thought has always been and continues to be very extremely important to me. So perhaps I am not a good person right for your journal.”\textsuperscript{47} The added emphasis from the crossed-out “very” to “extremely” shows how genuine Sontag’s interest in Marxism was, or how strong she wanted it to be. But Sontag kept a distance, despite being aware of what Simone de Beauvoir called the

\textsuperscript{44} Cf. Ibid., 7.
\textsuperscript{45} Cf. Ibid., 3f., 9.
\textsuperscript{46} Rollyson, \textit{Understanding Sontag}, 117, 126, 131; Poague and Parsons, \textit{Sontag Bibliography}, 188
\textsuperscript{47} [Letter Sontag to Fredric Jameson, Sept 11, 1976], Series 1: Correspondence, Box 88, Folder 30, Susan Sontag papers (Collection 612), UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles.
“bourgeois condition” of the intellectual. Yet, she not only used the term to describe her own development as a writer in her diaries but also as a category for her role models, including Arendt.\(^{48}\)

While Arendt is generally considered a member of the New York Intellectuals, she did not specifically like the label of the “intellectual.” Actually, she outrightly despised it, as she notes in a *Denktagebuch* entry of December 1951: “Das spezifisch Empörend-Widerwértige des Intellektuellen besteht darin, dass selbst seine schlechtesten Sachen noch besser sind als er selbst.”\(^{49}\) The “Hass“ and “Ekel“ she associates with the figure of the intellectual is based on her thought that every human being is more than anything he or she ever produces, achieves, and even does or thinks:

Der Mensch ist natürlicherweise mehr als alles, was er tut oder denkt, mehr als alles, was er je tun oder denken könnte. Dies ist sein eigentlicher Stolz, der Stolz des Natürlich-Irdische-Menschlichen, dass das eigentliche Wesen, das jeder ist, dass die eigentliche Grösse, die jeder hat, mit ihm aus der Welt geht, ihn nicht überlebt wie ein Ding, sondern sterblich ist wie er und so unrettbar verloren geht, wie dies ’Wesen,’ solange er lebt, unbezweifelbar wirklich ist.\(^{50}\)

In creating something that supervenes himself (or herself), the intellectual leaps over this idea that the actual greatness of each human being consists in the way he or she is alive in the world. Arendt clearly marks that whatever is produced out of such hubris cannot be good in itself but is rather at most mediocre. Arendt differentiates the “intellectual” from the “genius” based on attitude: In contrast to the intellectual, the genius is constantly anxious to outdo themselves, driven by the anxiety that what he or she produces might actually be more than what he or she is themselves. “Sein Fluch ist es, als Mensch dauernd in Konkurrenz zu stehen mit seinen Taten und Werken, gejagt von der Angst, dieser nicht würdig zu sein.”\(^{51}\) In other words, true works of literature or art

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\(^{50}\) Ibid., 149.

\(^{51}\) Ibid.
are always already secondary to the human being who creates them. Literary quality consists in how far this real, living being is approximated – in how far literature reflects back on something that is even greater than itself. Intellectual work, in Arendt’s sense, lacks this quality because it values the product over the human being, denigrating the latter. Where Arendt was so skeptical of the intellectual, is it a fitting label for her? In this study, I suggest that critic more aptly describes not only the kind of writing she produced and how she was “home in debate,” but also her public stance as one of those “reviewers, analysts, and commentators,” who are grouped under the label of the New York Intellectuals.\(^52\)

Similarly, I consider critic a more fitting category for Sontag than intellectual, although she was less conflicted about it than Arendt. Sontag moved beyond the group not only because she selectively embraced cultural and political values promoted by the New Left but also because she decidedly considered herself a fiction writer in addition to a critic – and this part of her work is not covered by what the New York Intellectuals are considered to have been or done.\(^53\) Indeed, circling back to Arendt’s contrasting of the genius to the intellectual, Sontag aspired to be the former while she knew that she was considered the latter, and embraced “experience and education” as the main tools to “honed” her skills, in order to be able to create something that would be more than herself.\(^54\)

Arendt and Sontag are examples of how the New York Intellectuals were never really “a coherent and self-defined group,” but rather a congregation of “loners,” working “in isolation,” as Irving Howe argues. While the group’s members’ most obvious commonality was their Jewish ethnic background, what distinguished their criticism was the fact that they promoted radically socialist, anti-Communist ideals through “literary criticism with a strong social emphasis,” and

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\(^{52}\) Jumonville, New York Intellectuals, 4.
\(^{53}\) Ibid., 4; Rollyson, Understanding Susan Sontag, 5.
\(^{54}\) Sontag, As Consciousness is Harnessed, 168.
through a specific “exotic style” of writing. Jumonville suggests that the specificity of their criticism consisted in a commitment to “independent judgment” as a weapon against totalitarianism and “ideology.” This is what Arendt and Sontag, as critics, shared with all members of the group throughout its existence from broadly 1930 to the late 1970s. In this study, I examine how their work fleshed out the shared “exotic style” and “independent judgment.”

1.1.4 Other Biographical Crossings in New York

Arendt and Sontag were surrounded by questions about criticism beyond the New York Intellectuals and the Columbia seminar on interpretation. Their paths crossed in broader career-related ways. For instance, they were members of a circle of popular literary critics to which also Elizabeth Hardwick belonged. A momentous occasion was Hardwick’s diagnosis of a crisis in book reviewing in an article from 1959, which ultimately led to the founding of *The New York Review of Books* in the context of the newspaper strike of 1962-63.

In the article titled “The Decline of Book Reviewing,” Hardwick laments that rather than being driven by “liveliness and interest,” contemporary criticism indifferently cultivates “praise of everything in sight.” Such promotion by “flat praise and […] faint dissension,” without “involvement, passion, character, eccentricity” and “literary tone itself” is problematic, Hardwick argues, because readers require informed and impassioned guidance. Critics, Hardwick demands, need to “have a position.” Hardwick suggests that reviewing should not be too complicit with the

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book market (by promoting and praising) but that generally taking a strong stance is even more important than the evaluative result – commitment is key.\textsuperscript{57}

Along with the \textit{New York Review of Books} editors Robert Silvers and Barbara Epstein, Hardwick was part of the same socio-professional circle of critics as Arendt and Sontag.\textsuperscript{58} In this context, Arendt appeared as an authority to Sontag because she intimately knew European Jewish intellectuals who were important to Sontag and could provide authoritative insights into their lives as a diary note of December 1973 illustrates: “Hannah Arendt said that Benjamin was the only person Scholem ever really loved. (The evening at Lizzy’s [Hardwick’s:CM] house last week […]).”\textsuperscript{59}

Arendt was not only well connected to important people – like Walter Benjamin, who had died more than thirty years ago at this point, and Gershom Scholem – but also to major funding sources like the Guggenheim and Rockefeller Foundations and therefore a preferred reference for applicants who needed letters of recommendation.\textsuperscript{60} Her archive holds several such letters for the Guggenheim foundation which valued her opinion highly.\textsuperscript{61} Certainly, Roger Straus was aware of Arendt’s authority in the intellectual milieu of New York when he asked her for a positive comment on Sontag’s first novel \textit{The Benefactor},\textsuperscript{62} which he could include in the novel’s advertising, and, on October 25, 1963, for agreeing to be referenced in Sontag’s application to a Guggenheim fellowship.\textsuperscript{63}

\textsuperscript{57}Hardwick, “The Decline,” 138-142. For all preceding quotes.
\textsuperscript{58}Meyer, \textit{Arendt}, 303.
\textsuperscript{59}Sontag in her diary of December 1973. Sontag, \textit{As Consciousness is Harnessed}, 361.
\textsuperscript{60}Meyer, \textit{Arendt}, 399.
What was likely the first letter of recommendation by Arendt for Sontag followed five years later, on November 18, 1968 (shortly after the publication of her Benjamin portrait). It is directed to the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, listing the name of the “candidate” as “Mrs. Susan Sontag”. Arendt writes enthusiastically but concisely:

I heartily support Mrs. Susan Sontag’s application for a Guggenheim fellowship. Her first novel, The Benefactor, is an extraordinarily promising book which shows an unusual combination of intelligence and fantasy. The book is entirely unconventional, very well written, and in remarkable control of what might easily have become mere eccentricity. During the last few months I also read several essays by Mrs. Sontag, especially a long one on Camus which, in my opinion, belongs among the very best essays to appear during the last years.  

Figure 1.2. Letter of recommendation Arendt for Sontag, November 18, 1968

While Straus solicited this first letter of recommendation, Sontag asked herself personally for a second letter of recommendation in 1973. Modestly, Sontag presents her request of one of the five letters of recommendation required by the Rockefeller Foundation: “May I ask a favor of you? […]”  

Admiration and respect surface in her humble concession that she had “been postponing asking you for more than a month because I know you have better things than this to do with your time.”

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The high esteem in which Sontag appears to hold Arendt in is intensified by her note that she was less hesitant to ask the four other recommenders, among them Elizabeth Hardwick and Lionel Trilling. Sontag also suggests that Arendt would not have to even write it herself – her employees would suffice – as long as Arendt’s name supports her: “But if you have a secretary, and if you don’t mind doing it, I would be very grateful.” While the letter is submissive for the most part, its address and closure invoke respectful, yet intimate familiarity more than distant formality. Sontag addresses “Hannah” by her first name and closes by recalling their recent meeting at Hardwick’s house and signaling that she would like to meet again. “I was very pleased to see you again the other night at Elizabeth’s. I will be back in New York at the beginning of March and hope to see you again.” Finally, she signals that she considers herself and Arendt on the same side versus the Rockefeller Foundation, whose requirements for grants would be a nuisance to writers like herself and Arendt. “Forgive me for bothering you with this Rockefeller nonsense, but they insist on five letters.”

Arendt’s positive response to Sontag’s request is succinct if self-explanatorily agreeing to writing another letter: “Dear Susan, Of course I shall write to the Rockefeller Foundation. […]” She takes up Sontag’s gesture of annoyance at the procedure by making no secret of her dislike of the letter of recommendation genre: “The whole thing is a bore.” Arendt also makes clear that she has no doubt of Sontag’s qualification for the stipend: “I’m pretty sure that you don’t need a recommendation of either myself or anyone else, and that this is a mere formality.” Accordingly terse is the actual letter, which Arendt sends out the same day, which forcefully communicates Arendt’s conviction of Sontag’s self-explanatory qualification by gesturing at the unnessessariness of the procedure: “I’m somehow embarrassed to write a letter of recommendation for Susan

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Sontag, who, after all, has done enough to prove her worthiness of support by the Rockefeller Foundation. This is simply to assure you that this is indeed my opinion.” Arendt’s laconic style of recommendation certainly shows her genuine aversion to the genre – in other cases she uses even more empty phrases such as “so good as to stand in no need of further recommendation,” characterizes ideas as being of “high interest” and “qualifications […] beyond doubt.” More than a lack of care, Arendt simply takes advantage of (and exposes) the formality of the procedure, which mostly requires her authoritative name in support of the candidate, by not investing more energy than minimally necessary for success.

However succinct and marginal, these correspondences show that Thomas Meyer’s claim in his recent biography that Arendt ignored Sontag completely after the *Benefactor* blurb – that she was “von ihr links liegen gelassen” – needs to be nuanced. Indeed, all the more so as Sontag even appears in some of her most personal correspondences like with Mary McCarthy who not only did not like Sontag but was specifically suspicious about her flirtatious advances towards Arendt. In a 1967 letter, she wrote:

> I read that Susan Sontag was arrested [in an antiwar demonstration]. And what about her? When I last watched her with you at the Lowells’, it was clear that she was going to seek to conquer you. Or that she had fallen in love with you – the same thing. Anyway, did she? 

Arendt’s response is not preserved, but one year later, she references Sontag in the context of political activism against the Vietnam war, which Sontag participated in (and wrote about) while Arendt maintained a safe distance: “[Meanwhile] your lecture tour. What were you lecturing

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about? Vietnam? (I just received a pamphlet ‘Hanoi’ by Susan Sontag, haven’t read it. The whole thing seems too obvious.”

The fact that Sontag’s name appears in Arendt’s correspondence with one of her best friends, McCarthy, shows that Sontag was a significant, if skeptically viewed, member of their social circles.

Another striking remote point of contact appearing in the archive, which is apropos for this study is that Arendt was invited in 1972 by *The American Review* editor Ted Solotaroff to contribute a response to an essay by Sontag on the “women’s liberation.” In his request, Solotaroff emphasizes that “Susan […] would be very pleased, indeed honored, to have you enter this discussion with her.” Arendt did not enter the discussion: “to tell the truth, […] I have sworn a holy oath not to touch women’s liberation.” Instead, she recommended her admired friend Renata Adler (who was of Sontag’s generation) as an opponent: “why don’t you ask Renata Adler?” As the author of the essay collection *Towards a Radical Middle*, Adler represented a liberal stance, with which Arendt sympathized and which would, as she hoped, provide a “different perspective” than Sontag’s.

While part of the same intellectual circles, Arendt and Sontag did not become close friends. Sontag seems to have sought closer contact, but Arendt seems to have kept a distance, specifically regarding feminist politics. However, the fact that she did write the requested letters of recommendation suggests that she was at least to some degree invested in supporting younger colleagues. Despite her aversion to feminism, Arendt could not prevent being grouped in public as

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72 Arendt, *Between Friends*, 228.
73 Which of her essays from the early 1970s on the movement this was is not quite clear. Cf. Susan Sontag, *On Women* (London: Picador, 2023), 183.
an influential woman intellectual along with Sontag (and many others), as a photo series of “America’s 75 most important women” in the *Ladies Home Journal* of January 1971 shows.\(^{76}\)

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**Figures 1.3-4: “America’s 75 most important women”**

The description of the two women show how differently they were publicly perceived – Hannah Arendt as a “political scientist, author and educator. A relentless, effective foe of totalitarianism” and Sontag as “l’enfant terrible of the literary world, her philosophical essays, reviews and novels epitomize avant-garde values of the ‘new aesthetic.’”\(^{77}\) Is the only quality Arendt and Sontag shared really just that they were Jewish women writers? In this study, I comprehensively show that they had more in common – an elective affinity based on their work as critics, the unearthing of which is significant precisely for feminist reasons.

### 1.2 Corpus and Methods

In the aforementioned note about interpretation from her 1966 Brecht essay, Arendt stages herself as a casual member of her target audience: “all of us” ordinary “Bürger” as opposed to

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professional “critics and scholars.” Considering that she proves her exceptional erudition, expertise and familiarity with the subject matter by extensive quotations on the essay’s first few pages, this self-fashioning as a non-expert seems like a pose. Rhetorically, this pose protects her – an equal amongst experts – against being measured by “‘Brecht scholars’” as one of them, according to academic principles, which she despises anyway: She mockingly dismisses them as being based on a self-deceptive illusion, namely the idea that one could, after all, say something about poets and poetry beyond citing. Arendt clarifies in this passage that she does not identify as a member of the group of “critics or scholars” – “I am not one of them” – their business is not her business. Instead, her concern, as she announces, is political – the consideration of poets “from a political viewpoint”, namely that of the “citizen.” (MDT, 210f.) The political reading Arendt develops in the essay has caused substantial controversy the details of which have been discussed extensively elsewhere. The question of what kind of solution Arendt actually develops for the problem posed has received less attention – namely how to “talk about poets” beyond quoting them, and how to do so in a non-scholarly but in a political manner.

The genre Arendt turns to as a solution, such is one claim of this dissertation, is the portrait. One of the many places the aforementioned Brecht essay was reprinted in was the book Men in Dark Times – a collection of portrait essays featuring figures of the literary, political and

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78 Arendt, MDT, 210; Arendt, “Quod Licet Jovi,” 529.
philosophical scenes mostly of the early 20th century. This portrait collection has only recently received attention as an example of a substantial subgenre in Arendt’s work. The intricate literary, philosophical, and political quality of the essays included has been noted, but the essays have neither been close-read in detail nor considered as criticism – as a specific approach to writing about literature. Eva Geulen has identified Arendt’s position between politics and philosophy as something “third” which surveys both realms but is not invested in either, but is instead independent from both as an “outsider.” Geulen has also identified some stylistic qualities of Arendt’s writing that correlate to this “third” positionality, that actually is not really a position insofar as it emerges “diskursiv und pluralistisch,” as Geulen argues. Distinctive of Arendt’s writing is, according to Geulen, a play with voices by citation and story-telling that Geulen calls “Rollenprosa and Rollenspiel” the result of which is a “Mimikry ans Objekt” and an easily misleading “minimale Distanz” between Arendt’s voice and her subject’s. Geulen illustrates Arendt’s “Rollenprosa” in the Brecht essay but suggests that this style generally characterizes her writing per se. A dedicated study of how Arendt’s distinctive play with voice features in her portraiture more generally – and for what reasons and to what effects – remains to be done. Taking on this project, I explore in the following how Arendt in her portraiture develops a solution to the

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81 The exception is Lessing. Cf. MDT, 3-33.
82 Geulen, “Bucklicht Männlein”, 41: “Das Porträt bildet fast so etwas wie eine eigene Untergattung in Arendts Essayistik.”
83 Peter Uwe Hohendahl, The Institution of Criticism (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016), 11, 14. Hohendahl defines it as “that form of literature which is concerned with literature” – as a textual genre that may be published in academic or public media like “scholarly books and articles, journalistic essays, book reviews in newspapers, and the like.” Generally, Arendt’s singular style of writing and her investment in literature has been noted but only sparsely and scatteredly. Accordingly, the precise relation of style and politics in Arendt’s work remains to be explored. Cf. Also Thomas Wild, Nach dem Geschichtsbruch: deutsche Schriftsteller um Hannah Arendt (Matthes & Seitz, 2009); Marie Luise Knott, Unlearning with Hannah Arendt, trans. Nanne Meyer (New York: Other Press, 2013); Wolfgang Heuer and Irmela von der Lühe, eds., Dichterisch Denken: Hannah Arendt Und Die Künste (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2007).
86 Ibid., 29, 24-25, 6-7.
87 Ibid., 8.
dilemma of how to “talk about poets” beyond quoting them in a non-scholarly and non-critical but political and authoritative manner.

That the genre of the portrait might, in a distinctive way, be linked to mimicry comes into view through the comparison with Sontag. Recalling the proximity of voices observed by Geulen for Arendt’s writing, a recurring observation about Sontag’s style is an “oscillation of subject and object.”88 Leland Poague introduces the most recent bibliography of Sontag’s work by pointing out that Sontag approximates her subjects in a way that renders them indistinguishable from her own voice to a certain degree. Specifically the collection Under the Sign of Saturn, Poague argues, challenges the reader to distinguish, “at what point in Sontag’s description of Barthes [or other writers:CM] Barthes is only Barthes, no longer (also) Sontag: at what point is Sontag’s writing about Barthes (in ‘Writing Itself’) only objective, descriptive, no longer self-reflexive or self-aware?”89

Along with the “oscillation” of voices, Poague notes a similar ambiguity of a standpoint in Sontag that Geulen observers for Arendt: “answers are never stable” so much so that it seems impossible to decide “whether Sontag is a modernist or a postmodernist […] homophobic or elitist or misogynist” – trying to categorize Sontag is, Poague concludes, “beside the point, […] missing exactly the ambivalence characteristic of Sontag’s writing.”90 Like in Arendt’s case, however, Sontag’s “ambivalence” has not been considered in terms of the genre of the portrait, even though Sontag herself characterizes the essays in Under the Sign of Saturn as such in one of her most

88 Poague and Parsons, Sontag Bibliography, liii.
89 Ibid., liiif.
90 Ibid., liv.
prominent interviews, locating the genre between “essay […]” and “fiction.” Her portraits, she suggests, are “less idea-ridden, less expository” than her earlier essays.\(^\text{91}\)

Some prominent examples of these earlier essays had been notoriously concerned with deconstructing established norms of academic reading, writing and canonization. “Against Interpretation” and “Notes on Camp” have become legendary pamphlets of Sontag’s 1960s revolt against dusty Freudian or Marxist modes of interpretation and rigid, high-brow ideas about the task of criticism.\(^\text{92}\) If Sontag was indeed “against interpretation” in her eponymous essay debut, she did not yet present a concrete positive alternative then, in 1964, beyond calling for “an erotics of art” instead of a “hermeneutics.” (AI, 14) Criticizing her for not doing so neglects the polemic character of her debut, which was only the starting point for her quest to find an alternative mode of criticism.\(^\text{93}\) As I argue in this study, the portraits in *Under the Sign of Saturn* present her 1970s alternative to the criticism she exorcized in the 60s, performatively presenting “individual” rather than discussing discursively “general” sensibilities.\(^\text{94}\)

Coming full circle, I thus argue that for both Arendt and Sontag, the portrait passed as a genre which allowed them to do what a specific kind of criticism failed to achieve: discussing aesthetic objects – literature in Arendt’s case and art of different media more generally in Sontag’s – without writing “about” them. The portrait hence features as an authoritative alternative to a scholarly kind of criticism that both writers were skeptical of, yet closely associated with, in different but similarly conflicted ways.

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94 Sontag, *Conversations*, 201.
Therefore, two portraits are at the center of this study. Both not only stem from but arguably constitute the heart of their portrait collections *Men in Dark Times* (1968) and *Under the Sign of Saturn* (1978): their portraits of Walter Benjamin. These portraits paradigmatically show how Arendt’s and Sontag’s work is linked: Both drew on Benjamin’s prolific literary critical work – of which I will sketch selective aspects in the next chapter – to develop their own critical positions, and significantly contributed to the preservation and promotion of his work in the US and Germany. With their portraits, both intervened in the so-called Benjamin debate that escalated in 1967 about the editorial and interpretive appropriations of Walter Benjamin’s work, which I will also elaborate on in the next chapter. While Arendt’s and Sontag’s paths crossed in the broader context of academic and public intellectual circles concerned with interpretation, the Benjamin debate about critical methods constituted a concrete playground for both to flesh out their style of portraiture as an alternative to critique. Moreover, relating the Benjamin portraits shows that Arendt’s work was highly significant for how Sontag developed her critical stance. In other words, the Benjamin portraits are not only paradigmatic examples of how Arendt and Sontag developed their distinctive responses to the methodical questions surrounding them. They also contain literal citational traces of their relationship. Attending to both portraits individually and in relation to each other, I examine how Arendt’s portrait, and her work more generally, was significant for Sontag’s – and how, in turn, Sontag’s portrait illuminates the significance of Arendt’s portrait as a transatlantic critical intervention.

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1.2.1 The Portrait

A closer look at the genre of the portrait is needed in order to examine Arendt’s and Sontag’s Benjamin portraits as their distinctive alternatives to critique. The genre “portrait” has a long career in literary and art history. In painting, drawing, and photography, a portrait is an upper or full body image of a person. In literature, a portrait describes essential qualities of a non-fictional person, with a focus on appearance and character, including the narration of actions or situations typical of the person’s life.\textsuperscript{96} Portraits can appear in other genres, for instance, in a eulogy or obituary, or appear independently, especially in the art section of journalistic media, where they are also called “profile” in the American context.\textsuperscript{97} In the German context, it has been virtuously developed as a special form of essay (J.G. Herder’s “Shakespear” essay, imitated by the young Goethe in his “Rede zum Shakespeares-Tag”) and as a condensed poetic form (H-M. Enzensberger \textit{Maosoleum}).\textsuperscript{98} Portraits are distinguished from biographies by their succinctness and strict selection of aspects of the narrated life and from anecdotes by their more comprehensive claim to grasp a personality beyond singular, isolated events.\textsuperscript{99} Portraits are stylized characterizations whose truthfulness, objectivity, and verifiability is secondary if not irrelevant in relation to the act of portrayal itself as deliberately creative and performative rather than representational, mimetic.\textsuperscript{100}

The distinctiveness of the portrait becomes most evident in contrasting it with adjacent genres: As part of a novel, a character portrait can be understood in a trivial sense as the

\textsuperscript{96} Dieter Burdorf, “Porträt,” in \textit{Metzler Literaturlexikon: Stichwörter zur Weltliteratur}, founded by Günther and Irmgard Schweikle, eds. Dieter Burdorf, Christoph Fasbender, Burkhard Moennighoff (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 1984), 600.
\textsuperscript{98} Burdorf, “Porträt,” 600.
\textsuperscript{99} Burdorf, “Porträt,” 600.
\textsuperscript{100} Ibid.
presentation of significant characteristics of a character through the narrator. Canonical examples like James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* thematize the boundary between fiction and non-fiction specifically through citation.

Illuminating for my goal to discuss the portrait’s status as a critical alternative to critique is its relationship to the *essay*. Arendt’s and Sontag’s portraits have been considered part of their essayistic work (by themselves and scholarship). The essay genre seems to have a more systematic relevance than the fact that many of Arendt’s and Sontag’s portraits are laudatios or obituaries. To understand Arendt’s and Sontag’s use of the genre, three historically proximate positions are helpful: Adorno’s “Der Essay als Form,” (1954/58) Lukács “Über Wesen und Form des Essays: Ein Brief an Leo Popper” (1910/11) and Simmel’s “Das Problem des Porträts” (1918). In some respects, Adorno’s and Lukács’ accounts on the essay are very similar; in fact, Adorno references Lukács repeatedly. Both situate the essay between academic, scholarly writing and art. Its distinct achievement consists for both in a specific kind of conceptual thought that inductively draws on aesthetic, empirical experience. Both, Adorno and Lukács, emphasize the processuality, reflective nature and open-endedness of essayistic writing that yields the

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102 Other examples like Henry James’ *Portrait of a Lady*, Madeleine de Scudéry *Portraits du grand Cardinal*, or Maksim Gorky’s *Literaturenye portrety* or even Oscar Wilde’s *Picture of Dorian Gray* come to mind. Broadly speaking, recurring themes in these works are the boundary between aesthetic and historical reality, fiction and non-fiction (in Joyce’s case, the narrative is conspicuously auto-fictional); and a prominent form is citation (Gorky’s portraits are highly dialogical; Joyce draws heavily on citation from a range of contexts, including folk poetry and commercials).
103 Sontag, *Conversations*, 201; Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future, Six Exercises in Political Thought*. (New York, 1961), 14f.: “It seems to me, and I hope the reader will agree, that the essay as a literary form has a natural affinity to the exercises I have in mind”; Geulen, “Bucklicht Männlein,” 41; Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt, for Love of the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 280.
106 Ibid., 19f.
impression of the essayist’s “Standpunktlosigkeit.””\textsuperscript{107} For both, the essay is concerned with philosophical questions but departs from traditional philosophy. For Adorno, the essay is the paradigmatic form of critique: “die kritische Form par excellence [...] immanente Kritik [...] Ideologiekritik.”\textsuperscript{108}

While qualities like reflective judgment and open-endedness characterize Arendt’s and Sontag’s portraits, their main concern is not philosophy but rather aesthetic experience, in Arendt’s case with a political twist. Lukács description of the essay’s simultaneous conceptual and experiential character is relevant to the portraits: “Die Intellektualität, die Begrifflichkeit ist es, als sentimentales Erlebnis.”\textsuperscript{109} In fact, Lukács discusses the portrait as a paradigmatic critical genre distinct from art and academic writing that shows how life is not measurable by external standards. Where the portrait raises the question of similarity (“Ähnlichkeit“), it gives new shape to its object’s defining qualities rather than aiming for mimetic representation: we cannot measure “an dem ‘wirklichen’ Goethe die Wahrheit der Goethe von Grimm, Dilthey oder Schlegel.”\textsuperscript{110}

Related to this reshaping of reality is Simmel’s concern in “Das Problem des Portraits“ with how, in a portrait (painting in this case), the impression of unity in a real-life encounter with a person can be replicated, given that the embeddedness of such an encounter in “Gefühlsreaktionen, Schätzungen, Verknüpftheiten mit Bewegungen und Umgebungen” is lost. Simmel’s main concern is how different artistic media (literature or painting) negotiate the relationship between depth and surface to create a wholistic or fragmented impression of a person.\textsuperscript{111} Simmel suggests that surfaces imply depth: “Die Struktur und Dynamik des ganzen

\textsuperscript{108} Adorno, “Essay als Form,” 16f., 27, 33.
\textsuperscript{109} Lukács, \textit{Seele und Formen}, 15.
\textsuperscript{110} Lukács, \textit{Seele und Formen}, 22.
\textsuperscript{111} Simmel, “Das Problem des Porträts,” 370, 374f. Simmel considers art to address the problem that “der Mensch ist dem Menschen ein fluktuierender Komplex von Eindrücken aller Sinne und seelischen Assoziationen, von Sympathien und Antipathien, von Urteilen und Vorurteilen, Erinnerungen und Hoffnungen“ which involves shifts in
Körpers unter der Haut, des ganzen Weltverhältnisses des Menschen ist freilich in die Oberflächenbeschaffenheit eingegangen – wie es Goethe sagt: ‘Es ist nichts in der Haut, was nicht im Knochen ist.’"\(^{112}\)

Lukács argues that form-giving is a central feature of essays more generally which explains why its preferred object is art and literature.\(^ {113}\) Apart from the portrait, Lukács differentiates the essay’s critical status from the closely related form of the book review. While the essay has become too rich and independent a genre merely to serve in a reviewing sense – “für ein hingebendes Dienen zu reich und zu selbstständig geworden“ – it still needs a concrete occasion as its point of departure: “jeder Essay schreibt mit unsichtbaren Buchstaben neben seinen Titel die Worte: bei Gelegenheit von....”\(^ {114}\) Initially a review, Sontag’s portrait specifically illuminates this move beyond occasionality.

Between Adorno, Lukács and Simmel, the portrait emerges as an essayistic genre in which the non-conceptual, aesthetic quality of the essay is amplified in such a way that the fabrication of reality itself is exposed. Portraiture is invested with a critical potential emerging from its aesthetic transformation of the nonconceptual, asystematic kind of essayistic inquiry. Whether and how Arendt’s and Sontag’s Benjamin portraits match or develop this understanding of portraiture is explored in this study.

\(^{112}\) Simmel, “Das Problem des Porträts,” 371f.
\(^{113}\) Lukács, *Seele und Formen*, 17.
\(^{114}\) Ibid., 27.
1.2.2 Methodology

How can one talk about – or interpret – writers who were against interpretation? In other words, what is my method for examining Arendt’s and Sontag’s critical methods and the methodical debates they respond to? Method is, per se, a conflicted term in literary studies as its scientific sense of replicability does not match the mode of inquiry in the humanities. The singularity of the cultural artifact or aesthetic object collides with the idea that interpretive results gained from it are replicable.115 Where methods are the object of this study, my methodology in approaching this object comes under specific scrutiny.

The most fundamental operation for the design of this study is what Rita Felski calls “relating” which emerges from an initial, affective mode of attachment – a “hook” – and involves “the critic’s persona – commitments, sympathies, and identification,” but also other “relations – whether poetic, discursive, or historical.”116 Felski’s broad sense of putting two texts (including their authors and their contexts) into conversation accounts for the fact that the idea for this study first emerged from an intuition, a “gut response” or “ambivalent, fraught” feeling that there was something odd about the striking similarity, yet lack of citational reference between Arendt’s and Sontag’s Benjamin portraits.

I first read the texts years apart from each other, one in Göttingen, in an introductory seminar at Georg-August Universität on literary theory (with Kai Sina) and the other six years later in New York, in a seminar on Arendt at Columbia University (with Eva Geulen).117

116 Rita Felski, Hooked: Art and Attachment (Chicago ; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2020. Kindle), vii ff., ix, 123. Felski argues that people – academics as much as everyone else – engage with art based on “attachment” which she conceptualizes as an immediate, intuitive reaction to aesthetic objects that yields a very close connection to it. While Felski differentiates “ordinary and academic interpretation,” the idea is that any kind of critical response starts from an attachment, which can “involve thought as well as feeling, values and judgments as well as gut response, [and:CM] often ambivalent, fraught, or vexed” affects.
117 The former taught by Prof. Kai Sina, the latter by Prof. Eva Geulen.
comparison hence emerged from a rather random coincidence of reading on the part of a student reader. Rendering it the core of this academic study instigates some unease as it raises the question of the scientificity (Wissenschaftlichkeit) of comparisons in the humanities, as posed, for instance, by Peter Szondi in the 1960s.\footnote{One of the founders of comparative literature in the German speaking sphere. Cf. Peter Szondi, \textit{Peter Szondi: Stellungnahmen Zur Literarischen Hermeneutik}, Studien Zur Vergleichenden Literatur- Und Kulturwissenschaft, Band 3 (Bielefeld: Aisthesis Verlag, 2022).}

Szondi’s program for a literary hermeneutics is not only a methodical point of orientation for my study but also an object of it, which I discuss in detail in my next chapter. Crucial to my method here is his much-cited definition of literary studies as a discipline concerned with art:

\begin{quote}
\end{quote}

For the design of this study, I draw on Szondi’s Adornian principle of attending to the “Logik [des] Produziertseins” of the literary text – but I complement it by examining its *Logik des Produziert-Werdens*. To be more precise, I approach both Benjamin portraits in two chapters each: one *close reading* and one *archival* chapter. The rationale is that the immanent focus of studying the logic of a text from within itself does not suffice to show how Arendt’s and Sontag’s portraits are related because that relationship does not merely consist in systematic analogies but also in their genealogy – in the production processes through which the stylistic surfaces of each portrait were shaped. In other words, a close reading of the portraits themselves, even if embedded in historical context, does not suffice to explain the odd overlap between them. Hence, I explore the production traces for each portrait in the respective writer’s archive.

In my close readings, I describe the main arguments and distinctive stylistic qualities of the portraits. Rather than form, which has become an over-extended term through recent New Formalist strands, style is my main analytic focus and object. Style has a mediating function: It is “above all interested, *inter*-*est*, […] in the middle of things,” as Geulen and Haas argue. Etymologically, *stylus* is literally a tool for writing, and it remains closely linked to the medium of writing, designating the “manner of writing” or “mode of composition” but also “judgement.” Style conveys the writer’s attitude to her object by the way in which the relationship between meta-versus object-language is negotiated. As my study shows, style can also convey how a critic relates to other critics’ readings of the same object.

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Style is a significant category to understand portraits because it can create the mimetic impression of what Walter Benjamin called “Ähnlich-Seins und Ähnlich-Werdens,” which is a quality of portraits, as I argued above. Through style, the critic can increase proximity to the object even to the degree of identity and a collapse of critical distance or maintain such critical distance. While different degrees of mimesis, or even mimicry, and distance between meta- and object-language are permissible in academic criticism, Geulen and Haas argue that what renders criticism academic is that style is *controlled*, maintains a marked distance from its object and consciously used as a hub for reflecting on the conventions of academic style. In this study, I maintain distance from Sontag’s and Arendt’s texts by examining their style not only per close reading but also archivally.

Taking the portraits as generative of their own critical criteria, I attempt to gain the terminology for understanding the portraits from themselves. I encircle the kind of critical stance evident in the portraits by tracing them in selective adjacent intertexts of each writer’s work overall. This attention to intertexts controls my readings of the portraits by corroboration and nuance through other related texts. While I consider both Benjamin portraits singular works of literature – whose distinctiveness I hope to show through citation – this singularity only comes into relief by contrast and comparison with adjacent work.

The archival approximations of the portraits are methodically informed by Kai Sina’s archival work on Sontag’s engagement with Thomas Mann and Hannah Arendt. In *Susan Sontag und Thomas Mann*, Sina traces Sontag’s engagement with Mann’s work by attending to reading traces, commentary in books and notes as well as productive transformations of these traces (in

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127 Ibid., 13.
her autofictional essay *Pilgrimage*, for instance).\(^{129}\) Sina’s archival study of Sontag’s reading of Arendt’s work decisively informs this project through which I hope to flesh out significant hypotheses Sina formulated recently.\(^{130}\) The findings I present here are based on comprehensive studies of both writers’ archives; their archived personal libraries and their correspondences, drafts, and notes. I reconstruct the publication and production history for each portrait by attending to significant interactions with people, intertexts and through drafting in notes, manuscripts and typoscripts.

The archival approach accounts for a distorting factor inherent in the design of this comparative study: the fact that Sontag was a generation younger than Arendt, and her portrait appeared ten years later than Arendt’s introduces a historical hierarchy between Sontag and Arendt and constitutes an asymmetry between the portraits that distorts the attempt to systematically compare them. Arendt and Sontag did not simultaneously develop their critical responses to the methodical questions that surrounded and bothered them. Rather, Sontag developed her response through her reception of Arendt, but Arendt developed hers very probably not through her reception of Sontag.

Because of this genealogical asymmetry, *relating* is the more fitting methodological term for this study than *comparing*, even though I am, at points, comparing the portraits to each other, to Benjamin’s criticism, and to historically more proximate or distant systematic positions of criticism. Insofar as Szondi’s literary hermeneutics is a major methodical point of orientation for this study, my comparisons are informed by Szondi’s principle of seeking the distinctness in similarity: While I argue that Arendt and Sontag offer similar alternatives to the “hermeneutics of


\(^{130}\) Kai Sina, “Worin unsere Stärke besteht.”
suspicion,” they are still not “dasselbe.” But apart from systematic similarities, I am interested in the genealogical relationship of the portraits. Therefore, I consider their portraits related rather than comparable – their affinities are elected, rather than coincidental, systematic overlaps.

This relationship is a transatlantic one. Thereby, I mean that Arendt’s and Sontag’s portraits create a lineage of criticism that bridges the Atlantic (used in an admittedly reductive sense); US American and specifically German as well as French contexts. The genealogy of the portraits shows that both engage substantially with critical positions from both sides of the Atlantic. In tracing the transatlantic affinities Arendt and Sontag create, my project therefore also moves beyond national literary studies. In fact, this study is informed by and seeks to contribute to transatlantic literary studies as a recently emergent subfield of the discipline.

1.3 Main Claims

The main thesis of this dissertation is that, despite stark differences between Arendt and Sontag, their work is related in a significant sense. Both were concerned with questions pertaining to interpretive method and the task of criticism. Members of the same academic and public intellectual circles in mid-twentieth-century New York, both turned to the literary portrait as an alternative genre to modes of critique that substitute and decenter rather than promote the aesthetic

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object. Specifically their Benjamin portraits, with which they both intervened in the so-called Benjamin debate about interpretive and editorial methods, show how they fleshed out their critical stance similarly.

Linking their style of portraiture to the current debate on critical method, Arendt and Sontag model a carefully affirmative critical stance that is interested in literature as a convergence of human life and work that transcends the literary work itself, pointing to the singular human being who created it (in Arendt’s case) and to the transpersonal, transformative realm of aesthetics (in Sontag’s case). Because of this existential condition of literature, the critic’s preservation and promotion of it, through a specific form of provocative, stimulating judgment is a key political-cultural assignment for both. Arendt and Sontag act as critics by facilitating the encounter with the portrayed object for the reader citationally, approximating the object almost to the degree of identification but maintaining distance through the seemingly universalizing judgments they offer. Per citation, Arendt and Sontag also inscribe Benjamin and themselves into an authoritative literary tradition.

Considered in the context of the New York Intellectuals who “have mostly been loners,” as Irving Howe argues, Arendt’s and Sontag’s portraits show how they sought their companions citationally.\textsuperscript{134} For Sontag, Arendt was a complicated but critical companion. The stylistic affinity of their portraits can be archivally traced back to Sontag’s reception of Arendt’s work which substantiates anecdotal biographical observations that Arendt was an intellectual role model for Sontag. The affinity between their Benjamin portraits suggests that while Sontag never wrote about Arendt, she wrote \textit{with} Arendt.

\textsuperscript{134} Howe, “New York Intellectuals: A Chronicle and a Critique”, 32.
Adapting to the patriarchal power structures of the critical debates they engaged in, Arendt and Sontag missed the opportunity to credit and empower fellow women writers. Sontag’s lack of credit to Arendt as a significant interlocutor not only for the development of her Benjamin portrait but her critical stance more generally – let alone Arendt’s general significance as Benjamin’s first American editor – specifically shows how strong patriarchal rule still was in mid-twentieth-century criticism.

1.4 Stakes

What are the main scholarly contributions of this study? Firstly, I contribute to Arendt and Sontag scholarship, illuminating for each how the other writer was an important interlocutor and how both were deeply involved in critical debates of their time – in the scholarly context of Columbia University, the New York intellectuals and the transatlantic Benjamin debate. For Arendt’s case, I emphasize her achievements as a literary critic – a category that has not been commonly applied to her. For Sontag, I show the centrality of Arendt as an intellectual role model. For both writers, I demonstrate how significant their literary portraiture was for their role as critics – a genre that has been neglected for both – and how both used citation as a crucial stylistic device to establish relationships and inscribe themselves into authoritative literary traditions.

Further, I add to the study of Benjamin’s postwar reception in the US and Germany, specifically in the context of the Benjamin debate, for which, as I argue, Arendt and Sontag were highly significant, as they made Benjamin’s works transatlantically available to a public audience in the United States of America and Germany beyond exclusive, academic circles in the sphere of the Frankfurt School.
I moreover contribute to the current debate on criticism by examining Arendt’s and Sontag’s Benjamin portraits as specifically illuminating examples of how a critical alternative to critique could be actualized. More specifically, I provide a transatlantic perspective on the current debate by drawing on scholarship from the US and Germany and embedding Arendt’s and Sontag’s portraits in a transatlantic history of literary criticism. Focusing on the role of citation as a stylistic tool to create literary relationships and rewrite traditions, I move beyond the polemic rhetoric characterizing the debate, focusing instead on concrete textual analysis of citational practices. Lastly, I contribute to diversifying the canon of literary criticism in the US and Germany in a feminist sense by comprehensively attending to Arendt’s and Sontag’s role in the Benjamin debate and their shared project of preserving and promoting Benjamin as a literary critic.

1.5 Chapter Synopsis

In “Criticism – a Historical and Systematic Frame,” I provide a transatlantic historical and systematic sketch of criticism to gather the theoretical, terminological tools and historical reference points for characterizing Arendt’s and Sontag’s critical methods as they appear in their portraits. I begin by sketching the main signposts of the current Anglo-American debate. Most generally, major participants in the debate take issue with “critique” – a critical mode associated with the paradigm of historicization as emphatically promoted by Fredrick Jameson’s call to “always historicize,” as well as with what Ricoeur called the “hermeneutics of suspicion” in the tradition of Marxist and Freudian interpretation. The alternative ideals are characterized by a focus on the aesthetic qualities of the works of art, the acknowledgment of which through immanent analysis is considered more significant than contextualization. Secondly, I discuss how Peter

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135 Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading,” 123-151, 124f.
Szondi addressed very similar questions already in the 1960s in Germany when he envisioned a literary hermeneutics. With Szondi, I identify citation as a key stylistic device for close reading. Thirdly, Szondi’s methodological reflection on the relationship of hermeneutics and criticism affords a rough history of criticism in Germany versus the US. This history leads me to discuss the Merkur debate about the editorial and interpretive appropriations of Walter Benjamin’s work as an illuminating precedent of the current debate. Overall, this first chapter serves as the systematic and historical background of my study. I identify citational style as a key stylistic quality marking the difference between competing critical positions. Arendt’s and Sontag’s Benjamin portraits offer new perspectives on the current questions on method through their contributions to the Benjamin debate. In turn, the current debate and its historical precedents provide an instructive, unexplored context for illuminating Arendt’s and Sontag’s criticism and their relationship.

After this framing chapter, I dedicate two chapters to each, Arendt’s and Sontag’s Benjamin portraits. First, I attend to the “Logik des Produziert-Werdens” by reconstructing the production and publication histories of each portrait in an “archival approximation” chapter. Then, I analyze the “Logik des Produziertseins” by performing a close reading of each portrait, in which I attend to stylistic features and argumentative foci and trace major qualities of their criticism in adjacent work. In the Arendt chapters, I focus on how Arendt intervened in the Benjamin debate and challenged Adorno’s and Scholem’s readings of Benjamin as a failed Marxist philosopher, and Zionist, respectively. A central component of her intervention is her editorial work which preceded the escalation of the Benjamin debate in the late 1960s by twenty years and which significantly informed her critical approach to portraiture, as she translated her efforts for Jewish reconstruction after the Holocaust and what she called the “hidden tradition” of pariah thought into a provocatively audience-oriented citational style. I show how Arendt provides a genuinely
transatlantic perspective on Benjamin by publishing in German and English, and how the American version of her Benjamin portrait amplifies her performative, in her sense political approach to criticism. In the Sontag chapters, I focus on how Sontag intensely read Arendt’s work per se, how Arendt’s Benjamin portrait was key for her Benjamin reception, and how she meticulously studied the Benjamin debate. In my close reading of her portrait, I show how she stylistically imitates Arendt’s portrait but neglects to credit her explicitly and rather cites Adorno and Scholem as historical reference points. I argue that the stylistic citational overlaps with Arendt’s portrait, as well as her imitation of Arendt’s editorial strategy of publishing her portrait three times in a row, nevertheless suggest that she challenged Adorno’s and Scholem’s readings of Benjamin in a similar way as Arendt, preserving and promoting Benjamin as a literary critic rather than philosopher. I trace how Sontag develops the melancholic aesthetic she sketches with Benjamin in adjacent works. Lastly, I explore hidden references to Arendt’s work in Sontag’s work more broadly, specifically in her first novel, in which a fictional transformation of Arendt appears.

In my conclusive comparison, I synthesize my findings from this study, focusing on what critical alternatives to critique can be found in Arendt’s and Sontag’s Benjamin portraits and what that implies for their relationship. I argue that both develop an audience-focused critical style through a distinct use of citations and provocative, stimulating judgment. Modelling a committed, aesthetic attentive approach to the literary object, Arendt and Sontag acted as cultural ambassadors who preserve and promote a transatlantic tradition of literature with Benjamin. Their critical concern exceeds the literary text. It pertains to the political encounter with the person inherent in the text (in Arendt’s case) and the transpersonal, transformative power of the aesthetics (in Sontag’s case). Insofar as both Arendt and Sontag create a transatlantic lineage of criticism for themselves with Benjamin, their portraits are examples of how criticism and hermeneutics
converge in a trans-academic setting. I conclude by arguing that attending to the transatlantic “hidden tradition” inherent in Arendt’s and Sontag’s Benjamin portraits has a crucial feminist significance which the portraits themselves only stylistically communicate by modeling a citational stance of writing with rather than about the aesthetically encountered.
Chapter 2: Criticism – Systematic and Historical Frame

Critical procedures. The danger of their multiplicity.

1. Speak only of the author – speak only of the work.
2. Consider the work in relation to other works by the same author – consider the work in isolation.
3. Place the work in a literary-historical context and compare it in terms of style or content with other works in the tradition.
4. Treat the work – polemically, prognostically, analytically – according to its effect on its public.
5. The work as representative of a thesis – the thesis as representative of a work.

Walter Benjamin. “Program for Literary Criticism”\textsuperscript{136}

Walter Benjamin’s list of different “critical procedures” cited above captures very well what the contemporary debate about critical methods is concerned with: how the critic should approach her object. The central question is how much and what kind of contextualization is advisable in interpretation. Very roughly, the two main poles between which critical ideals are envisioned are \textit{critique} versus \textit{close reading}. In Benjamin’s list above, items three and five (historical and theoretical reading) would fall under the former category in the current debate: \textit{critique} is broadly associated with a contextual, mistrustful mode of reading that assumes that understanding the literary object requires creating critical distance from it through philosophical, historical, or psychoanalytical framing. Critique prioritizes theory over the aesthetic object. It is even considered a “shorthand for theory itself.”\textsuperscript{137} The other pole, \textit{close reading}, is invested with the idea that the literary object mediates itself if the critic approaches it with careful, affective attention to its aesthetic qualities. In Benjamin’s list, “speak[ing] only of the work” and “consider[ing] the work in isolation” would fall under \textit{close reading}. As the New Critics adopted


it, *close reading* is closely associated with critical practice and even *criticism* per se.\(^ {138}\) With *critique* versus *close reading*, the role of historicization versus immanent reading – central to the University seminar on interpretation in which Arendt and Sontag participated – is also central to the current debate.

### 2.1 Signposts of the Current Anglo-American Debate on Criticism

In the American context, “critique” has come under attack beginning in the late 1990s with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s influential 1997 essay “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, you’re so paranoid, you probably think this essay is about you,” followed by Bruno Latour’s 2003 polemic “Why has Critique Run out of Steam.”\(^ {139}\) To understand the valence of “critique” in the debate, it is worth pointing out that English lexically differentiates what in German and other European languages collapses in one word, “Kritik,” “*critica, critique.*”\(^ {140}\) Based on dictionary definitions, *criticism* is much more closely linked to literature, while *critique* is loosely associated with philosophical, reflexive thought.\(^ {141}\) The *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms (ODL)* defines *criticism* as a “reasoned discussion of literary works” with different goals:

The defense of literature against moralists and censors, classification of a work according to its genre, interpretation of its meaning, analysis of its structure and style, judgement of its worth by comparison with other works, estimation of its likely effect on readers, and


the establishment of general principles by which literary works (individually, in categories, or as a whole) can be evaluated and understood.142

What these various operations share is that criticism is in a fundamental sense reactive, intertextual, and dependent; it presupposes the existence of literary works to which it may take multiple approaches with the two main goals of pronouncing an evaluation (“can be evaluated […]”) or, epistemologically, advancing knowledge (“[…] and understood”). Criticism is literature about literature.143

This understanding of criticism as a reactive genre has become problematic in the current debate. The concern is that critique, as a critical mode that decenters the literary object in favor of its interpretive framework, has come to dominate criticism to the extent that the differentiation of critical modes that the English language affords has become impossible. Accordingly, Latour defines as a desideratum in his 2003 essay: “The practical problem we face […] is to associate the word criticism with a whole set of new positive metaphors, gestures, attitudes, knee-jerk reactions, habits of thought.”144

The first to pronounce the problem of the paradigm of critique was Sedgwick. As she points out in her 1997 essay mentioned above, certain “critical habits” have become “synonymous with criticism itself,” which is in itself problematic because of the “stultifying side effect” of any dogma: the inability to account for “local, contingent relations.” According to Sedgwick, the problem with the paradigm of critique, consisting precisely in its paradigmatic status, transpired most evidently with Fredric Jameson’s self-defeating motto “always historicize”: “Always historicize? What could have less to do with historicizing than the commanding, atemporal adverb

143 Hohendahl, Institution of Criticism, 11, 14.
‘always’?” Sedgwick challenged Jameson’s motto in the context of the one-sided US American reception of Ricoeur’s “category of the hermeneutics of suspicion” which had become “a mandatory injunction rather than a possibility among other possibilities.” Rather than formulating an “imperative,” Sedgwick emphasizes that Ricoeur wanted “to describe the position of Marx, Nietzsche, Freud” taxonomically, differentiating them from alternatives such as “philological and theological ‘hermeneutics of recovery of meaning.’” About a decade after Sedgwick’s essay, Rita Felski labeled Ricoeur’s “hermeneutics of suspicion” as critique. In her use of “critique,” Felski summarizes what Sedgwick refers to as “critical habits” and “critical theory” as a “thought style,” whereby she means a hermeneutic “mood and method” ruled by “suspicion.”

Felski’s focus on “affect” builds on Sedgwick’s attempt to understand the problem of critique in a nuanced way that avoids the ironic impasse inherent in the effort of overcoming a transhistorical dogma of historicization. This impasse transpires in Best and Marcus’ introduction to “surface reading” of 2009 but also reappears in North’s recent book: Both see the problem of critique in its status as “transhistorical imperative;” in the “‘historicist/contextualist’ paradigm” of a Jamesonian “symptomatic reading” in which the significant aspect of a text is considered repressed in the aesthetic object, which to uncover requires psychoanalytic or Marxist interpretive tools. Both Best and Marcus, as well as North, seek to replace this paradigm with a non-contextualizing critical approach. While North draws on the English tradition of I. A. Richard’s “close reading,” emphatically embracing its materialist aesthetics and political impetus, Best and

145 Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading,” 124f. For all preceding quotes.
146 Felski, Limits, 2.
147 Ibid., 1f.
149 North, Literary Criticism, 1, 17; Best and Marcus, “Surface Reading,” 1f.
Marcus suggest their “surface reading” approach as an empirical, scientific alternative to the “depth” focus and allegorical method of historicism.  

Because of Best and Marcus’ focus on the scientific and methodological quality of “surface reading,” the literary text appears here as a largely transhistorical unit whose meaning seems evident independent of historical context. They envision a criticism that aims for such scientific standards as “objectivity, validity, truth,” operates by the motto “weak interpreters but potent describers” and overcomes “the selectivity and evaluative energy that have been considered the hallmarks of good criticism,” namely of “critique.” By “surface reading,” Best and Marcus mean embracing “description” of “patterns [...] within and across texts,” and attending to the “evident, perceptible, apprehensible in texts; what is neither hidden nor hiding; what, in the geometrical sense, has length and breadth but no thickness, and therefore covers no depth. Instead of Jameson’s allegorical, symptomatic interpretation which focuses on “absences, gaps, and ellipses in texts,” situates meaning on “latent” and “deep” level, and therefore requires “an extreme degree of penetration or insight” to interpret it, Marcus and Best envision an alternative that attends to the “present” and the “manifest.”

Part of what Heather Love calls the “descriptive turn,” Best and Marcus develop Latour’s call for a renewed empiricism in criticism. Triggered by a post-9/11 phenomenon he calls “instant revisionism,” Latour observes in “Why has critique run out of steam” the appropriation of critical, skeptical modes of argument by an extreme right, anticipating the current post-factual

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150 Best and Marcus, “Surface Reading,” 3f., 6; North, Literary Criticism, 3, 15.  
151 Best and Marcus, “Surface Reading,” 3, 5-8, 17f.  
152 Ibid., 17.  
153 Ibid., 9.  
154 Ibid., 4.  
era of distrust and disinformation.\textsuperscript{156} Latour suggests that this appropriation reflects back on how critique has been misunderstood in the first place: “a certain form of critical spirit has sent us down the wrong path […] the question was never to get away from facts but closer to them, not fighting empiricism but, no the contrary, renewing empiricism.”\textsuperscript{157}

Overall, the envisioned alternatives in the debate advocate affective, descriptive proximity to the text instead of the mistrustful distance of critique. However, how this proximity could be created remains methodically vague to the extent that a polemic rhetoric dominates such positions as North’s and Best and Marcus’ who react to what Guillory calls the underlying disciplinary “legitimization crisis” of the debate by either leaping to the methodological repertoire of empirical sciences or by embracing a political, instrumental agenda of criticism.\textsuperscript{158} The question of what \textit{close reading} actually is – beyond its original coinage of I. A. Richards’ and Empson’s Practical Criticism – has increasingly become a matter of debate, where aspects of it have been observed for such different, otherwise incompatible interpretive traditions like deconstruction, Barthian post-structuralism or even the Frankfurt School who is otherwise concerned with Critical Theory.\textsuperscript{159} Lacking a concrete, clear, teachable definition, close reading has been also associated with the intimate, identificatory, sentimental modes of lay reading.\textsuperscript{160}

\begin{flushright}
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\textsuperscript{157} Latour, “Why has,” 231, 243, 244.
\end{flushright}
Exactly in response to the question of what close reading is or could be, Arendt and Sontag enter the debate’s stage: They are invoked as examples of how to ‘read closely’ in the debate. Sontag is prominently referenced as a prime model of Best and Marcus’ “surface reading,” and implicitly as an ancestor to Sedgwick’s reparative reading. Offering different older and newer “types” of surface reading, including “surface as materiality” or “as the intricate verbal structure of literary language” within and across texts, Best and Marcus reference Sontag as the Kronzeugin for the “[e]mbrace of the surface as an affective and ethical stance.” Thereby, they mean an attitude of “accepting texts, deferring to them instead of mastering or using them as objects,” and a refusal of “the depth model of truth, which dismisses surfaces as inessential and deceptive.” Referencing Sontag’s essay debut Against Interpretation (1966), Best and Marcus take advantage of her pointed polemics in this early “manifesto” against suspicious Freudian or Marxist hermeneutics, against disclosure and substitution, and for “an ‘erotics of art,’ which approaches the aesthetic object “in its ‘pure, untranslatable, sensuous immediacy.’”

Outlining an ambitious critical approach themselves, they invoke Sontag’s “statement” in service of their own polemic, without much elaboration on whether she practiced what she preached or changed the sermon itself later in her career. Therefore, what it exactly means that “such an erotics can take the form of attending to the text, or to one’s affective responses to it” remains abstract. Moreover, the polemic thrust of Best and Marcus’ introduction obscures that the alternative to suspicious hermeneutics they invoke with Sontag can actually still be characterized in hermeneutic terms. Indeed, Kai Sina has identified Sontag herself as “eine hermeneutische Leserin par excellence,” who challenged a specific kind of hermeneutics, namely the suspicious one, but read very much in terms

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161 Best and Marcus, “Surface Reading,” 10f.
162 Felski, Hooked, 131. Felski makes the argument that Best and Marcus still operate in the framework of hermeneutics. In this sense, they differ from Love whose descriptive approach seeks to move beyond hermeneutics.
of the “dialogischen, indefiniten und mitunter existanzial gefärbten Sinnbildungsprozess” at the core of hermeneutic “Verstehenskunst.”

In contrast to Sontag, Arendt is not explicitly referenced as a model reader of literature in the current debate on criticism, which confirms the continued neglect of Arendt’s concern with literature relative to her political theoretical work. However, Arendt indirectly serves as a counter example to academic criticism in Eva Geulen’s work. As I mentioned in my introduction, Geulen characterizes Arendt’s style as “Mimikry ans Objekt.” Via this phrase, Geulen indirectly connects Arendt to the current debate on criticism because she actually first uses it in her review of Norths’ *Literary Criticism*, arguing that academic literary criticism is distinct in that it approaches literature in a methodical way, by drawing on “kontrollierbare Verfahren” – rather than as “Mimikry ans Objekt.” In her application of the phrase to Arendt, it becomes clear what “Mimikry ans Objekt” is in the first place – namely a distinct citational style which maintains only a minimal difference between meta- and object-language, creating an intricately subtle plurality of voices that seems to be one unit.

Linking the references to Sontag and Arendt, so far unexplored features of what *close reading* could be transpire: Both Sontag’s call for an “erotic” and Arendt’s mimicry style imply an intimate, very close relationship between critic and aesthetic object. But the relationship of their modes of approximation of the object to the tradition of hermeneutics, and academic, methodical literary criticism seems complicated: Sontag is considered a hermeneutic reader but also a counterexample to suspicious hermeneutics. Arendt’s *mimicry*, in turn, is contrasted with academic

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166 Geulen, “Altes und Neues.”
close reading as a “Methode eigenen Rechts” in the hermeneutic tradition.\textsuperscript{167} Hence, both Arendt and Sontag seem to challenge ideas about established methods in literary studies that are closely linked to the tradition of hermeneutics. In order to understand whether and how Arendt and Sontag challenge or reform these ideas, a closer look at the hermeneutic tradition is required.

Such exploration of hermeneutics is afforded from within the debate itself: Embracing Sedgwick’s early differentiation of hermeneutic variants, Felski points out that a resource for disciplinary self-affirmation (beyond the leap into political instrumentalization or empirical sciences) is the hermeneutic tradition of which the suspicious kind associated with critique is only one option. Indeed, she envisions an “affirmative hermeneutics” as an alternative to critique that would understand literature as generative of its own critical criteria rather than measuring it by external theoretical “master codes.”\textsuperscript{168} Rather than assuming the position of a judge – someone who decides a case based on a fixed system of rules external to the case itself – the affirmative critic “does justice to” the object by granting it agency in co-constituting the rules by which its case will be decided. Informed by Latourian “actor-network-theory,” Felski argues that literature, as a “nonhuman actor” affords attachments, affective reactions and social relationality along with thought and “intellectual rigor.”\textsuperscript{169} For an affirmative, post-critique critic, the text is not understood as determined or conditioned by context but co-constituting it along with the reader: It carries within itself worldliness, context, and history.\textsuperscript{170} The text is not “timeless” but “time-full.”\textsuperscript{171}

Locating history in the aesthetic object, Felski suggests that the polemic contrasting of surface versus depth reading can be bridged by recourse to hermeneutics. Indeed, Felski argues

\textsuperscript{167} Geulen, “Altes und Neues.”
\textsuperscript{169} Felski, \textit{Limits}, 7, 152ff., 157ff., 162.
\textsuperscript{170} Ibid., 153, 162.
\textsuperscript{171} Ibid., 161.
that hermeneutics hosts unexhausted alternatives to *critique* and considers its “neglect […] in Anglo-American literary theory […] scandalous.”\(^{172}\) Invoking the figure of Hermes, she characterizes hermeneutics as a nimble, agile, flexible tradition that is inherently inclined to reform and invites methodological self-reflection.\(^ {173}\)

Exploring Peter Szondi’s thoughts on a “literary hermeneutics” in the 1960s, I will discuss in the following how he sought to reform the hermeneutic tradition by drawing on the tradition of close reading in a similar way as Felski’s revival of hermeneutics in the contemporary American context. Szondi’s methodological reflections afford a historical sketch of *criticism* in Germany versus the US which leads me to the *Merkur* debate that constitutes the local historical context of Arendt’s and Sontag’s Benjamin portrait and shows how they challenged dogmatic modes of reading in terms of *critique* through specific citational styles.

### 2.2 Precursor of the Current Debate: Peter Szondi’s “Literary Hermeneutic”

The current Anglo-American debate reiterates a problem that Peter Szondi discussed in a very similar way in the 1960s when he sought to determine the distinctive assignment of academic criticism between the sciences and the humanities by developing a *literary* hermeneutics. Szondi unfolded his hermeneutic program almost simultaneously with Jacob Taubes reorientation at hermeneutics at the Columbia University on interpretation but there were no overlaps or encounters, to my knowledge. In his “Traktat über philologische Erkenntnis” and his lectures *Introduction to Literary Hermeneutics* (of 1967/68), Szondi takes a historical approach to a

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\(^{172}\) Felski, *Limits*, 32f.

\(^{173}\) Ibid., 32f., 172f., 173-182. Due to a “lingering aura of Teutonic fustiness” which she sees associated with hermeneutics in the Anglo-American context, Felski introduces her alternative to critique as “affective hermeneutics,” rather than “postcritique,” only in the Clark Lectures, building on the embodied, appreciative and trusting rather than suspicious, cognitive hermeneutic approaches she already hints at in *Limits.*
systematic redefinition of hermeneutics based on the assumption that methodological reform requires close familiarity with the methodological past in order to account for the historicity of the innovation.\textsuperscript{174}

Szondi argues that despite Schleiermacher’s definition of hermeneutics as the “\textit{vollkommenen Verstehen einer Schrift},” the discipline of Germanistik has failed to develop a literary hermeneutics with a set of teachable rules how to approach literature: “we do not today have a literary hermeneutics in the sense of a material theory of the interpretation of literary texts (that is, a theory that culminates in practice).”\textsuperscript{175} In short, Szondi seeks to reappropriate hermeneutics from other humanities disciplines where it has become a general “theory of understanding” through Dilthey and Schleiermacher, or even received a fundamental place in Heidegger’s phenomenology.\textsuperscript{176}

Unlike the current debate, Szondi emphasizes the need of a historical perspective to formulate a literary hermeneutics.\textsuperscript{177} This need arises from the core conflict defining the hermeneutic tradition, which is historical perspectivity itself: Ever since its first appearance in the context of the reception of Homer in classical Ancient Greece, hermeneutic approaches have oscillated between grammatical and allegorical reading. The problem that appeared with Homeric reception was “the linguistic gap” created through “the aging of texts” which threatened to render canonical literature “unintelligible or obsolete.” The two main hermeneutic solutions to this problem have been either to determine the “\textit{sensus litteralis}” (grammatical interpretation) or to interpret the “\textit{sensus spiritualis}” (allegorical interpretation.)\textsuperscript{178} Both approaches are alike in their

\textsuperscript{175} Szondi, \textit{Introduction}, 13; Szondi, “Traktat,” 263.
\textsuperscript{176} Szondi, \textit{Introduction}, 1-5.
\textsuperscript{177} Szondi, \textit{Introduction}, xvi, 1f.; Guillory, \textit{Professing Criticism}, x.
\textsuperscript{178} Szondi, \textit{Introduction}, 5f., 8. For all preceding quotes.
ahistorical tendency “to leap over historical distance” but different in their notions of meaning. Grammatical interpretation seeks to conserve an original meaning by “replacing the linguistic expression […] that has become historically alien with a new one or by glossing it, accompanying and explaining it with a new expression.” Allegorical interpretation, in turn, ascribes the sign a “new meaning derived not from the conceptual world of the text but from that of the interpreter.” In contrast to the grammatical, the allegorical approach allows for “manifold textual meaning” rather than stipulating only a single correct one.\(^{179}\) These two alternatives have always competed, Szondi argues.\(^{180}\) Considering the current debate, it seems that they are still competing: Best and Marcus’ “surface reading” reminds of grammatical reading as it is staged as an alternative to Jameson’s allegorical critique. In its relative decentering of the history of the text and in its empirical focus, “surface reading” reminds of “traditional philology,” which, according to Szondi, operated based on the ahistorical premise that it could access and preserve an original meaning, despite or exactly because of its “historical” perspective.\(^{181}\) After the “rise of historical consciousness,” Szondi argues, such ahistorical self-forgetfulness has become problematic.\(^{182}\)

What Szondi suggests is very similar to the current debate’s demands, namely rendering “the text’s aesthetic character a premise of interpretation” rather than appreciating it retrospectively, after a philological analysis.\(^{183}\) The significant difference is that Szondi does not seek to dismiss historical perspectivity altogether but rather account for it exactly by grounding an updated literary hermeneutics on the “contemporary understanding of art” with the aim of reconciling “philology with aesthetics.”\(^{184}\) In other words, Szondi suggests that aesthetic

\(^{179}\) ndi, *Introduction*, 8f. For all preceding quotes.
\(^{180}\) Ibid., 9f.
\(^{181}\) Ibid., 12.
\(^{182}\) Ibid., 5.
\(^{183}\) Ibid., 4.
\(^{184}\) Ibid., 13.
attentiveness is the key to historical self-reflection as it has the potential to indicate the historical specificity of the concept of art governing the interpretive act. This locating of historical awareness in aesthetic sensibility reminds of Felski’s Latourian suggestion that artworks are “timefull.”

As a methodological side-note in the “Traktat,” Szondi suggests that the tradition of Anglo-American close reading could be a method to move beyond the alternatives of allegorical versus grammatical reading. He references what is in English literary criticism as an example of an understanding of literary studies that is aware of its own non-scientific character and better suited to develop a distinct literary hermeneutics. However, Szondi notes a similar neglect of criticism in the German context as Felski notes for hermeneutics in the American one. Without much explanation, Szondi mentions that the German word “‘Kritik’” has disqualified itself for being adopted as a term in academic literary studies but argues that what is meant by the term in the Anglo-American (and French) context is nevertheless academically legitimate:

Wenn auch das deutsche Wort ‘Kritik’ für diesen Bereich kaum mehr zu retten ist, so wäre es doch vermessen, den englischen, amerikanischen und französischen Vertretern dessen, was das Wort in ihrer Sprache meint, Unwissenschaftlichkeit vorwerfen zu wollen. Daß sie ihr Geschäft nicht als Wissenschaft verstehen, zeugt vom Bewußtsein, daß die Erkenntnis von Werken der Kunst ein anderes Wissen bedingt und ermöglicht, als es die übrigen Wissenschaften kennen.185

To explain what criticism means, Szondi references I. A. Richard’s The Philosophy of Rhetoric and Empsons Seven Types of Ambiguity as examples of criticism, invoking the same authorities (and initiators of what became “New Criticism” in the US) as North in the current debate.186 Szondi considers the English term “criticism” a productive contrast to the German “Literaturwissenschaft,” because it more directly invokes the distinctive mode of knowing of literary studies, namely an iterative process of differentiation, which does not produce “Wissen”

186 North, Literary Criticism, 14f.; Szondi, “Traktat,” 264, 266f.
Building on the Ancient root of *criticism*, Szondi defines this epistemic mode through its core operation of judgment – “des Scheidens und Entscheidens.” The transatlantic potential of Szondi’s reference of “criticism” remains similarly implicit as the “hermeneutics” Felski aspires to rehabilitate. To understand why Szondi doubted that “Kritik” could be reintroduced to German academic literary studies and how he nevertheless practically adopted it, I provide a transatlantic historical sketch of criticism in the following through which I also seek to understand the reservations towards the German tradition of hermeneutics that Felski ascribes to a “lingering aura of Teutonic fustiness.”

### 2.3 Transatlantic History of Criticism

In the German context, “Literaturkritik” is considered institutionally distinct from academic literary studies. Maybe this is the main reason why Szondi did not label his methodological innovation *literary criticism* but held on to *hermeneutics*. As Szondi sought to establish himself as an academic in the German academic scene of the postwar decades, he could not afford departing too much from methodological and disciplinary conventions. All the more so as he, as a non-native German and Hungarian Jew, had to fight for recognition by conservative colleagues, who were committed to Germanistik as a nationalist philology, some with a National Socialist past. German *Literaturwissenschaft* after the Second World War held on to its tradition as a national philology that had its origins in the middle to second half of the 19th century when it started to increasingly distinguish itself from public-facing criticism.

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188 Ibid.
Peter Uwe Hohendahl observes that in the US, “‘literary criticism’ is used to describe the work of academic writers” independent of where or on what kind of object they publish.\textsuperscript{191} In contrast,

\begin{quote}
[s]ince the late nineteenth century, German usage has distinguished between \textit{Literaturwissenschaft} as the form of literary criticism situated in the academic, and \textit{Tageskritik} or \textit{Buchkritik}, which is closely connected with a mass medium like the press. \textit{Literaturwissenschaft}, especially in this period, devoted its efforts to the literature of the past, while the task of \textit{Literaturkritik} in the narrow sense of the word has been to describe and evaluate the literature of its own time.\textsuperscript{192}
\end{quote}

This terminological distinction marks two extremes which today are not always sharply kept apart as the activity of some German academics as reviewers and essayists in public media shows.\textsuperscript{193} Such activity is often called “Publizistik,” a more elegant name for a very similar kind of writing that “Literaturkritik” produces for a living.\textsuperscript{194} But the fact that there is a different word for very closely related forms of writing only corroborates that there still is a desire for distinction.

This distinction between criticism and literary studies occurred in Germany in the middle of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century when the academic discipline \textit{Germanistik} became an important agent for the cultivation and preservation of canonical, national heritage beyond the medieval ages in the context of “\textit{nation building}.”\textsuperscript{195} First, its paradigmatic project was the comprehensive preservation and study of Goethe’s monumental estate. Indeed, this “Neugermanistik” considered itself mainly a “Goethe-Philologie.”\textsuperscript{196} The nationalist agenda driving this philology dates back to the baroque period when a German language canon replaced the classical (Latin and Greek) canons that had

\begin{footnotes}
\item[192] Ibid., 13f.
\item[193] Cf. Sina. “Worin unsere Stärke besteht.”
\item[196] Ibid., 10.
\end{footnotes}
long dominated critical work, mostly consisting in preservation and commentary of classical sources.197

Until about 1850, public and academic criticism both targeted the general educated public in terms of this nationalist agenda.198 Over the course of the 18th and 19th centuries, the general growth and acceleration of the literary market and increasing literacy yielded the need for reader guidance.199 While Baroque and early enlightenment criticism was still concerned with universalist regulatory poetics, presenting rigid ideas about aesthetic quality and its moral value, the enlightenment yielded the critic as a figure to foster communication about literary quality with a broader public, based on rational principles and with the goal to foster cultural community building, self-reflection and education in taste.200

Academic criticism became increasingly distinct from this public criticism as a philological, literary historical discipline that flourished in the context of scientific positivism at the end of the 19th century.201 In the final decades of the 19th and the first of the 20th century, the humanities more generally entered a phase of self-affirmation and methodological self-reflection.202 In his conception of hermeneutics, Wilhelm Dilthey aimed at advancing literary studies as an academic discipline of the humanities that could compete with the scientific standard of objectivity. But, as Szondi argues, Dilthey’s historicist perspective failed to account for the specificity of literature as an object of research.203 Dilthey was focused on an “analysis of understanding” rather than formulating a literary hermeneutics proper in terms of a set of rules for

198 Hohendahl, Institution of Criticism, 14ff.; cf. also Lützeler. Publizistische Germanistik, 1f.
199 Anz and Baasner, Literaturkritik, 24-36.
200 Ibid., 28-31, 74, 79f.
201 Hohendahl, Institution of Criticism, 15.
interpretation. Therefore, literary studies in Germany remained largely a philological discipline concerned with the methodologically controlled preservation of the literary tradition (of a nationalist Goethean paradigm), without actually adapting their interpretive approach in a historically conscious way – neglecting the aesthetic conditions of its own age, as Szondi argues. Literary studies was largely indifferent to the contemporary literary market and the general public’s reading preferences and interests. Deemed unscientific, these areas were left to journalistic criticism which expanded as “feuilleton” in the new mass media following the French model of public-facing criticism.205

Because academic literary studies claimed the preservation of the canon, public criticism lost its standards for judging literary quality and became increasingly “impressionistic,” fell prey to the escalating commercialization of culture and had to react to increasingly diversified and dispersed audiences.206 Part of the problem was therefore a compartmentalization of the historical and aesthetic perspective. Alfred Kerr is often cited as a paradigmatic example for the impending “subjectivist” turn.207 With Kerr, a core problem for criticism as a profession competing with academic literary history transpired; namely the question which standards to draw on in its approach to literature. While academic literary studies built its authority on the literary tradition which it could reference to evaluate and examine literature, journalistic, public-facing criticism had to find standards offside the canon but also fight its consumption by the laws of the literary market.

While “Literaturkritik” and “Literaturwissenschaft” had parted ways in Germany at this point, they converged in the Anglo-American context so much so that criticism nominally had

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206 Hohendahl, *Institution of Criticism*, 15, 18
207 Ibid., 18.
become a central part of the academic discipline of literary studies by the 1950s in the US. John Guillory offers several reasons for this development: Beginning with the interwar period, Anglo-American literary studies distanced itself from the German tradition of philology (partly because of political antipathy) and entered an identity crisis. Not only had the discipline divergent projects and no official name – “philology, rhetoric, belles lettres, and literary history” – but also did it struggle with two border conflicts – “between the humanities and the social sciences” and “between the profession and the discipline.” These two conflicts overlapped insofar as the public-facing, journalistic criticism of the nineteenth-century periodical culture “saw all of society as their legitimate concern,” as Guillory argues, but disciplinary professionalization would not allow for a discipline “specializing in everything,” specifically considering that social sciences were already forming as a discipline concerned with society as a whole.\footnote{Guillory, \textit{Professing Criticism}, 45-50. For all preceding quotes.} Nevertheless, \textit{criticism} had not merely become part of the academic discipline of literary studies by 1950 but also “impos[ed] the name of \textit{criticism} on the discipline itself.”\footnote{Ibid., 48-50, 54, 56, 72.} Along with the rise of vernaculars as literary languages, which opened new teaching positions that critics took on, Guillory explains this baptizing power with criticism’s integrating effect on the disparate disciplinary strands that lacked a methodological core. With I. A. Richards’ “‘close reading,’” a methodology came into sight that established disciplinary authority based on the aesthetic quality of literature as a “\textit{verbal work of art},” instead of a historical document.\footnote{Guillory, \textit{Professing Criticism}, 48-50, 53-55; cf. also Geulen, “Altes und Neues”; North, \textit{Literary Criticism}, 1-20.} Providing a “formalized technique of reading,” criticism entered the discipline and yielded the momentary armistice personified by the “scholar-critic.”\footnote{Guillory, \textit{Professing Criticism}, 50.} This formalization in the process of the disciplinary professionalization of criticism was also a way out of the impasse for public critics who lost their self-authorized status after the decline of the
nineteenth-century periodicals. As Szondi notes in his “Traktat,” German literary studies did not integrate criticism in this way.

2.3.1 Walter Benjamin between Kritik and Literaturwissenschaft

Arguably the most pivotal figure whose work and life were conditioned by and itself concerned with the lack of integration of criticism and historical literary studies in Germany was Walter Benjamin. His practical and theoretical critical work offers an alternative to the loss of autonomy of public criticism through the economic laws of the literary market on the one hand and academic institutionalization in terms of a nationalist philology on the other hand. In his reluctance to submit to either, while at the same time aiming for a public-facing, yet philologically rigorous, aesthetically and historically sensitive, even political, ambitious mode of criticism, Benjamin’s work responds to the crisis of criticism between academia and the public. He drafts a concept of criticism from the perspective of the precarious life of an independent (politically persecuted and exiled) Jewish critic offside the institutional protection of nationalist, fascist academic walls.

Benjamin explores alternatives to the “impressionistic” collapse of critical work first in his early language-theoretical works around the year 1920, and practically in his work as a reviewer, before collaborating with Bertolt Brecht on more political work in the early 1930s. Overall, his work offers a concept of criticism that complicates the simplified opposition between historically-minded scholar and commercial, aesthetistic critic. Benjamin’s thoughts about criticism changed throughout his career, beginning with a romanticist notion of critical judgment that operates in

212 Guillory, Professing Criticism, 44f., 50.
213 Szondi, “Traktat,” 266.
close proximity to the discussed work of art at hand and complements it reflexively, then gravitating towards historical-philosophical interpretation before turning to political criticism. While a comprehensive engagement with Benjamin’s complex thought on criticism exceeds the scope of this study, I point out a few aspects relevant to Arendt’s and Sontag’s Benjamin portraits as well as to the current debate, as I suggested at the beginning of this chapter.

Benjamin’s notion of criticism is based on theoretical ideas on language recurring across many of his earlier works, such as *On Language as Such and on the Language of Man* (1916), his dissertation *The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism* (1918/19), *The Task of the Translator* (1921) and *Goethe’s Elective Affinities* (1922). Drawing on the romantic conception he discusses in his dissertation, criticism is more than evaluation, knowledge, or preservation of a canon. It involves the “completion, consummation, and systematization of the work and […] its resolution in the absolute.” While Benjamin seems to decenter the role of judgment, he actually complicates it. To avoid impressionistic and subjective criticism (as represented by Kerr), Benjamin draws on the romantic notions of immanence and reflection to establish new aesthetic standards for critical judgment that emerge from the artwork itself.

The critical act in this romanticist conception is per se proof of the aesthetic quality of a work of art which affords its reflection in criticism. Therefore, it precludes negative judgment: “The criticizability of a work demonstrates on its own the positive value judgment made concerning it. […] If a work can be criticized, then it is a work of art; otherwise it is not.”

When what is bad is simply not criticized but “annihilated,” everything that is discussed in criticism becomes aesthetically valuable. In this sense, criticism boosts art; it is an extension,

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215 Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, 159.
216 Ibid., 160.
development and promotion of art to which it has a genuinely affirmative relationship. As the romantic critic’s standards are immanent to the artwork, criticism becomes the regulator of subjectivity; evaluation is inherent in the work itself.\footnote{Benjamin, Selected Writings, vol. 1, 160.} This trans-subjective validity is proven, according to Benjamin, by the lingering, transhistorical authority of the romantics’ critical claims.\footnote{Ibid., 161.}

Benjamin, however, did not wish to restore the romantic project; he rather sought to develop his own critical categories in his subsequent works.\footnote{Cf. Hohendahl, Institution of Criticism, 20f.} For instance, in his essay on \textit{Goethe’s Elective Affinities}, he famously differentiates criticism and commentary, as well as their target categories of “truth content” and “material content.”\footnote{Benjamin, Selected Writings, vol. 1, 297; Burkhardt Lindner, Thomas Küpper, and Timo Skrandies, eds., \textit{Benjamin-Handbuch: Leben, Werk, Wirkung} (Stuttgart: Verlag J.B. Metzler, 2006), 475ff.; Uwe Steiner, \textit{Walter Benjamin} (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2004), 57-64.} This essay is central to Arendt’s Benjamin portrait, but the complex critical stance it unfolds can only be sketched here.\footnote{Cf. Helmut Hühn, Jan Urbich, and Uwe Steiner, eds., \textit{Benjamins Wahlverwandtschaften: Zur Kritik Einer Programmatischen Interpretation} (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2015), 9.}

Organized in three parts that complement each other as thesis, antithesis and synthesis, Benjamin situates criticism relative to commentary, biography and philosophy.\footnote{Steiner, \textit{Walter Benjamin}, 57-64, here 60.} The critic’s assignment is to expose how art struggles to free itself from mythical forces by attending to its “material” and “truth content.” In the case of Goethe’s novel, Benjamin reads the shattering of the protagonists’ marriage as the “material content” that undermines the protagonists’ seeming rational autonomy from mythos, which is exemplified by their naïve excitement about the chemical concept of elective affinities whose parabolic meaning for their own situation they laughingly neglect. Benjamin’s criticism grants insight into such rationalist oversight as it operates more like alchemy, showing “what is alive” in works of art from the past – revealing their “immortality” by analyzing

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{Benjamin, Selected Writings, vol. 1, 160.}
\footnote{Ibid., 161.}
\footnote{Cf. Hohendahl, Institution of Criticism, 20f.}
\footnote{Benjamin, Selected Writings, vol. 1, 297; Burkhardt Lindner, Thomas Küpper, and Timo Skrandies, eds., \textit{Benjamin-Handbuch: Leben, Werk, Wirkung} (Stuttgart: Verlag J.B. Metzler, 2006), 475ff.; Uwe Steiner, \textit{Walter Benjamin} (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2004), 57-64.}
\footnote{Cf. Helmut Hühn, Jan Urbich, and Uwe Steiner, eds., \textit{Benjamins Wahlverwandtschaften: Zur Kritik Einer Programmatischen Interpretation} (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2015), 9.}
\footnote{Steiner, \textit{Walter Benjamin}, 57-64, here 60.}
\end{footnotes}
its “material” for its “truth content.” The idea is that criticism operates in very close proximity to the work of art at hand (like the romantic kind), whose “enigma” it conserves, rather than explaining it through a theoretical framing. Indeed, the “truth content” is tied to the medium of language so much so that it cannot be explicated discursively but remains veiled: “in the face of everything beautiful, the idea of unveiling becomes that of the impossibility of unveiling.”

While exposing how mythos is featured in art, the critic’s task is philosophical rather than feeding the myth. Therefore, the essay’s second part is a polemic against Friedrich Gundolf’s mythologizing, heroizing Goethe book of 1916, which Benjamin challenges based on the principle that “the work must by all means stand in the foreground.”

This principle of immanent reading and the terminology of the Goethe essay also define Benjamin’s method in his baroque book in which he reads the baroque tragic play as secularized Christian drama in which allegorically displays the despair of mortal life characterizing the era. The book’s concept of melancholy becomes central in Sontag’s Benjamin portrait which, however, does not comment on the book itself, whose form challenged disciplinary conventions of criticism so much so that Benjamin’s academic career ended with the project. Indeed, the Baroque book is an example of Benjamin’s concern with literary history and presents an alternative to the utilitarian, positivist kind of literary history which Benjamin takes issue with in his polemic 1929 essay “Literary History and the Study of Literature” As prefigured in the Goethe essay, works

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223 Benjamin, Selected Writings, vol. 1, 298.
224 Ibid., 297.
225 Ibid., 351, 334.
226 Ibid., 334.
227 Steiner, Walter Benjamin, 61.
228 Ibid., 66.
of art grant access to history philosophically; by exposing the passing of time sedimented in the work of art, the critic mortifies and simultaneously revives it, providing it with an afterlife.\textsuperscript{231}

The lack of academic acknowledgment for the Baroque book, Benjamin’s increasing financial dependence on journalistic work and his increasingly political perspective in exile contributed to a politicization of this historical-philosophical notion of criticism in the 1930s.\textsuperscript{232}

With Brecht and others, Benjamin envisioned co-editing the journal \textit{Krise und Kritik} as a platform for intellectual debates on the contemporary social-political crisis and the outdated status of critical standards in order to improve the interventionist potential of criticism.\textsuperscript{233}

While Benjamin advanced some of Brecht’s arguments for the “sociological and scientific” turn of criticism – the idea being that criticism should attend to the economic conditions of its production and analyze literary forms in terms of their socio-political function – Brecht’s emphasis on criticism’s didactic quality is key for the innovative critical alternative that Benjamin developed through his exchange with Brecht. While renouncing its didactic gesture, Benjamin adopts the reception focus of Brecht’s epic theater.\textsuperscript{234} In his 1931 fragment “The Task of the Critic,” Benjamin writes: “Instead of giving his own opinion, a great critic enables others to form their opinion on the basis of his critical analysis.”\textsuperscript{235} Rather than giving an opinion, the critic should present her opinion in a way that provokes her readers to take a stance.

Similarly, Benjamin argues in his 1934 talk “The Author as Producer. Address at the Institute for the Study of Fascism” that an author’s political stance shows in how her text models for readers to embrace the same stance, rather than in that stance itself: “The best political tendency

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{231} Witte, \textit{Benjamin}, 73; Pfeifer, \textit{To the Collector}, 104f.
\bibitem{232} Hohendahl, \textit{Institution of Criticism}, 22-25; cf. also Pfeiffer, \textit{To the Collector}, 103ff.; Annie Pfeifer, \textit{To the Collector}
\bibitem{234} Along with his failed Röwohl edition of his selected literary critical works, this was his second failed project of 1930. Cf. Lindner et al., \textit{Benjamin-Handbuch}, 312, 330; Hohendahl, \textit{Institution of Criticism}, 25-28.
\bibitem{235} Hohendahl, \textit{Institution of Criticism}, 25-27.
\bibitem{236} Benjamin, \textit{Selected Writings}, vol. 2, part 2, 548.
\end{thebibliography}
is wrong if it does not demonstrate the attitude with which it is to be followed.”

Literature is political where it has “exemplary character” and enables readers to produce (namely write) themselves. The political critical act consists in this protreptive, stimulating relationship between author and reader: “An author who teaches writers nothing teaches no one.”

In this politicized conception of criticism, Benjamin’s notion of judgment is only fragmentarily formulated. It still seems to be conceived in close proximity to the work of art itself, like in the romantic notion: “For the true critic, judgment comes last, rather than first in the critical act. Ideally, he forgets to judge.” Overall, Benjamin’s political notion of criticism still responds to the loss of critical criteria which caused the crisis of public criticism. Rather than approaching art with a fixed system of values and criteria, like in a critique mode, the work of art itself generates judgment, like in Felski’s affirmative hermeneutics. However, while the work itself still plays a central role in the critic’s judgment, Benjamin shifts the focus from the interaction with the work of art (and immanent reading) to communicating this interaction to a reader. Good criticism turns the reception into a production process. The hermeneutic dichotomy of grammatical versus allegorical reading is at this point left behind as the judgment is not based on some idea of original meaning but involves doing justice to the critic’s readers (and their historical realities). Judgment no longer just accounts for the work itself (in the romanticist sense) but also consists in a communicative provocation (political sense).

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237 Ibid.
240 Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, part 1, 294.
Benjamin locates this specific kind of judgment between three poles: materialist, magical, and academic criticism. The concept of “enigma,” which already appeared in the Goethe essay, plays a crucial role insofar as political criticism should not fully give it away (materialism’s mistake) nor uncouple it from the material medium and its history (magical criticism’s mistake). The goal is to point to the secret, not to solve it. Herein resides Benjamin’s notion of dialectics: All critics, academic or non-academic, should operate in close proximity to the literary work and formulate a provocative judgment that stimulates readers to take a stance themselves. Therefore, quotation becomes central to Benjamin’s notion of criticism. Indeed, in “Program for Literary Criticism,” he demands: “a criticism consisting entirely of quotations should be developed.”

Central to Benjamin’s notion of dialectic criticism is its reluctance to depart from its object and its constant return back to it; representation is unthinkable here without presentation. With this conception, Benjamin seeks to revise literary studies’ unproductive link between research and teaching – unproductive because of a lack of methodological flexibility that would actually account for the object. Methodological flexibility allows to attend to both contemporary innovations and canonical works. The dialectic critic is concerned both with the tradition and the new. Overall, Benjamin envisions a mode of criticism that is academic and historical but also able to discuss contemporary works in a politically potent way. Thus, Benjamin’s conception allows to bridge the two institutional spheres of academic and public criticism – the former primarily concerned with history and tradition, the latter with politics – by developing a concept of criticism closely tied to the literary object.

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2.3.2 The Battle over Benjamin: The Merkur Debate

Benjamin’s contributions to the development of literary criticism were sporadically acknowledged in the reception of his work. However, until the heated debate about the edition and interpretation of Benjamin’s works (mainly by Adorno) that started in the mid-1960s, the reception of Benjamin’s work was dominated by Adorno who considered Benjamin a philosopher, dismissed Benjamin’s literary criticism as a minor part of his work and the image of Benjamin as a literary critic as a “cliché.” Before exploring how Arendt’s and Sontag’s Benjamin portraits contribute to acknowledging Benjamin as a literary critic, some context on the Merkur debate is required.

Adorno’s interpretation of Benjamin came under attack in the respective Merkur debate throughout the 1960s. Merkur publisher Hans Paeschke was an important interlocutor in this debate, turning Merkur into a central platform for it by initiating the first two reviews of the 1966 Benjamin letter edition in his magazine. Along with the Merkur, two special issues of the left-leaning magazine alternative. Zeitschrift für Literatur und Diskussion and seven issues of spring 1968 of the Frankfurter Rundschau featured prominent contributions in the debate.

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Even today, the *Merkur* remains a central platform publishing continued commentary on Benjamin and the debate. But in 1968, Paeschke complained that the debate grew over his head when other journals started featuring contributions. Indeed, Paeschke was alarmed about the heated mode of the debate, expressing his concern about loss of control over it with metaphors of battle and war: “Ein Separatkrieg also um Benjamin hierzulande mit immer schlimmeren Konfusionen, weil niemand koordiniert und jeder aus einer anderen Ecke schießt.”

Today, the battle has calmed down but there is still no armistice. The fronts and platforms of the debate have changed, while the editorial politics and interpretive methods applied to Benjamin’s works are still a point of controversy despite the critical editing of Benjamin’s works on both sides of the Atlantic. Due to the lingering methodological concerns with the editorial and interpretive treatment of Benjamin’s estate, Benjamin’s name has become closely, maybe even metaphorically, associated with methodological crisis. I am using *Benjamin debate* in the following to refer to this extended lingering of concern with Benjamin as a genuinely critical figure.

### 2.3.2. a Heißenbüttel and alternative

The *Merkur* debate began upon the publication of Adorno and Scholem’s edition of Benjamin’s letters in 1966 and abated after Arendt’s publications of her Benjamin portrait in America towards the end of 1968. The editorial and interpretive issues discussed in it date back to Benjamin’s lifetime, and his increasing dependence on the Institute for Social Research’s financial support beginning in the mid-1930s. Arendt, who had become a close friend of

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Benjamin’s in French exile, knew about these conflicts early on, as is evident her letter to Paeschke from December 11, 1967.²⁵³

The main points of controversy of the Merkur debate were Adorno’s, Horkheimer’s and Tiedemann’s, as well as Scholem’s editorial attitudes towards and interpretive appropriations of Benjamin’s works during his life and after his death. In his single public statement in the debate – his “Interimsbescheid” in the Frankfurter Rundschau issue of March 6, 1968 – Adorno vehemently defended himself against the accusations of his “‘Personalunion’” as editor and interpreter of Benjamin’s work. He claimed the right to interpret Benjamin “wie irgendein anderer,” and dismissed the charge of having exercised “Gesinnungsdruck” on Benjamin by misusing his financial dependence on the Institute for Social Research while in French exile for the sake of manipulating his works and effectively erasing the Marxist, philological and literary critical qualities in Benjamin’s work.²⁵⁴

The pivotal case based on which Adorno’s antagonists sought to demonstrate his abuse of power, was his rejection of Benjamin’s Baudelaire essay in 1938, and his continued neglect of its original version.²⁵⁵ Indeed, Benjamin’s and Adorno’s correspondence in November and December 1938 concerning the Baudelaire essay, a part of Benjamin’s envisioned Baudelaire book, which in turn emerged from his ongoing work on the Arcades Project, illuminates the central conflict at the heart of the debate.²⁵⁶ This conflict had two sides to it: firstly, a theoretical and methodological disagreement and secondly, the question of publication in the Institute’s journal Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung. Adorno opposed the essay’s publication more strongly than other members of

²⁵⁴ Adorno, “Interimsbescheid.” Denying all accusations made against him, partly citing Unseld’s similar denial of February in the Frankfurter Rundschau verbatimly, Adorno states: “Nichts daran ist wahr.”
²⁵⁵ Cf. Witte, Benjamin, 167, 170, 185-189.
²⁵⁶ Benjamin, Briefe, vol. 2, 782-799; Witte, Benjamin, 163ff.
the Institute because he considered it misrepresentative of Benjamin’s work, based on its lack of theoretical mediation of the empirical material presented. In his response of December 9, Benjamin defends his method of deferring theoretical interpretation and emphasizes his desperate financial situation.

The central methodological disagreement between Benjamin and Adorno consists in the question how to operate with material evidence. The competing options discussed in their exchange are a) “die echt philologische Haltung,” which is in Benjamin’s terms of the Goethe essay an essential step in the critical process from “material” to “truth content” and which Adorno dismisses as “die staunende Darstellung der bloßen Faktizität,” and b) Adorno’s ideal of mediating the materialistic determination of cultural characters through the “Gesamtprozeß.” Adorno considers the Baudelaire essay to be lacking Benjamin’s usual theoretical brilliance, an example of a forced and failed attempt at Marxist interpretation, and a result of some kind of ascetic renunciation of theoretical interpretation. Benjamin, in turn, feels misread and insists on the need of philological attention to facticity exactly for the sake of breaking its auratic spell. In short, Benjamin and Adorno disagree on interpretive method, which Adorno considers a philosophical assignment whereas Benjamin views it as a critical one. In the following I explore how this methodical conflict – one could say it is one between critique and criticism – is discussed in the Mercur debate.

258 Ibid., 791, 796f.
259 Ibid., 792, 793f., 796.
260 Ibid., 786, 793.
261 Ibid., 785, 793, 794f.; Witte, Benjamin, 170ff.
262 Benjamin, Briefe, vol. 2, 785-788; Witte, Benjamin, 170.
In his two *Merkur* reviews of March 1967 and January 1968, Heißenbüttel criticizes the way Adorno and Scholem edited Benjamin’s work. In his review of their letter edition of 1966 (1967), he problematizes that both read Benjamin one-dimensionally and distortingly, assimilating Benjamin into their own systems of thought. Both appear to Heißenbüttel to claim “Benjamins Vorhaben besser zu verstehen als der Autor.”\(^{263}\) Scholem, reading Benjamin in terms of Jewish metaphysics and mysticism, Heißenbüttel argues, sidelines Benjamin’s Marxist orientation as an unsuccessful and misguided aberration of the metaphysician who “wanted to be” a Marxist but wasn’t one.\(^ {264}\) Likewise but worse, Adorno not only criticized Benjamin’s orientation at a “materialistischen Dialektik”\(^ {265}\) in his exchange with the author but continued erasing the “marxistisch-materialistische”\(^ {266}\) quality, as Heißenbüttel suggests, even in his writing on Benjamin after his death.\(^ {267}\) Heißenbüttel takes issue with Adorno’s unfounded claim that specifically the later Benjamin had increasingly suffered from alienation to himself [“Selbstentfremdung”].\(^ {268}\) Heißenbüttel identifies lack of evidence as a general feature of Adorno’s writing on Benjamin.\(^ {269}\) In his own alternative reading of Benjamin, Heißenbüttel identifies Benjamin as a writer—“Benjamin war Schriftsteller”\(^ {270}\)—which Adorno, Heißenbüttel suggests, could not realize because of his philosophical blinkers.\(^ {271}\)

\(^{263}\) Heißenbüttel, “Vom Zeugnis,” 238.
\(^{264}\) Ibid., 234, 236.
\(^{265}\) Ibid., 238.
\(^{266}\) Ibid., 240.
\(^{267}\) Ibid., 238, 241.
\(^{268}\) Ibid., 240.
\(^{269}\) Ibid., 234, 244.
\(^{270}\) Ibid., 244.
\(^{271}\) Ibid., 238.
Adorno’s encroachment on Benjamin’s works is more problematic than in Scholem’s case, Heißenbüttel argues, because of his position at the Institute for Social Research on whose funds Benjamin relied. However, Heißenbüttel’s critique focuses less on the lack of financial support provided by the Institute to Benjamin than on method: Opening his own review with a Benjamin block quote on letters as testimony, Heißenbüttel demonstrates how he considers close attention through quotation to the edited or criticized crucial to editorial and critical work. In his second apropos publication in the *Merkur* issue of January 1968, Heißenbüttel sharpens his challenge of Adorno’s editorial failures by calling for a proper historical-critical edition of Benjamin’s works through an unbiased editor. Instead of an editor who keeps Benjamin’s estate locked away from public, and whose view of the edited work is distorted through his own philosophical lens, Benjamin would deserve a complete historical-critical edition.

By calling for a comprehensive Benjamin edition, Heißenbüttel reacted to two recent publications: Tiedemann’s edition of a chapter of Benjamin’s work on Baudelaire (“Der Flaneur” in *Neue Rundschau*) and a 1967 alternative issue dedicated to the editorial history of Benjamin’s works. Reconstructing Benjamin’s communication with Adorno about the Baudelaire chapter, which was denied in its first but printed ultimately in a revised version in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* in 1939, Heißenbüttel argues that rather than adopting Adorno’s criticism, Benjamin carved out his position more sharply in the editing process, thereby increasing the difference between his and Adorno’s position. Adorno promoted his own stance not only in his exchange with Benjamin and his editorial work but also in his own, seemingly independent, work.

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273 Ibid., 179, 184.
as Heißenbüttel argues. Thus, Heißenbüttel reads Adorno’s “Versuch über Wagner,” which precedes Benjamin’s Baudelaire essay in the respective 1939 issue of Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung, as a philosophical rebuttal against Benjamin. Overall, Heißenbüttel – like Szondi as well as Arendt and Sontag, as I will show – reads Benjamin in literary terms, rehabilitating his status as a writer rather than philosopher.

Alternative

The October/December 1967 and April/June 1968 issues of the alternative reinforce central points of Heißenbüttel’s criticism but seek to resuscitate Benjamin as a Marxist, socialist philosopher rather than as a literary writer. While Heißenbüttel was mainly concerned with interpretive questions, the alternative editors addressed editorial, and archival problems. Drawing on new archival findings, the alternative takes issue with what is experienced as an untransparent management of Benjamin’s dispersed estate. Unlike the Frankfurt Benjamin archive under Adorno’s control, the “Staatlichen Zentralarchiv Potsdam (DZA),” based in former GDR, allowed insights into a previously unknown, second set of Benjamin’s estate. The Alternative editors emphatically agree with Heißenbüttel, charging Adorno’s, and his pupil Rolf Tiedemann’s, with appropriating Benjamin’s image for their own theory:

Problematizing Adorno’s and Scholem’s “Subjektivität der Herausgeberkriterien,” the editors conclude in the second issue of April/June 1968: “Die historisch-materialistische Konkretion sowie die sozialistische Perspektive im Denken Benjamins sind den Herausgebern

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278 Ibid., 182.
279 The radical position by the alternative points to the broader cultural-political context of the Benjamin debate which was the apex of the 1960s student movements. Cf. Neuffer, Journalistische Theorie, 43-93.
280 Brenner, alternative 1968, 86, 45.
They demand, like Heißenbüttel, a continued public, academic discourse and correction of Adorno’s distortions through a critical edition and a cancelling of the “Monopolstellung [...] die Adorno in Kooperation mit dem Suhrkamp Verlag durch Herausgebervertätigkeit, Nachlaß- und Druckrechtverwaltung innehat.”282 Reprinting some selective statements from a discussion in the Frankfurter Rundschau, the second alternative issue demonstrates how Adorno, Tiedemann and Suhrkamp editor Unseld continue denying or ignoring the accusations presented against them.283

In conclusion, the main criticism in the local “Merkur-debate,” whose main actors are Heißenbüttel and the alternative editors, pertains to Adorno’s and Scholem’s editorial and critical manipulation of Benjamin while he was alive and after he had died. Heißenbüttel and the alternative editors problematize that both Adorno and Scholem disapproved of Benjamin’s Marxist-materialist orientation, and hence specifically disliked his later works concerned with surrealism as well as his friendship with Brecht. The alternative issues demand attention for the “historisch-materialistische Konkretion sowie die sozialistische Perspektive“ in Benjamin’s work more emphatically than Heißenbüttel.284 His articles characterize Benjamin as a writer and focus on the lack of academic, editorial decency and philological rigor in Adorno’s (and Scholem’s) work to the effect of a marginalization of Benjamin’s literary critical work.

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281 Brenner, alternative 1968, 45, 47.
282 Ibid., 47.
283 Cf. Ibid., 87.
284 For instance, the second alternative issue features an anti-Adornian reading of Benjamin’s dialectics by Hildegard Brenner, a letter by Benjamin to and contribution by Asja Lacis apart two unrelated Marxist contributions on other topics (plus bibliographical references on the Benjamin “Discussion”). Cf. Brenner, alternative 1968, 44, 48-68.
2.3.2. b Scholem and Adorno on Benjamin

On an argumentative level, Scholem and Adorno read Benjamin as a metaphysician, and philosopher respectively rather than a literary critic. Both disagree with his use of Marxism and consider Benjamin’s turn towards it a distortion of his actual project. This distortion, both argue, is connected to his friendship with Brecht. Both view Benjamin as a fundamentally alienated, isolated figure. With respect to interpretive method, Scholem’s and Adorno’s approaches differ substantially, the former approaching Benjamin mostly through biographical narrative, where the latter reads him largely immanently, in a mode of critique, yet without any reference to historical context for the most part. As Arendt’s and Sontag’s Benjamin portraits methodically counter Adorno’s and Scholem’s approaches, I delineate main points of these in the following.

Adorno on Benjamin

The distinct character of Adorno’s editorial and interpretive stance towards Benjamin consists in his assumption that there is a correct way of understanding Benjamin, namely a philosophical one, and many ways to misunderstand him. The key interpretive principle underlying all his nine texts on Benjamin’s legacy that appeared after Benjamin’s death is: “Man versteht Benjamin nur dann richtig, wenn man den Umschlag äußerster Bewegtheit in ein Statisches, ja die statische Vorstellung von der Bewegung selber, hinter jedem seiner Sätze spürt.”285 This sentence not only identifies the key analytic category which Adorno applies to Benjamin – the “dialectical image” – but also indicates his interpretive method:286 Circling back to the current debate’s differentiation between surface and depth reading, or criticism and critique, Adorno invokes

286 Benjamin, Schriften, XVII.
something “behind” Benjamin’s sentences – on a depth level, as it were. Yet, he seems to gain the categories of his reading from Benjamin’s work itself rather than from a contextual frame; in Felski’s sense of post-critique, he seems to approach it as generative of its own critical criteria.

However, this process does not show on the surface of Adorno’s writing on Benjamin as he rarely provides quotes and evidence for his claims about him – a quality of his writing that Heißenbüttel found fault with. Adorno’s introduction to the Schriften (1955), which is, like Arendt’s and Sontag’s portraits, an editorial introduction, and hence a paratext, features only very few scattered keyword quotes by Benjamin, like “‘in Marmorgrüften’” or “‘priviligiertes Denken.’”287 The absence of Benjaminian text in Adorno’s introduction raises the question what Adorno means when he describes Benjamin’s method as defined by “evidence”288: “Was Benjamin sagte und schrieb, klang, als käme es aus dem Geheimnis. Seine Macht aber empfing es durch Evidenz.”289 Adorno acknowledges the intertextual quality of Benjamin’s work and his “leibhafte[] Fühlung mit den Stoffen,” which suggests that he understands evidence in Benjamin’s case as somehow citational.290 If this is so, Adorno’s writing appears diametrically opposed to Benjamin’s.291 Where Adorno’s introduction is a paratext – a text that is defined by his relationality to other texts – it is striking that this relationality does not surface in terms of intertextual reference through quotes, for instance. If Adorno thinks in relation to Benjamin’s texts, this relation seems to occur elsewhere, outside his own texts. There is no evident conversation between Adorno and Benjamin but rather Adorno’s monadic monologue about Benjamin.

287 Benjamin, Schriften, IXf.
288 Ibid., X.
290 Adorno, Über Walter Benjamin, 58; cf. Benjamin, Schriften, X.
291 Benjamin, Schriften, XV.
If evidence is a quality criterion for Adorno which he aimed for also in his own writing, the kind of evidence he appeals to seems immanent, inherent in his reading, rather than on its surface, in the sense of quotation. While Adorno claimed an intimate familiarity with Benjamin’s work – justifiably so, given his longtime correspondence with the teacher, colleague and friend – and thus could be considered a “close reader” of Benjamin’s work, his method would be more aptly characterized as immanent critique rather than close reading, because there is a degree of suspicion in his attitude towards Benjamin: He claimed to understand significant theoretical and methodical intentions of Benjamin’s work better than Benjamin himself, specifically concerning materialist interpretation. Benjamin himself disappears in Adorno’s interpretation. Indeed, where no other context is referenced, it seems to be Adorno who stands “behind” Benjamin’s sentences; as the depth to the surface he does not show.

Adorno’s nine texts on his legacy were published over three decades, between 1940 and 1976. Upon Benjamin’s death in October 1940, Adorno published a short note in the journal of the German-Jewish Club in New York, Aufbau, titled “Gedächtnis.” This note already presents the main tenets of Adorno’s view of Benjamin. Noting Benjamin’s renown as a Proust translator as well as “Publizist” in the well-respected journals “Frankfurter Zeitung” and “Literarische Welt,” Adorno argues that Benjamin’s actual significance is of a philosophical dimension. But his philosophy is easily misunderstood as literary criticism, Adorno argues, as Benjamin wrapped it in the form of “Kommentar und Kritik von Texten” and presented “freischwebende Entwürfe” rather than systematic theory. Thus, Adorno stages Benjamin’s work as an interpretive

294 Wesseling. Benjamin Bibliographie, 392. Arendt would start working as a columnist for this journal one year later.
challenge. The note reads like an attempt to wrest Benjamin’s work away from a trivial understanding of it as simple-minded literary criticism. Based on its fragmentary status, Adorno anticipates the continued development [“Entfaltung”] of Benjamin’s work. He also attributes Benjamin otherworldliness, associating him with death metaphorically even while still amongst the living.296

These main points return in all later essays, throughout which Adorno holds on to his reading of Benjamin as a philosopher. He locates Benjamin specific philosophical style between phenomenology (mostly represented by Heidegger), Jewish theology (for which Adorno references Scholem and Rosenzweig) and German idealism (Kant, Hegel).297 The challenge of Benjamin’s thought, Adorno argues, is the shock experience it creates through the literary method Adorno ascribes to him, emerging from his dedication to the “concrete,” through which he thinks concepts.298

Adorno suggests that Benjamin distorted his own real project by drawing on a misunderstood Marxism and Jewish theology. This implies, as Heißenbüttel criticized, that Adorno does not take Benjamin’s actual project seriously as is but suggests that there would or could have been a truer, more authentic Benjamin – whom Benjamin himself never achieved to realize. This presumption is striking given that he had argued in his “Portrait” of 1950 that the “recourse to ‘misunderstandings’ as a means of explaining the effect of intellectual phenomena does not lead very far” as it “presupposes that there is an intrinsic substance, often simply equated with the

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298 Benjamin, Schriften, X, XII, XIV, XV, XX; Adorno, “Portrait,” 231, 240.
author’s intention.” Presupposing such substance, Adorno had argued, is problematic not only because “such a substance is in principle hardly identifiable” but specifically because Benjamin is a “complex and fragmentary” author. Adding a dialectical twist, however, Adorno suggests that because Benjamin is “hardly identifiable” by any one category, misunderstandings are inevitable because they “are the medium in which the noncommunicable is communicated.”

This dialectics of misunderstanding illuminates Adorno’s 1955 introduction to the Schriften where he essentializes Benjamin’s complexity to the degree that he becomes totally incompatible. Adorno considered Benjamin’s relationship Marxism and theology as a failed attempt of assimilation based on a fight for discursive authority. Such “helpless assimilation” was doomed to fail, Adorno suggests, because he fell prey to the general loss of spiritual authorities and failed to elevate his incommensurable individuality from “private reflection” to an “objektiven Tendenz und […] veränderner Praxis.” Whatever Adorno meant by “objective tendency,” he creates an image of Benjamin as a genuinely isolated figure, impossible to integrate in society and established systems of thought. His own appropriation of Benjamin for the realm of philosophy appears self-contradictory in this sense. Adorno tries to counter this problem – claiming Benjamin as a philosopher despite the challenge his position posed to official philosophy by drawing on his own reconception of dialectical philosophy. This dialectical appropriation rests on a repeated association of Benjamin with magic and the realm of death: Adorno conjures Benjamin up as a magician in an explicitly literal sense, attributing to him exactly that profession which metaphorically represents apolitical criticism for him in his Kunstwerk essay and which he

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300 Ibid.
301 Ibid., 232.
302 Benjamin, Schriften, XXII.
303 Ibid., XXIIf.
304 Ibid., XXIII, XXIIf.
305 Ibid., 14.
contrasts with academic criticism. In an essentializing way, Adorno characterizes him as a “Zauberer,” equipped with an “Aura des Außerordentlichen” which made him “totally incommensurable.”

Given this isolation, it is not surprising that Adorno considers sadness a defining character trait of Benjamin: In his futile wish for integration lies the reason for his sadness, which Adorno considers specifically Jewish: “Trauer – nicht Traurigkeit – war die Bestimmung seiner Natur als jüdisches Wissen.” Adorno’s Benjamin is characterized by a decentered self whose unity is a mystic “phantasma” and for whom self-identity means “melancholic complacency.” This attribution of melancholy and its association with Benjamin’s Jewishness returns in Arendt’s and Sontag’s portraits, albeit with different, less essentializing – in fact, less sad twists.

Reading Benjamin in speculative, philosophical, theoretical terms remains Adorno’s agenda. In his preface to Tiedemann’s dissertation on Benjamin published ten years after the introduction to Benjamin’s Schriften, Adorno appreciates Tiedemann’s achievement, as he calls it, to interpret and rehabilitate Benjamin as a “Theoretiker[…]” rather than a critic. Since the publication of the first two-volume Benjamin edition (by the Adornos), Benjamin’s work would have been considered “literarkritisch” – an annoying “Cliché,” as Adorno states. Benjamin’s critical, aesthetic dimensions are only seemingly his primary concern, according to Adorno; Actually, he considers them secularized side products of his theory.

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306 Benjamin, Schriften, XXX; cf. Benjamin section above.
308 Benjamin, Schriften, XXIII.
311 Ibid..
312 Ibid..
Accordingly, Adorno only reluctantly included Benjamin’s literary critical works in the *Schriften* – ironically conceding in the same stroke that this decision goes against Benjamin’s self-conception: “Gleichwohl trägt die Ausgabe dem Bedürfnis Rechnung, nicht nur den Philosophen Benjamin zu zeigen, sondern ebenso den Kritiker und ′Literator,′ als den er sich selbst verstand und der aus seinem Bilde von Philosophie nicht fortgedacht werden kann.”313 The editorial goals and limits Adorno outlines in his introduction to the *Schriften* indicate the way he hopes them to be read: Rather than doing justice to Benjamin as someone who died because of persecution through the Nazis or representing Benjamin’s complete works according to critical, academic standards, the *Schriften* aim to present Benjamin as a philosopher.314 The question of why it was important to understand that Benjamin was supposedly a philosopher remains unmotivated. Likewise, Adorno does not explicate his own method and how that differs from literary criticism, which remains itself rather vague beyond the cliché character Adorno attributes to it. As I argued, Adorno’s method could be considered a form of immanent critique that operates “behind” (“hinter”) rather than at or with the surface of his object. Thus, it differs and maintains a marked distance from Benjamin’s method for which the “concrete” material evidence – surface phenomena – are central.

**Scholem on Benjamin**

Like Adorno, Scholem is a significant interlocutor for Arendt and Sontag who draw on, but challenge and develop his mostly biographical, theological method of reading Benjamin. As a point of reference, I therefore provide a sketch of his readings as well. Scholem started publishing

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313 Benjamin, *Schriften*, XXV.
314 Ibid., IX, XXV.
on Benjamin much later than Adorno, releasing three texts between 1965 and 1975.\textsuperscript{315} In a narrative mode of auto-biographically based recollection, Scholem argues in his Leo-Baeck Lecture that Benjamin was essentially a metaphysician: a philosopher of language and history with a strong theological background and orientation.\textsuperscript{316} In contrast to Adorno, Scholem motivates his disagreement with Benjamin personally and concedes the subjectivity of his view of Benjamin.\textsuperscript{317} Emphasizing his close contemporary proximity to Benjamin, Scholem remembers his in-person encounter with him, invoking the historical Benjamin as evidence for the reality of his memory: “I first set eyes on […]”\textsuperscript{318} In contrast to Adorno, Scholem reminds of Benjamin’s impressive liveliness. But like Adorno, whose editorial achievements Scholem points out, he experienced a “profound sadness” and internal conflicts in Benjamin’s personality and work.\textsuperscript{319}

Considering Benjamin’s materialism an aberration, Scholem emphasizes his idiosyncratic, essentially theological mode of philosophy. The “self-willedness of Benjamin’s materialism derives from the discrepancy between his real mode of thought and the materialist one he has ostensibly adopted. His insights are in all essentials still those of the metaphysician […],” Scholem writes.\textsuperscript{320} Specifically Benjamin’s late essays like the “Work of Art” and Baudelaire essays are problematic in Scholem’s opinion, last but not least because of a “baleful […] disastrous” Brechtian influence.\textsuperscript{321}


\textsuperscript{316} Scholem, \textit{On Jews and Judaism}, 185.

\textsuperscript{317} Ibid., 174.

\textsuperscript{318} Ibid., 173.

\textsuperscript{319} Ibid., 174.

\textsuperscript{320} Ibid., 186.

\textsuperscript{321} Ibid., 187-189.
Like Adorno, Scholem observes implicitly a strong *literary* orientation which he considers a *Jewish* quality: Moving from “systematic philosophy” to “commenting on the great works,” Benjamin essentially engaged in a Jewish activity. While he was never exclusively committed to Marxism or the Jewish tradition, the latter was an element at “the root of his being,” in Scholem’s view. Scholem hence bases his argument on an essentialist idea of character, presupposing that there is a *real* Benjamin behind, beyond what he claimed himself. In this sense, Scholem approaches Benjamin from a stance of critique, like Adorno. But he attends to the surface of Benjamin’s work by providing some quotational evidence for his reading: His character shows, Scholem suggests, in some Jewish words and concepts which reappeared throughout Benjamin’s work; for instance “Revelation,” “Redemption,” the messianic and apocalyptical thought, which is at the basis of Benjamin’s “destructiveness,” Scholem argues, explaining his focus on remembrance without a future.

Also, Scholem discusses the role of literature for Benjamin’s writing in more depth than Adorno. While granting it a more central role for Benjamin’s work than Adorno – noting that Benjamin wrote about literature extensively – he argues that Benjamin was not a “conventional” literary critic as “concerned with the structure and value of an important work” but provided “philosophical probings of their specific and […] historical aura.” He notes Benjamin’s preference for collecting, children’s books, for miniatures and microcosms, his aphoristic and yet narrative philosophical style. Scholem considers Benjamin’s singular style in a theological sense as finding a “new beauty of the interpreter’s language, which seems to descend from the language

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323 Ibid., 191ff.
324 Ibid., 193-195, 197.
325 Ibid., 181.
326 Ibid., 175f.
of a recording angel,” creating literally “woven tissues.” Benjamin failed academically because of his vindication of “Allegory” and his essentially theological aesthetic ideas; a merge of the “profane” and “theological” which irritated the academe. Noting a similar profound alienation as Adorno, Scholem considers Benjamin one of the “so-called German-Jewish author[s]” who “knew that they were German writers – but not Germans […] They truly came from foreign parts and knew it.” Like Adorno, Scholem notes Benjamin’s intricate asocial character – a ruthless, radical “pronounced firmness in judging people”, contrasting with his “undogmatic manner of thinking […]” and “Chinese courtesy.”

Scholem’s mode of writing about Benjamin is more personal compared to Adorno’s theoretical approach. That Scholem had a preference for autobiography and narrative rather than theory shows most clearly in his works Freundschaft and From Berlin to Jerusalem. Overall, his claim to the correct interpretation of Benjamin is less pronounced than in Adorno’s case. Still, he critiques Benjamin by reading his work from a theological frame.

2.3.2.c Benjamin in Szondi’s Literary Hermeneutics

While Benjamin did not live to get academic credit (including literal financial credit) for his innovative conception of criticism, Peter Szondi, pace Adorno, rehabilitated some of Benjamin’s thoughts on criticism for literary studies. Where Szondi references the Anglo-American tradition of criticism explicitly as a methodological inspiration, his Benjamin reception

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327 Scholem, On Jews and Judaism, 183.
328 Ibid., 182.
329 Ibid., 182, 185.
330 Ibid., 190.
331 Ibid., 174.
334 Cf. Lützeler, Germanistische Publizistik, 1ff.; Martus and Spoerhase, Geistesarbeit, 207ff.
is key for how he methodologically developed his critical hermeneutics. His two essays on Benjamin show how Szondi develops a method of close reading that has overlaps with Benjamin’s own conception of criticism. In the literary hermeneutics Szondi develops in conversation with Benjamin, hermeneutics and criticism begin to converge, tackling the institutional gap between Literaturkritik and Literaturwissenschaft.

This rehabilitation of Benjamin in the context of literary studies for literary criticism, rather than in Adorno’s or Scholem’s philosophical or metaphysical terms, is ironic because Szondi sided with Adorno in the Benjamin debate. Szondi’s orientation at Adorno’s work was unconventional, if not frowned upon in literary studies in the 1950s when it became available in Europe. In contrast to colleagues with a fascist history like Friedrich Sengle, who published established historicist genres like biographies or epoch studies, Szondi was attracted to how Adorno’s aesthetics accounted for the historicity of form. Specifically Szondi’s early works are considered to be historical-philosophical (geschichtsphilosophische) readings of form. His turn to philology and hermeneutics in the 1960s to reconsider the distinct academic assignment of literary studies could have been motivated by the unpopularity of his Adornian dialectical method amongst Germanistik colleagues. With his Habilitation, Szondi obviously met the disciplinary

335 His most obvious support of Adorno’s position is his solicitation of their contributions to Über Walter Benjamin, the collection of essays based on a series of radio conversations Szondi moderated in 1965 with Adorno, Scholem, Bloch and Rychner, which were first published in the journal Der Monat. Cf. Adorno. Über Walter Benjamin, 173. Cf. also Wesseling. Benjamin Bibliographie, 403. He also provided Adorno and Scholem a stage to give lectures at his institute at the Freie Universität in Berlin in 1967 during the height of the student revolts. Cf. Riechers, Szondi Biographie, 92, 189, 194.
336 Riechers, Szondi Biographie, 34ff., 57, 62.
337 Riechers, Szondi Biographie, 47ff., 39; Martus and Spoerhase, Geistesarbeit, 29ff.
339 Riechers, Szondi Biographie, 41, 51, 100; Martus and Spoerhase, Geistesarbeit, 144f.
but how much Szondi’s rehabilitation of a literary hermeneutics remained dialectical in Adorno’s sense is a matter of debate.\footnote{Cf. Martus and Spoerhase, Geistesarbeit, 153f.; Riechers, Szondi Biographie, 100, 113; Szondi, Introduction, xvii.} Certainly, Benjamin is relevant for it.

Initiated by an early reading of one of the mimeographed copies of On the Concept of History, Szondi did editorial and essayistic work on Benjamin in the 1960s.\footnote{Riechers argues that Szondi departed from Adorno while Thouard reads Szondi’s philology as a dialectical project. Cf. Riechers, Szondi Biographie, 104; Thouard, “Die Dialektik,” 46f.} While his editorial engagement for Benjamin was in close proximity to Adorno and Scholem, the theoretical and methodical reverberations of Benjamin’s work in Szondi’s rethinking of a literary hermeneutics move beyond them.\footnote{Cf. Wesseling, Benjamin Bibliographie, 125; Riechers, Szondi Biographie, 90f.; Witte, Benjamin, 185.} Overall, Szondi’s “literary hermeneutics” was precisely a project of disciplinary distinction not only from positivist historical and empirical sciences but also from philosophy. Like for Benjamin, “Deutung” was the business of literary criticism for Szondi while it was philosophical for Adorno.\footnote{Riechers, Szondi Biographie, 102, 105, 90-93.}

Connected to this difference is that Szondi was not primarily a theoretician but a practitioner.\footnote{Riechers, Szondi Biographie, 101; Thouard, “Die Dialektik,” 36, 44-47; Eva Geulen, “‘The Primacy of the Object’: Adorno’s Aesthetic Theory and the Return of Form,” New German Critique 48, no. 2 (2021): 5–21, https://doi.org/10.1215/0094033X-8989204, 15.} While Szondi was theoretically inclined, theory appears in his works always tied to an object and as a dynamic activity.\footnote{Martus and Spoerhase, Geistesarbeit, 168f.} Adorno, and the Institute for Social Research more broadly, inspired Szondi’s philosophical, theoretical vocabulary but Benjamin provided methodical clues for Szondi’s material hermeneutics. For instance, Adorno provides a key phrase for Szondi’s method of “Versenkung in die Werke, in ‘die Logik ihres Produziertseins’” but exactly this phrase also invokes Benjamin’s conception of criticism in the romanticist sense of

\footnote{Martus and Spoerhase, Geistesarbeit, 169, 171. Unlike Adorno, Szondi never wrote an aesthetic or literary theory.}
completion of works of art. Szondi also performs this immersive act differently than Adorno, namely through quotation.

His *Hölderlin-Studien* show paradigmatically how quotation becomes Szondi’s pivotal tool to attend to the singular, particular quality of the literary work of art without explaining it away through the “Parallelstellenmethode” whose application Szondi complicates in the *Studien* as a pseudo-scientific. Indeed, Szondi distinguishes literary hermeneutics by a specific citational style: As Szondi argues, the most important difference between literary and historical objects is that while the latter are matters of the past and need to be re-presented, the former are always already present; The “Gegenwart des Kunstwerks” (like “ein Sonett des Andreas Gryphius”) is a given in contrast to a historical event like the “Dreißigjährige Krieg.” The difference between history and literary criticism is therefore one of representation: While history can draw on mimesis, literary studies has to facilitate an encounter with the literary object and expose its claims to the reader’s scrutiny. In this sense, Szondi’s literary hermeneutics is dialectical and reader-oriented like in Benjamin’s provocative, stimulating criticism. This overlap also shows in the didactic orientation implied in Szondi’s hermeneutics. The educational potential of quotation is to anchor any interpretive act in the object and make it available to the reader (or student, for that matter):

Kein Kommentar, keine stilkritische Untersuchung eines Gedichts darf sich das Ziel setzen, eine Beschreibung des Gedichts herzustellen, die für sich aufzufassen wäre. Noch deren unkritischster Leser wird sie mit dem Gedicht konfrontieren wollen, sie allererst verstehen, wenn er die Behauptungen wieder in die Erkenntnisse aufgelöst hat, aus denen sie hervorgegangen.

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349 Szondi, “Traktat,” 265.
351 Szondi, “Traktat,” 266.
The idea behind this imperative of confrontation is that literary studies produces a kind of knowing, rather than knowledge: “Das philologische Wissen hat seinen Ursprung, die Erkenntis, nie verlassen, Wissen ist hier perpetuierte Erkenntnis.”

Szondi offers the metaphor of the key for interpretation: “Interpretationen sind hier Schlüssel“ but, like in Benjamin’s preservation of the work’s “enigma,” they should unlock the literary “door” in a way that shows its hermetic, encrypted character: The text should be understood “in der Entschlüsselung als verschlüsseltes.”

In his discussion of a Hölderlin poem, Szondi demonstrates how such unlocking has to work with the language of the literature itself by citing it. Providing quotations is the critical methodical correlate to what in a scientific sense is a “proof.” But rather than “Beweise,” quotes work as “Hinweise” which provide evidence of a certain kind:

Evidenz aber ist das adäquate Kriterium, dem sich die philologische Erkenntnis zu unterwerfen hat. In der Evidenz wird die Sprache der Tatsachen weder überhört, noch in ihrer Verdinglichung mißverstanden, sondern als subjektiv bedingte und in der Erkenntnis subjektiv vermittelte vernommen, also allererst in ihrer wahren Objektivität.

As I mentioned earlier, evidence is a central characteristic of Benjamin’s work according to Adorno. But in contrast to Adorno, from whom he might have adopted the term, Szondi provides evidence in a more concrete way than Adorno, namely quotationally. In Szondi’s criticism, the interpreting subject exposes their reading to the reader’s test by appealing to the text’s evidence through quotation. Thus, Szondi’s conception of the criticism invokes what Benjamin called the control of subjectivity in the romantic critic’s work: A critical reading has to prove self-evident; the text itself has to convince of the critic’s interpretation.

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353 Ibid., 266.
354 Ibid., 280.
355 Ibid., 281. The criterion of evidence also holds for parallel passages: “Die Parallelstelle muß sich wie jeder andere Beleg über ihren Belegcharakter erst ausweisen.” This is important because Szondi locates in the “Parallelstellenmethode“ a tendency to try to prove an interpretation by enlisting comparable passages without attending to the singularity of each.
Szondi’s two essays on Benjamin, “Hoffnung im Vergangenen. Über Walter Benjamin” (1961) and “Benjamins Städtebilder” (1963), are paradigmatic examples of how Szondi’s interpretive method operates very close to the text.\textsuperscript{356} Truly reading Benjamin \textit{closely}, Szondi shows the singularity of individual passages while also linking them in order to make an argument about dominant themes.\textsuperscript{357} In their citational proximity to the text, they substantiate Szondi’s orientation at the critical method coined by I.A. Richards and could be considered examples of surface reading.

Therefore, these two essays also illuminate how Szondi developed a genuinely \textit{critical} literary hermeneutic; How criticism and hermeneutics converged in his reading of literature. The central operations guiding Szondi’s interpretations are comparison and differentiation; very much in the sense of how he envisions it in the “Traktat”: “Scheiden und Entscheiden.”\textsuperscript{358} For instance, in his first Benjamin essay, “Hoffnung im Vergangenem,” Szondi explores the “Eigenart des Benjaminschen Werkes” by contrasting Benjamin’s \textit{Berliner Kindheit} with Proust’s \textit{A la Recherche du temps perdu} and Rilke’s writing on childhood memory.\textsuperscript{359} While Szondi notes significant parallels between these writers like their political persecution through rising fascism, along with their concern with memory, he emphasizes that they are still not “dasselbe.”\textsuperscript{360}

Szondi shows the differences (between the three authors’ conceptualization of time and their concern with childhood memory) by contrasting an exceptional number of block quotes (on average, thirty percent of each page consists of quotes).\textsuperscript{361} The progression from commonality to distinction reads as if Szondi were disproving his own first impression of identity: Exposing the

\textsuperscript{357} Szondi “Traktat,” 450ff.  
\textsuperscript{358} Ibid., 266.  
\textsuperscript{359} Szondi, “Hoffnung im Vergangenen,” 276.  
\textsuperscript{360} Ibid., 280.  
\textsuperscript{361} Ibid., 275-295.
“Gemeinsamkeit” as “bloß ein Schein,” he emphasizes the non-identical, in Adorno’s sense (who in this point lingers with Szondi’s hermeneutics). While Proust sought to escape time by reviving the affects of his childhood, Benjamin embraced temporality and sought to capture the future planted in the past.

With Benjamin, Szondi distinguishes two main options of how to read here which nuances the opposition between historical depth and aesthetic surface of the current debate: While Proust models the desire for an ahistorical collapse of time (into space, i.e. surface), Benjamin searches for a (deep) historical experience of the past as future. Benjamin’s historical perspective characterizes, according to Szondi, not only his autobiographical writing but his work per se. Generally, Szondi suggests that Benjamin’s work accounts for the subjective condition of literary knowledge instead of reaching for pseudo-scientific objectivity. Depth, in Szondi’s sense, is linked to a subjective historical perspectivity that links past and future. In contrast to the current debate’s dismissal of “depth” approaches along with any kind of historicality, Szondi presents with Benjamin a notion of historical reading that is neither pseudo-scientific (which Best and Marcus orientation at the sciences risks to be) nor ahistorical (as Jameson’s “always historicize” tends to be read).

Szondi’s second Benjamin essay, “Städtebilder,” nuances the opposition between depth and surface further. Quoting a reflection by Benjamin on two different ways to write about cities, Szondi argues that what Benjamin differentiates as the exoticizing, superficial gaze of the stranger from the local’s deep dive into the cities past does not actually match Benjamin’s own city

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363 Ibid., 297, 282, 286.
364 Ibid., 280.
365 Ibid., 288-291.
366 Ibid., 290.
writings: “keineswegs können die Wörter ‘oberflächlich’ und ‘tief’ zur Klassifizierung von Bejinamins eigenen Schilderungen herhalten.”367 In contrast, Benjamin links depth and surface in his city writings, which Szondi classifies as “Porträts.”368 Where any trip to the past is also always a trip to into the distance and vice versa (any trip abroad is always also a trip to the past, or future for that matter), Benjamin’s portraits (of cities in this case) and his Berliner Kindheit demonstrate for Szondi how this writing is premised on distance: “Benjamins Berlinbuch zeugt von der konstitutiven Rolle der Distanz.”369

Where the portrait transpires as a genre that plays with distance in a temporal and spatial sense, Szondi’s own writing on Benjamin could also be read as a negotiation of proximity and distance through quotation. Titled “Hoffnung im Vergangenen. Über Walter Benjamin [CM],“ the quotationally rich survey of major works by Benjamin provided in his earlier essay of 1961 does not so much read as a text about Benjamin but rather a text written with him. Throughout, Szondi maintains a clear distance by explicitly setting the quotes of from his own voice.370 Beginning with a page long block quote, Szondi integrates Benjamin quotes in smaller blocks that provide passages based on which Szondi develops his argument, albeit without much commentary on the passages. They are invested with the aforementioned criterion of evidence as Szondi laconically clarifies: “Wir haben viel zitiert und brauchen nun doch nur wenig zu kommentieren. Denn die Abschnitte aus der Berliner Kindheit beantworten selber die Frage nach dem Unterschied zwischen Prousts und Benjamins Suche nach der verlorenen Zeit.371

368 Ibid., 295f.
369 Ibid., 296f.
371 Ibid., 285.
Considering Szondi’s search for a nuanced historical aesthetics in the context of his literary hermeneutics, he not only invests the quotes with the power to show their differences in their conception of time themselves but also to yield the historical time from which they emerged. This, at least, is suggested at the end of “Städtebilder” where Szondi provides one explicit historical contextualization; a dense sketch of the biographical conditions of Benjamin’s work and the specific context of the texts considered.\(^{372}\) Most importantly, Szondi marks Benjamin’s conflict with the academic world as his most significant experience as it forced, or rather allowed him to develop his singular kind of literary and journalistic work. Where Szondi emphasizes that this work is as important as his academic publications, he rehabilitates Benjamin’s criticism and thus departs from Adorno who dismissed it.\(^{373}\) Indeed, the fact that his historicization serves exactly a claim that challenges Adorno’s reading suggests that he moves beyond it, which the prominence of quotes in his close reading method supports. With Szondi, Benjamin’s criticism makes its entry into German academic literary studies both as an object of interest for the discipline but also methodologically. Benjamin’s work thus receives belated academic acknowledgment through Szondi that also provides links to the current debate. The mode of close reading transpiring with Szondi’s Benjamin reception prepares the way to consider Arendt’s and Sontag’s critical methods as transpiring in their portraits. Drawing on the theoretical, terminological tools and historical reference points I provided in this chapter via the current debate on criticism, Szondi and the *Merkur* debate, I will explore where Arendt’s and Sontag’s portraits are situated between the poles of critique versus close reading, depth versus surface, historical distanciation and aesthetic attachment.

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\(^{373}\) Ibid., 308f.
Chapter 3: Arendt’s Benjamin Portrait – Archival Approximation

“this person’s mind would stand revealed as having been forced to turn full circle not once but twice, first when he escaped from thought into action, and then again when action, or rather having acted, forced him back into thought.”

Quotation is as central to Arendt’s Benjamin portrait as to Szondi’s. Indeed, one of the first versions of her Benjamin portrait is titled, reminding of Szondi’s citational principle, “Hinweis auf Walter Benjamin.” But Arendt’s hints at Benjamin differ from Szondi’s: quotations receive so much agency in answering the critic’s question in Arendt’s portrait that object and critic at points seem to merge, creating the aforementioned “mimicry” effect. Yet, Arendt does more than quote Benjamin; much more, as this chapter shows.

In the following, I examine the production and publication history of Arendt’s Benjamin portrait to understand what Szondi calls with Adorno the “Logik des Produziertseins” by first attending to the text’s Logik des Produziert-Werdens. Thereby, I show that Arendt’s intervention in the Merkur debate precedes the debate itself significantly and moves beyond it by developing a distinct transatlantic interpretive and editorial method in conversation with Benjamin. To understand the history of the portrait, I contextualize it in Arendt’s editorial work of the post-war period and trace its genesis in her correspondence, reading, drafting, and note-taking. I argue that Arendt’s portrait is closely linked to her energetic editorial work driven by a passionate investment in rethinking and recreating a specific kind of German Jewish tradition. Only secondarily was her portrait written for the Merkur debate of 1967/1968. However, in her editorial work, Arendt anticipated the debate’s criticism of Adorno’s (and the Frankfurt School’s and Scholem’s) editorial

and interpretive practices in the 1940s. Her editorial efforts sought to counter the distortion of Benjamin’s works before she wrote her portrait in the 1960s, in which she translated her editorial principles into a distinct critical style that is in some respects similar to but significantly moves beyond Szondi’s academic methodological concerns.

### 3.1 Editorial Agenda

Hannah Arendt came to the US as a stateless refugee, seeking survival from fascist persecution.\(^\text{375}\) Also, she sought to save works by her friend Benjamin, who had asked her to hand over some of his manuscripts to Adorno.\(^\text{376}\) Inconsolable about Benjamin’s death in 1940, this editorial task quickly turned into an editorial mission as Arendt became increasingly worried about the Institute for Social Research’s handling of Benjamin’s estate.\(^\text{377}\) Arendt’s skepticism about the Institute’s editorial politics was grounded in her own determined editorial engagement and driven by her political investment in rescuing a specific Jewish European cultural tradition. Her editorial work started with her book on Rahel Varnhagen before the war in Germany and continued, with heightened urgency, in US exile in the 1940s. Her efforts to preserve, publish, and promote Benjamin’s works can be read as a paradigmatic case of the kind of work Arendt performed in the US upon arrival in New York City in 1941, illuminating how she fought for reviving what she called a “hidden tradition” of Jewish thought, literature and art.\(^\text{378}\) In turn, attending to Arendt’s editorial work in the immediate postwar years is crucial for a nuanced, in-depth understanding of the genesis of her Benjamin portrait’s style and argument.

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Upon arrival in New York in 1941, Arendt immediately immersed herself in the local Jewish intellectual scene, seeking connections that would allow her to proceed with the intellectual and practical political work for Jewish causes she had engaged in during her French exile.\(^{379}\) After a short stay with a family in Massachusetts in the summer of 1941 where Arendt intended to improve her English, she successfully found a place for her first English article on the Dreyfuss affair with eminent Jewish history scholar Salo W. Baron in his journal *Jewish Social Studies*.\(^{380}\) Using material she had collected in Paris, Arendt continued her theoretical and historical-sociological work on antisemitism she had started in French exile, which ultimately resulted in her English debut and first postwar monograph *Origins of Totalitarianism* in 1951.\(^{381}\) Along with continuing her academic work, Arendt soon secured a position as a columnist for the newspaper *Aufbau*, a German language journal founded by the New York German Club in 1924, which became an important political platform for German Jewish immigrants.\(^{382}\)

Arendt’s relationship to the academic world had been conflicted before and during the German fascist regime – as a Jewish woman, her chances for an academic career were very low – and she remained committed to the broader public at least as much as to the academic world throughout her life. Her trans-academic perspective countered the “déformation professionelle” of contemplative philosophy practiced in academic isolation, which resulted in severe political aberration in Heidegger’s case.\(^{383}\)


Arendt had become acquainted with *Aufbau* through her friend Kurt Blumenfeld, who also had introduced her to Zionism before the war during her studies in Germany.\textsuperscript{384} Between 1941 and fall 1942, Arendt contributed articles to *Aufbau* that addressed her increasing concerns about the development of Zionist politics.\textsuperscript{385} Although the last article of her column “This Means You” on “The Crisis of Zionism” appeared in November 1942, she continued challenging the Zionist mainstream, arguing for confederation of the Mediterranean peoples instead of a Jewish nation state.\textsuperscript{386} Arendt’s relationship to Zionism remained highly ambivalent, resulting in her first (and ultimately the fatal second Eichmann-trial related) severe conflict with Gershom Scholem upon her 1945 article “Zionism Reconsidered” based on Arendt’s lack of unconditional affirmation of the need for a Jewish state.\textsuperscript{387} Scholem and Arendt had first met during her French exile in 1935 and 1938 through Benjamin.\textsuperscript{388} After Benjamin’s death, of which Arendt informed Scholem, they collaborated and corresponded continually because both were strongly invested and involved in efforts to rescue, restitute and preserve European Jewish cultural heritage that started in the mid-1940s in the US.\textsuperscript{389} From 1944 to 1946, Arendt worked for the “Conference on Jewish Relations,” a scholarly group led by Salo Baron which formed in 1933 and studied modern antisemitism.\textsuperscript{390} Beginning in 1943, the Conference shifted its focus to planning the restitution of European Jewish property and


\textsuperscript{388} Meyer, *Arendt*, 253f.


heritage after the Second World War and formed a transnational “Commission on European Jewish Cultural Reconstruction.”\textsuperscript{391} The Commission compiled a list of “Jewish Cultural Treasures in Axis-Occupied Countries” which appeared in the conference journal Jewish Social Studies between 1946 and 1948, with addenda and supplementary lists on publishers, periodicals, and educational institutions.\textsuperscript{392} The commission’s agenda was to “investigate the manifold, complex problems of the cultural reconstruction of European Jewry after the devastation of the Second World War” with a specific focus on “libraries, museums, and archives and upon all phases of Jewish education.” While culture was understood broadly, including “communal reconstruction” in a wider sense, the commission intended to rehabilitate, restore, reconstruct and redistribute specifically “Jewish cultural institutions” concerned with archiving, preserving and promoting objects of Jewish education, thought, literature and art.\textsuperscript{393} The commission was approved by the American government and legitimized to organize the restitution of looted goods, most of which were collected in an archive in Offenbach (Main) after the war.\textsuperscript{394} The commission collaborated with the Cultural Committee of the Joint Distribution Committee and the American Association for Jewish Education and was partly funded by the American Jewish Committee.\textsuperscript{395}

From 1948 to 1952, Arendt directed the “Jewish Cultural Reconstruction.”\textsuperscript{396} To recover Jewish cultural heritage, Arendt traveled to Europe for the first time after the war for sixth months...

\textsuperscript{391} Arendt, \textit{Der Briefwechsel}, 634ff.; Young-Bruehl, \textit{Arendt}, 187; Meyer, \textit{Arendt}, 245ff.


\textsuperscript{393} Commission, “Tentative List,” 6.

\textsuperscript{394} Meyer, \textit{Arendt}, 247-250.

\textsuperscript{395} Commission, “Tentative List,” 5.

\textsuperscript{396} Young-Bruehl, \textit{Arendt}, 188.
between 1949 and 1950 and a second time in 1952.\footnote{Cf. Meyer, \textit{Arendt}, 251 with updated numbers compared to Young-Bruehl, \textit{Arendt}, 188; cf. also Meyer, \textit{Arendt}, 247-255.} Drawing on her intimate knowledge of the German intellectual landscape and its academic institutions, Arendt approached libraries and archives asking them to return Jewish cultural objects and art that had been looted by the Nazis.\footnote{Arendt, \textit{Der Briefwechsel}, 635f.; Meyer, \textit{Arendt}, 247-255.}

Her investment in transferring this heritage to Israel was less grounded in political Zionism than in pragmatic, cultural politics aimed at reviving and renewing Jewish life and culture after the “break with tradition” by making available and apparent the material basis of what she coined as the “Hidden Tradition.”\footnote{Arendt, \textit{Der Briefwechsel}, 609, 613; Arendt, \textit{Sechs Essays}, 184-204 and 379-395; Bernstein, “Hannah Arendts Zionism?”, 194, 198, 200f.} Indeed, her work for the Zionist movement often pertained to cultural preservation and rescue. At the beginning and end of her involvement she used academic resources at her disposal for political work against fascism: In 1933, she collected and copied anti-Semitic material from the Prussian State Library as documentation for the German Zionists. In New York, she took advantage of her broad intellectual network in and comprehensive knowledge of Europe and its academic institutions to direct the rescue work of the “Jewish Cultural Reconstruction.”\footnote{Arendt, \textit{Der Briefwechsel}, 632-637.} Zionist organizations allowed her to turn her intellectual skills into political work. Indeed, her intellectual and practical work are closely intertwined, as a postwar Curriculum Vitae shows in which she motivates her turn from intellectual to practical work and back again by her overarching concern with antisemitism: “um mir auf praktische Weise eine Übersicht über die Judenfrage zu verschaffen.”\footnote{Meyer, \textit{Arendt}, 19, 252.} The motivation for her Zionist activism came from her own experience of the growing antisemitism in Germany during the 1920s and her belief in the importance of political resistance and systemic change.\footnote{Arendt, \textit{Der Briefwechsel}, 612.} That purpose conflicted with the movement’s plans to build a

\begin{footnotesize}
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\footnote{Cf. Meyer, \textit{Arendt}, 251 with updated numbers compared to Young-Bruehl, \textit{Arendt}, 188; cf. also Meyer, \textit{Arendt}, 247-255.}
\footnote{Arendt, \textit{Der Briefwechsel}, 635f.; Meyer, \textit{Arendt}, 247-255.}
\footnote{Arendt, \textit{Der Briefwechsel}, 632-637.}
\footnote{Meyer, \textit{Arendt}, 19, 252.}
\footnote{Arendt, \textit{Der Briefwechsel}, 612.}
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Jewish nation-state on Palestinian territory, which Arendt strongly disagreed with.\(^{403}\) She considered Jewish self-assertion and self-defence essential (proposing the idea of forming a Jewish army during World War Two, for example), and she hoped for a Jewish “homeland” in Palestine as a “‘cultural center’” – but she objected to the building of a Jewish state.\(^ {404}\)

Along with her more administrative, political work for the “Jewish Cultural Reconstruction,” Arendt’s commitment to cultural preservation appears in her editorial work which brought her together with Schocken.\(^ {405}\) Even before he approached the “Conference on Jewish Relations”, Arendt knew Schocken from the German Zionist circles Kurt Blumenfeld introduced her to.\(^ {406}\) Schocken employed Arendt as a senior editor at Schocken Books from 1946 to 1948.\(^ {407}\) But her perspective on preserving and promoting European Jewish literary heritage differed from Schocken’s.\(^ {408}\) Characteristic of Arendt’s perspective were two early essays in which she argued for embracing Jewish identity as the paradigmatic quintessence of human dignity. Rather than attempting to assimilate into a target culture, Arendt demands in “We Refugees,” (1943) that Jews should “keep their identity.”\(^ {409}\) Similarly, in her 1944 article “The Jew as Pariah: A Hidden Tradition,”\(^ {410}\) Arendt investigates how the Weberian notion of the “pariah” – the ultimate “social outcast” – connects the work of seemingly assimilated Jews like Heine, Kafka, Lazare and Chaplin. Arendt emphasized the urgency of claiming such authors as Jewish “pariahs” specifically because “other peoples” have claimed them for the sake of “assimilationist
propagandists” and “dubious ideologies.” The insight she gained in her work for “Jewish Cultural Reconstruction,” arguably informed her criticism:

there has been a tendency in recent years to compile long lists of European worthies who might conceivably claim Jewish descent, but […] they have not succeeded in reclaiming for the Jews any single writer of note unless he happen to have written specifically in Hebrew or Yiddish.\footnote{Arendt, \textit{Sechs Essays}, 184f. For all preceding quotes.}

Rather than limiting what “Jewish” means to these languages, Arendt calls for a more nuanced approach. She suggests to attend to Jewish work that has achieved to “transcend the bounds of nationality” and to “weave […] Jewish genius into the general texture of European life.” In other words, Arendt sought to claim as Jewish specifically the work by those Jews who were deeply ingrained in a transnational European intellectual and cultural history. In turn, Arendt conceptualizes Europe as genuinely Jewish – her goal is the “admission of Jews as Jews to the ranks of humanity.”\footnote{Ibid. For all preceding quotes.} By applying the notion of \textit{tradition} exactly to a transnational Jewish lineage of “pariah” art, literature, and thought characterized by pariahdom, Arendt contributed to constructing Jewish cultural identity while also rethinking the notion of tradition as a linking of unassimilable singulars.\footnote{Bernd Auerochs, “Tradition,” in \textit{Metzler Literatur Lexikon}, 776.} Paradoxically, utmost separation becomes the defining quality of a \textit{tradition} here – which is a concept of transtemporal and –spatial connectivity. This is possible because “The Jew as Pariah” is an interpretive act that constructs a literary history. Arendt identifies “forms” and “types” in the works by Heine, Kafka, Lazare and Chaplin which she takes to illustrate “the concept of the pariah as a human type.”\footnote{Arendt, \textit{Sechs Essays}, 185.} The analytic result of Arendt’s interpretive linking are two promising forces for successful Jewish emancipation: “imagination” and community. Arendt argues that while the authors discussed achieved “emancipation of their
own” by imagining in a pariah mode, they “separated from their own people and lost contact.”

She demonstrates her emphasis on thinking in terms of community despite being thrown into the outlaw status of utmost social separation in the first person plural title of “We Refugees [emphasis CM].”

Facilitating “contact” to build community was a major goal of her editorial work. This includes her effort to translate, aimed at making the “hidden tradition” of Jewish pariah thought apparent and accessible transnationally. Along with the above-mentioned authors, Benjamin was one of the prime writers Arendt hoped to publish in this context with Schocken, beginning in October 1941: “Ich frage mich, ob man nicht die geschichtsphilosophischen Thesen […] bei Schocken herausgeben könnte.”

Schocken had been the owner of one of the most successful department store chains in Weimar Germany and a publishing house, Schocken Verlag, which he had to abandon to the Nazis in 1938. When he moved into exile, he transferred the publishing house to Tel Aviv and in 1940 quickly expanded to the US. The programmatic focus of the house was culturally Zionist, fostering the revitalization of Jewish tradition and its performative display, for instance through an attractive series of classical Judaica collected in “Schocken Bücherei” and its American successor Schocken Library. Indeed, Schocken’s main agenda was to recreate the Jewish “high-

415 Arendt, Sechs Essays, 184.
416 Arendt, “We Refugees,” 274.
417 Arendt cultivated connections between Jewish and also non-Jewish literature shows in her own correspondence with Thomas Mann concerning the “Jew as Pariah” essay in which Mann, however, does not seem to have understood that Arendt is precisely interested in the concept of the pariah as a Jewish concept. (He suggests that his own work is also concerned with the issue in terms of the artist’s alienation from the burgherly world, as exemplified by his character Tonio Kröger, for instance. It is unknown whether Arendt responded.) Arendt, Sechs Essays, 382.
418 Letter to Scholem of October 17, 1941. Arendt, Der Briefwechsel, 19.
420 Krah, “Exporting,” 105f.
brow” cultural canon he had started building in his Berlin publishing house.\textsuperscript{422} But Schocken entered an economic “existential crisis” around 1950 partly because he failed to adapt his program to his new US American audience.\textsuperscript{423} Publishing mostly translations of books which Schocken already owned the copy rights to, the house did not cater to the US audience’s current concerns like Jewish identity amidst the civil rights movement and Cold War politics, for instance.\textsuperscript{424} Arendt considered Schocken “‘essentially a publisher of translations,’”\textsuperscript{425} and her editorial ideas challenged his focus on Judaica. Many of her projects that bridged Jewish and non-Jewish traditions, which concerned a variety of topics, ranging from translation to totalitarianism, were never realized.\textsuperscript{426} She jokingly considered him a publisher who “‘does not like to publish.’”\textsuperscript{427}

As programmatically indicated in “The Jew as Pariah,” Arendt was committed to redrafting a narrative of Jewish cultural self-conception after the experience of the “Death End of German Jewry.”\textsuperscript{428} An important idea for her as an editor became the “significance” of Jewish literary heritage – which Arendt considered conditioned by a transnational mode of reception. Already the title of her \textit{Aufbau} column, “This Means You,” demonstrated Arendt’s audience focus.

According to a programmatic talk at the “American Jewish Committee” of 1947, titled \textit{Creating a Cultural Atmosphere}, Arendt’s editorial endeavour was to create a Jewish “cultural atmosphere”\textsuperscript{429} – with a strong emphasis on “atmosphere” to indicate that she agreed with \textit{Commentary} editor Elliot Cohen that what was needed was “a ‘culture for Jews,’ but not a Jewish

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\begin{itemize}
\item Krah, “Exporting,” 102.
\item Ibid., 102, 110f.
\item Ibid., 108, 112, 113.
\item Ibid., 103, 105, 108.
\item Young-Bruehl, \textit{Arendt}, 189.
\item Arendt, \textit{Der Briefwechsel}, 626.
\item For this reason, Arendt had already called for the establishment of a Jewish cultural magazine before her employment at Schocken. Cf. Hahn and Knott, \textit{Von den Dichtern}, 22.
\end{itemize}
In the talk, later printed in *Commentary*, Arendt articulates her idea that Jewish literature, specifically “Yiddish writers of Eastern Europe” needed a transnational afterlife because the “cultural value of every author or artist really begins to make itself felt when he transcends the boundaries of his own nationality, when he no longer remains significant only to his fellow-Jews, fellow-Frenchmen or fellow-Englishmen.” What Arendt suggests here is that the relevance of literature rises and falls with the national diversity of its audience. Her criterion for good literature – valuable literature – is that it is transnationally read.

While Arendt does not elaborate on the exact conditions of transnational significance or how it can be achieved, her editorial engagement before, during and after her employment at Schocken Books demonstrates her belief that it was possible to make writers transnationally significant through creating access to their work by preserving, translating, promoting and publishing it. Ever since her first editorial experience which dates back to her book on Rahel Varnhagen, Arendt was highly sensitive to the ethical implications, risks and consequences of such editorial mediation. She was driven to write the Rahel book in response to what she considered unethical editorial politics. In her research on this book, which, as her second book, was supposed to be her *Habilitation*, Arendt discovered substantial editorial distortions of Varnhagen’s work by her husband who managed her estate after her death. During one of her first assignments at Schocken Books – editing the American edition of Franz Kafka’s diaries – she was again

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confronted with the substantial editorial infringements by Kafka’s friend Max Brod who had, against Kafka’s will, managed and published his estate.\footnote{Krah, “Exporting,” 29; Young-Bruehl, Arendt, 189; cf. Letter Arendt to Zohn, 24 February 1967, HAP: Correspondence, General, miscellaneous, 1960 to 1970, Manuscript/Mixed Material, https://www.loc.gov/item/mss1105600301/.

\footnotetext[435]{Benjamin, Arendt und Benjamin, 146; 162; Meyer, Arendt, 254f.  
\footnotetext[436]{The committee had suggested Stern should write on music theory despite Adorno’s prolific Marxist work in the same field. Cf. Dirk Auer, Lars Rensmann, and Julia Schulze Wessel, eds., Arendt und Adorno (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2003), 8f.; Young-Bruehl, Arendt, 80, 83.  
\footnotetext[437]{Young-Bruehl, Arendt, 80. Meyer, Arendt, 254f.; 299.  
\footnotetext[438]{Young-Bruehl, Arendt, 167; Benjamin, Arendt und Benjamin, 17.  
\footnotetext[439]{Young-Bruehl, Arendt, 166f.; Benjamin, Arendt und Benjamin, 146.}

Arendt feared that the editorial distortion that occurred in Varnhagen’s and Kafka’s cases could happen to Walter Benjamin.\footnote{Letter Arendt to Scholem of March 31, 1945. Cf. Benjamin, Arendt und Benjamin, 161.} This fear was grounded in two formative negative experiences she had made with Adorno, to whom Benjamin had entrusted with his estate.\footnote{Benjamin, Arendt und Benjamin, 146; 162; Meyer, Arendt, 254f.} In the late 1920s, Adorno had been part of the academic committee in Frankfurt (Main) that steered Arendt’s first husband Günther Stern (later Anders) into an unsuccessful attempt at submitting his second academic book.\footnote{The committee had suggested Stern should write on music theory despite Adorno’s prolific Marxist work in the same field. Cf. Dirk Auer, Lars Rensmann, and Julia Schulze Wessel, eds., Arendt und Adorno (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2003), 8f.; Young-Bruehl, Arendt, 80, 83.} Upon her first encounter with him, she is said to have announced in principled antipathy against Adorno: “‘Der kommt uns nicht ins Haus!’”\footnote{Young-Bruehl, Arendt, 80. Meyer, Arendt, 254f.; 299.} Arendt’s second indirect encounter with Adorno, about ten years later in the late thirties, increased her impression of his misuse of academic power: In Paris exile, Benjamin had expressed his fear of losing the Institute’s for Social Research’s financial support based on his methodical and theoretical disagreements mainly with Adorno, specifically in the case of his work on Baudelaire.\footnote{Young-Bruehl, Arendt, 167; Benjamin, Arendt und Benjamin, 17.} Nevertheless, Arendt handed over the documents Benjamin had entrusted her with to Adorno immediately upon her arrival in New York.\footnote{Young-Bruehl, Arendt, 166f.; Benjamin, Arendt und Benjamin, 146.} When she learned that the Institute would not publish Benjamin’s work any time soon, she became increasingly angry as she considered it a matter of “Loyalitaet gegen den toten Freund und Mitarbeiter” to publish “jede von ihm zur
Veroeffentlichung bestimmte Sache,” as she wrote to Günther Anders. She considered herself responsible for Benjamin’s estate and felt unjustly excluded from a debate she wanted to participate in, as she complains that Adorno “es […] nicht fuer noetig haelt, mich auf dem Laufenden zu halten.” Convinced of the importance of her contribution to preserving Benjamin’s work, specifically the “geschichtsphilosophische Thesen,” Arendt envisioned an American Benjamin edition early on, which she hoped to realize with Schocken even preceding her employment at his publishing house: To Schølem, she writes in a long letter laying out the chronology of her last encounter with Benjamin, on October 17, 1941:

Das Institut hat den Nachlass, wagt aber vorläufig nichts in deutscher Sprache zu veröffentlichlen. Ich frage mich, ob man nicht die geschichtsphilosophischen Thesen unabhängig davon bei Schocken herausgeben könnte. Er hat mir das Manuskript geschenkt und das Institut hat es erst durch mich erhalten.

While demonstrating that she was sincerely interested in sharing what she had been able to save from Benjamin with the Institute (The Theses), and while acknowledging Benjamin’s endowment of his estate to the Institute – “Er war dem Institut ausdrücklich von ihm hinterlassen worden” – Arendt becomes increasingly frustrated with Adorno’s attitude in her private correspondence of the 1940s. She was deeply concerned that the Institute would “bury” manuscripts she considered important, and even suspected they would plagiarize Benjamin: “Wiesengrund und Konsorten schreiben inzwischen die ‘Flaschenpost für die Zukunft’ [Dialektik der Aufklärung; CM]; ich nehme an, dass sie dabei manche Anregung aus dem ‘Safe‘ empfangen.” Between 1941 and 1950, Arendt and Schølem collaborate intensively to preserve and publish Benjamin’s works.

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441 In a letter to G. Anders of August 7, 1941. Cf. Benjamin, Arendt und Benjamin, 150.
442 Benjamin, Arendt und Benjamin, 155-159; Arendt, Der Briefwechsel, 19.
443 Benjamin, Arendt und Benjamin, 146, 162.
444 Ibid., 146-174.
445 Ibid., 146, 157.
446 Ibid., 159.
447 Meyer, Arendt, 254f.
Both sought collaboration with Adorno but were highly irritated by his irregular and untransparent communication. Scholem even suggests that Arendt should increase the pressure:


The confusion and frustration continued as the Institute published a provisional hectographed paper in memoriam of Benjamin in 1942 and letters Scholem had sent to Adorno were returned without response.449 Several attempts at book or magazine publications failed before they witnessed the first public German Benjamin publications began in 1950.450 By this time, Schocken had agreed to and canceled again Arendt’s plan for an American Benjamin edition: Noting to Scholem that Schocken had signaled interested in her work in November 1943, Arendt indicated that Benjamin was still one of her primary editorial endeavors.451 Schocken was hesitant to publish Benjamin at first, agreed to do so in 1946 then canceled the plan again two years later in 1948, and fired Arendt.452 Between fall 1946 and spring 1948, Arendt tried unsuccessfully to clarify the untransparent situation of Benjamin’s dispersed estate and retrieve documents from the Institute.453 Adorno only approached her once he had learned about her envisioned edition. Condescendingly, he assumed that the edition was the publisher’s plan which she only happened to be responsible for – “habe ich gehört, […] dass der Plan in Ihre Abteilung fällt” – while Arendt was actually the

448 Arendt, Der Briefwechsel, 23.
449 Arendt, Der Briefwechsel, 31-34; Benjamin, Arendt und Benjamin, 157; Wesseling. Benjamin Bibliographie, 125.
451 Benjamin, Arendt und Benjamin, 157-161.
452 Benjamin, Arendt und Benjamin, 161-171; Von den Dichtern, 21f., 23.
453 Benjamin, Arendt und Benjamin, 167, 171.
initiator of the project.454 Claiming interpretive and editorial authority, Adorno offered to write the introduction to her envisioned edition, presenting himself as the most qualified expert – an attitude that anticipates his self-defense in his “Interimsbescheid” of 1968, in which he claims to have “Sachverständnis:”455

ich glaube überdies nicht unbescheiden zu sein, wenn ich mich als qualifizierter für die Aufgabe betrachte denn irgendeinen anderen – sowohl wegen meiner intimen Vertrautheit mit Benjamins geistiger Landschaft wie wegen der zentralen Übereinstimmung unserer Philosophie.456

Adorno even claimed that his qualification was legitimized through Benjamin himself: On their last meeting in January 1938 in Italy, they had agreed, he argued, that Adorno should present “eine grössere Gesamtdarstellung seiner philosophischen Intentionen.”457 Adorno’s “great synopsis of Benjamin’s philosophical intentions” did not appear in the context of Arendt’s work and it is unlikely that Arendt would have assigned Adorno with the introduction even if Schocken had not cancelled Arendt’s editorial plans. Upon hearing about Adorno’s offer, Scholem warned Arendt that he should not be given disproportional space in the envisioned edition: “I doubt very much if anything would be gained by a too voluminous essay on his part. […] it might be advisable to limit his introduction for a fair proportion of the whole volume.”458 When Scholem informed Arendt of his collaboration with Adorno for a Benjamin edition with Suhrkamp in 1950, she reacted hesitantly but positively, signaling her commitment to the subject matter despite personal aversions: “Suhrkamp könnte eine gute Lösung sein. Glauben Sie dass Wiesengrund wirklich etwas tun wird?”459

454 Benjamin, Arendt und Benjamin, 168.
455 Adorno, “Interimsbescheid.”
456 Benjamin, Arendt und Benjamin, 168.
457 Ibid., 168.
458 Benjamin, Arendt und Benjamin, 170; Arendt, Der Briefwechsel, 153f.
459 Arendt, Der Briefwechsel, 318-323; cf. also Meyer, Arendt, 254f.
When Arendt continued her editorial work on Benjamin in the 1960s, she challenged both Adorno’s and Scholem’s interpretive appropriations of Benjamin which surfaced in their 1966 letter edition. She had already parted ways with Scholem because of his criticism of her report on the Eichmann trial.\textsuperscript{460} His last letter to her of July 1964, in which he announced his Leo-Baeck-Lecture on Benjamin, she (probably) left without response.\textsuperscript{461} But in spring 1967, she approached Adorno directly regarding Benjamin’s estate.

Despite her strong personal aversion against him, Arendt inquired with Adorno in January 1967 about the versions of Benjamin’s “Geschichtsphilosophische Thesen,” one of which she had handed over to Adorno in 1941. Her tone is politely inquisitive and does not reveal her outrage over Adorno’s lack of personal and professional integrity which appeared one year before in her correspondence with Jaspers: Amidst criticism of Heidegger’s complicity with the NSDAP, in mid-60s postwar Germany, Arendt accused the “Wiesengrund-Adorno-Leute in Frankfurt” of politically campaigning for their own advantages, while covering up Adorno’s own attempt to cooperate with the Nazis, and using his Jewish heritage to label any criticism as antisemitic.\textsuperscript{462} In Arendt’s verdict about Adorno in her letter to Jaspers – “einer der widerlichsten Menschen, die ich kenne”\textsuperscript{463} – shines through that she politically and ethically despises his demeanor as a public intellectual. No matter how much overlap there is in the core concern of their work to think through the conditions and consequences of Nazism, fascism and the Holocaust, Adorno appears to Arendt as a negative example for intellectual integrity and an improper model for political responsibility as a public persona.\textsuperscript{464}

\textsuperscript{460} Arendt, \textit{Der Briefwechsel}, 611f.
\textsuperscript{461} Ibid., 465.
\textsuperscript{463} Arendt, \textit{Jaspers Briefwechsel}, 670.
\textsuperscript{464} Dirk et al., \textit{Arendt Und Adorno}, 8f.
However, in her correspondence with Adorno of spring 1967, Arendt clearly makes an effort to maintain a polite, respectful relationship, generously providing Adorno with her version of the Theses again, as he claims to have forgotten which version he printed in the *Schriften*: “Von den Geschichtsphilosophischen Thesen Benjamins gab es eine ganze Reihe von Exemplaren, die mir von den verschiedensten Seiten zugingen, und ich kann beim besten Willen heute, nach mehr als 25 Jahren, nicht mehr sagen, was als Publikationsvorlage diente.”\textsuperscript{465} It appears as if Arendt eagerly sought to performatively demonstrate her contempt for such unreliable editorial memory by sending Adorno several copies of her version again. Along with her criticism of the lack of transparency in Adorno’s editorial decisions with respect to the *Thesen*, Arendt also challenges his continued neglect of Benjamin’s original Baudelaire essay which he had denied publication in 1938. Acknowledging his concession of the imperfectness of his *Schriften* based on the difficult circumstances of publication, Arendt announces her own edition and essay on Benjamin, warning him about her disagreement with his and Scholem’s views. Arendt claims to not yet know of any German “Kontroverse.” That she definitely learned about the respective debate only a few weeks later is clear based on her correspondence with *Merkur* editor Hans Paeschke with whom Arendt would soon publish the German version of her own Benjamin portrait that she had written for her American Benjamin edition which she was finally able to realize in the mid-1960s, as I elaborate below.\textsuperscript{466}


3.2 Publication History

Arendt published her portrait in English and German in the US and Germany. (Many other countries and languages followed later.) Early versions of both original versions were presented to the German and US public in talks first. They appeared in eight different contexts and (re-)translations in Germany and the US over twenty years between 1967 and 1989. However, there is only one American and one German version with multiple publications each: After a talk at Freiburg University in July 1967, the German essay version was first printed from January to March 1968 in a three-part series in the Merkur, with an additional postscript commentary in the same journal in October 1968. The German version appeared again in 1971 along with an essay on Brecht and in 1989 in a retranslation in Menschen in finsteren Zeiten.

In the US, the English version was first published in the New Yorker on October 19, 1968, after Arendt had presented it at a New York Goethe Institute talk earlier that year. Hence, the New Yorker version appeared almost simultaneously with the postscript of the German version. It was also published in two American books that came out in quick succession the same year. The October 19 New Yorker publication appeared both as the introduction of Arendt’s edited volume

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467 Benjamin, Arendt und Benjamin, 14.
468 With the exception of Ursula Ludz’ merged version in Arendt, Menschen in finsteren Zeiten, 185-209.
471 The reprint in Zwei Essays is largely identical with the Merkur version, except for some changes in footnote 3 (“Benjamin I,” 56f.). In the 1989 volume, the German essay was combined with parts of the English version by Ursula Ludz, excerpted from Arendt’s first presentation of parts of the English essay in a New York Goethe institute talk of early 1968. Cf. Mahrdt, “‘Unausrottbar ist das Poetische,’“ in Dichterisch Denken, 31-61.
472 Benjamin, Arendt und Benjamin, 202.

### 3.3 Production Traces

The journey that brought about these publications remained quite an Odyssey after Arendt’s transatlantic rescue of the manuscripts Benjamin had entrusted her with and her failed publication plans in the 1940s. After Arendt had stopped advancing her Benjamin edition plans when Schocken cancelled them in 1948, she was ironically presented with the idea of an American Benjamin edition again in 1964 through Howard Fertig, who at that point was the editor of the publisher Grosset & Dunlap.\footnote{Arendt, *Der Briefwechsel*, 623.} First, he approached her merely for editorial advice, as he was convinced that this “first American” publication of Benjamin would be “an intellectual occasion of real moment” and needed consultation with “someone who truly knows Benjamin’s work.”\footnote{[Letter Fertig to Arendt, 8 July 1964], *HAP: Correspondence, Publishers, 1944 to 1975, Grosset & Dunlap, 1963 to 1967*, Manuscript/Mixed Material, https://www.loc.gov/item/mss1105600477/. It is not unusual that Arendt was approached for such advice. Fertig, for instance, had also invited her to contribute an introduction to his paperback edition of Broch’s *The Sleepwalkers* in spring 1963. Cf. Letter Fertig to Arendt, 22 January 1963, ibid.} Considering Arendt “one of the very few people in the United States who does have an authoritative sense” of Benjamin’s achievements, Fertig unofficially hands over the project to Arendt as he decides to retire only shortly after his first request for her help, in December 1965.\footnote{[Letter Fertig to Arendt, 8 July 1964], *HAP: Correspondence, Publishers, 1944 to 1975, Grosset & Dunlap, 1963 to 1967*, Manuscript/Mixed Material, https://www.loc.gov/item/mss1105600477/.} Arendt had asked for a “more formal agreement” in fall 1965, after they had agreed on Harry Zohn as the translator for the edition, was still not a publication contract. Indeed, Fertig’s respective letter reads like a rushed statement, as if he quickly wanted to make sure that the Benjamin edition
was in Arendt’s hands before he left. “I should like this letter to stand as a formal statement of Grosset’s obligation in regard to your work on the Benjamin volume.” The rushed “formality” of his statement caused substantial confusion and copyright issues later on (as I elaborate below) but Fertig lays down the specific responsibilities he assigns Arendt with. Offering her for “the work you have already done – in selecting the articles to be included; in discussing the overall shape of the book; in reviewing the work of various translators and in deciding upon which should be employed for this volume – a minimum fee of $750,” Fertig also defines the future tasks to be taken on by Arendt and the respective payment: “a full fee of $1500 is to be paid […] in return for your continued active involvement as editor of the volume.” Along with “checking the translation”, Fertig expects Arendt to contribute “a full scale introduction to the volume.”

Arendt had hesitated about writing such an introduction when she initially planned her Benjamin edition in the 1940s; this is the first official request of her to do so by a publisher. Scholem had suggested Arendt should contribute an introduction herself after she had asked him to do so several times between fall 1946 and spring 1947. As Arendt wrote to Scholem, she was initially doubting herself for two seemingly contradictory reasons: her ability to gain enough emotional distance from Benjamin’s death and her limited familiarity with him. Paradoxically, Arendt apparently felt simultaneously too close and too remote from Benjamin to write about him:

dass ich Benji doch nur in den letzten Jahren kannte, dass ich von ihm biographisch sehr wenig weiss und dass ich, was noch mehr ins Gewicht faellt, den ganzen Kreis zu dem er gehoerte […] nicht kannte […] Mein persoenlicher Einwand ist noch viel plausible: ich habe mich mit Walters Tod nie abfinden koennen und habe infolgedessen in all den Jahren, die seit seinem Tod verstrichen sind, niemals die noetige Distanz gewonnen, um ‘ueber’ ihn schreiben zu koennen.

478 Ibid.
479 Benjamin, Arendt und Benjamin, 163-170.
480 Ibid., 171ff.
Hence, Arendt inquired of different intellectuals – Scholem and Brecht – if they were willing to write “einen einleitenden Essay.”481 Except for Adorno’s offer, Arendt did not find someone interested in writing the introduction in 1947. While the issue was resolved with the failure of the initial editorial plans, Arendt now accepted the challenge. Indeed, she continued fighting for the Benjamin edition despite increasing complications: After Fertig had left Grosset & Dunlap in spring 1966,482 the project suffered from lack consistent care from the publisher’s side as Fertig’s successor also left again after some months, leaving Grosset without any editor. In her correspondence with the publisher’s managing director Joseph Greene in spring 1967, Arendt politely complains about the editorial absence: “I must admit that I feel a bit uncomfortable that this book has lost its editor in your publishing house. There are more editorial questions which I would like to straighten out not only with the translator but with the editor as well.”483

At this point, Arendt had already contacted Zohn directly in February of 1967, even before Greene explicitly suggested that she “write directly to Professor Zohn.” While she continued communicating optimistically with Zohn and advancing the work on the translation and her introduction,484 her correspondence with the subsequent publishing house she sought help from in the first months of 1967, Harcourt, Brace & World, demonstrates a high degree of frustration about the complicated publishing career of the edition. Grosset & Dunlap ultimately turned out to have been in severe trouble, which announced itself in the unstable editorial situation and Greene’s unfortunate concessions about a “standstill” in some of the company’s departments.485

481 Benjamin, Arendt und Benjamin, 164f..
Wolff, acting editor for Harcourt, Brace & World, reports back to Arendt in summer 1967, Suhrkamp was claiming the copy right of the respective Benjamin texts since Grosset had been negligent in handling them, missing the deadline for publication. All this lead Arendt to conclude that even posthumously, Benjamin’s work was haunted by a hunchback, which would become one major theme of her essay. In a letter of August 4, 1967, she concludes: “der Bucklige hat zweifellos seine Hand im Spiel.”

Arendt had referenced the image of the hunchback already earlier in her correspondence with another influential interlocutor, Hans Paeschke, editor of the Merkur from 1947 to 1978. Paeschke and Arendt corresponded about Benjamin in November 1966, when he reports to have just read Adorno’s and Scholem’s letter edition of the same year. He is fascinated by the material – “Ich konnte kaum aufhören“ – but also notes Benjamin’s position between the ideological poles of his editors: “Wie steht er da zwischen den beiden Herausgebern!” In her response of December 23, 1966, Arendt agrees with Paeschke, noting her astonishment about how the letters display “wie er da zwischen den beiden Herausgebern steht, von denen der eine ihn immer jüdischer machen wollte wie er war, und der andere „linker“ als er je hätte sein können – das ist wohl auch nicht von schlechten Eltern!” Arendt captures her impression of a dominating tragic sadness of Benjamin’s life with the image of the hunchback:

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489 Arendt, Denktagebuch, 1125.
Im Übrigen ist es wohl doch ein furchtbar trauriges Buch. Sie kennen doch wahrscheinlich das Gedicht vom buckligen Männchen [...]. Benjamin hat es sehr geliebt und immer wieder zitiert. Aber erst als ich seine Briefe las, wurde mir seine allgemeine Lebenssituation klar: Es hat wahrhaftig nichts in diesem Leben gegeben, was nicht schiefging.“  

Along with her observation that the letter edition shows how tragically haunted by misfortune Benjamin was, the argument about Benjamin’s in-betweenness would become a central point of her portrait. The fact that Arendt develops interpretive ideas first in her correspondences with her editors, demonstrates how important these editorial exchanges were for her writing. Indeed, a motivating factor to continue working on the edition despite the publisher complications must have been her strong rapport with Paeschke and another influential magazine publisher; William Shawn, editor of The New Yorker. Both editors were supportive, if not affectionate admirers of Arendt’s work and appreciative of her genuine criticism of their publications.

To Paeschke, she mentions her own writing on Benjamin for an edition and her concern about its translation in the same letter of December 1966: “Ich bin im Begriff, für eine hiesige Auswahl aus Benjamins [sic] eine Einleitung zu schreiben. Und dann haben wir wieder das Problem wer übersetzt es.” In fact, Arendt started drafting her portrait in spring 1967 – “in German,” which she “found […] easier,” as she tells Zohn in her first letter to him on February 19, 1967. Paeschke immediately begins to ask for her Benjamin essay, repeatedly throughout spring and summer 1967, initially even offering himself as translator: “Und lassen Sie mich die Einleitung zu Benjamin lesen, sobald sie fertig ist. Diesmal möchte ich selbst die Übersetzung versuchen [...].” Arendt tells him in March 1967 that the essay will be exceptionally long, is not completed 

493 Ibid.
yet, and that she is writing the essay in German because she is disappointed with the Merkur’s recent translation style. This alternative reason from what she told Zohn a month earlier (“found it easier”) is significant insofar as Arendt was hesitant to publish with Paeschke after he had printed a controversial piece by former SS-member Hans Egon Holthusen which attacked Arendt: “Momentan ist mir ganz lieb, nicht im Merkur zu erscheinen.”\footnote{[Letter Arendt to Paeschke, 23 December 1966], HAP: Correspondence, Publishers, 1944 to 1975, Merkur, 1965 to 1966, Manuscript/Mixed Material, https://www.loc.gov/item/mss1105600524/.
} Arendt apparently also inquired with Der Spiegel for the publication of her Benjamin essay in summer 1967, one reason for which was the article’s length, as she tells Paeschke, emphasizing: “Ich würde gerade von der deutschen Fassung nicht kürzen lassen.”\footnote{[Letter Arendt to Paeschke, July 1967], HAP: Correspondence, Publishers, 1944 to 1975, Merkur, 1967 to 1968, Manuscript/Mixed Material, https://www.loc.gov/item/mss1105600524/.
} From March to September 1967, Arendt also emphasizes that she cannot publish the essay in Germany before the US publication for copyright reasons; because of “Fragen des copyright.”\footnote{[Letters Arendt to Paeschke, 17 March and 28 September 1967], HAP: Correspondence, Publishers, 1944 to 1975, Merkur, 1967 to 1968, Manuscript/Mixed Material, https://www.loc.gov/item/mss1105600524/.
} But Paeschke continues wooing Arendt, offering to print the Benjamin essay “in 2 oder 3 Teilen – wie sie mögen” in August 1967.\footnote{[Letter Paeschke to Arendt, 16 August 1967], ibid.} In September 1967, Arendt finally reports that The New Yorker has granted her pre-publication rights for Germany.\footnote{[Letter Arendt to Paeschke, 28 September 1967], ibid.} She sends the tripartite “Benjamin-Manuskript” in October, leaving the decision about its citational style to Paeschke, specifying that all quotes stem from the work or letter edition, as marked in the margin by “S für Schriften, B für Briefe.”\footnote{[Letter Arendt to Paeschke, 18 October 1967], HAP: Correspondence, Publishers, 1944 to 1975, Merkur, 1967 to 1968, Manuscript/Mixed Material, https://www.loc.gov/item/mss1105600524/.
} Paeschke is more than excited about the text: “es fällt mir schwer, nicht pathetisch zu werden.”\footnote{[Letter Paeschke to Arendt, 27 October 1967], ibid.
} He considers it an authoritative, outstanding interpretation (“Deutung“), a “gründender Akt“ that rehabilitates Benjamin for contemporary consciousness: “die Heimholung eines großen Geistes unserer Sprache in unser Bewusstsein.”
Paeschke’s enthusiasm comes with a warning that she is intervening into the Benjamin debate and that Adorno and Scholem will probably react to Arendt’s critique: “Auf Erwiderungen von Scholem und Adorno werden Sie vorbereitet sein.” Indeed, Paeschke hints at how he relies on Arendt in the ongoing Benjamin debate, noting that Adorno and Heißenbüttel were debating “Detailfragen” which, Paeschke argues, he kept his distance from, reasoning that Arendt’s article would be the next intervention. In her response of November 1967, Arendt anticipates potential points of conflict with Adorno and Scholem, including her arguments about the “Jewish question,” Benjamin’s affinity to Heidegger and her disagreement with them about Benjamin’s philosophical character. Like Paeschke, Arendt expects a strong reaction by Scholem and a weak one, or none at all, by Adorno, considering her criticism “fortiter in re, suaviter in modo.”

This “mode” of Arendt’s portrait, Paeschke implies, is not philological but more artistic, paying tribute to the “Zitatkünstler” Benjamin. Therefore, he decides to leave out the in-text bracketed references which would turn the reader into too much of a philologist and interrupt the text flow, as he states in a letter of November 29, 1967.

But Paeschke’s impact on the text does not end here – between December 1967 and January 1968, he informs Arendt about two important recent publications in the Benjamin debate: Firstly, Tiedemann’s prefacing and publication of Der Flaneur, a part of Benjamin’s envisioned book on Baudelaire which Adorno did not accept for publication in 1938, as Arendt criticized in her correspondence with Adorno earlier that year and which became a major matter of controversy in the Benjamin debate. Secondly, Paeschke informs Arendt about the special fall 1967 issue of the

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503 Ibid. For all preceding quotes.
alternative. Vexed by Tiedemann’s publication – in reading it, “bleibt einem nun wirklich die Spucke weg” – Arendt takes advantage of Paeschke’s offer to include any changes based on these publications until early January 1968, and inserts an outraged criticism of Tiedemann, in “Anmerkung 3.” Three further changes based on Arendt’s reading of the alternative make it into the text in early January. Arendt knows that her challenging of the Frankfurt School is at this point not “suaviter in modo” anymore. But the recent publications she learns about through Paeschke only increase her anger about the Frankfurt School’s appropriation and manipulation of Benjamin, as Arendt herself experienced the effects of Benjamin’s financial troubles. She tells Paeschke in a letter of December 11, 1967: “Ich kenne die Konflikte mit Adorno und Horkheimer sehr gut, weil mir Benjamin in seiner Verzweiflung die New Yorker Briefe zeigte und mich mehrmals bat, ihm bei der Formulierung der Antwortbriefe behilflich zu sein.” Hence, Arendt depicts her perspective to Paeschke as one very close to Benjamin. Indeed, she stages herself as not only an integral part of Benjamin’s side in the correspondence with the Institute but also as an intimate informant with access to interna based on her friendship with Horkheimer’s Parisian secretary. This decisive siding with Benjamin later translates into her critical citational form which, as I elaborate in the next chapter, suggests intimate proximity to Benjamin while maintaining a subtle critical distance. A correspondence like the above-mentioned illuminates the personal background of this stylistic quality.

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507 [Letter Arendt to Paeschke, 3 January 1968], ibid.
508 [Letter Paeschke to Arendt, 12 January 1968], ibid..
509 [Letter Arendt to Paeschke, 3 January 1968], ibid.
During and after the publication of Arendt’s portrait in the spring of 1968, Paeschke continues including his reflections on the course of the debate. For instance, he asks for Arendt’s opinion on Adorno’s complaint that he was not warned about Arendt’s publication which would have allowed him to correct mistakes (like Arendt’s false depiction of him as the “director” of the Institute for Social Research). Notably, there is no longer any direct contact between Adorno and Arendt anymore even though they had corresponded about the beginning “Kontroverse” one year earlier. This “radio silence” suggests that their mutual disregard is reified significantly through the Benjamin debate.

Arendt suggests to include a correction in the publication of the following part. Satisfied with the publication of the first part, she notes nothing “Sinnentstellendes.” Throughout spring 1968, Paeschke and Arendt continue corresponding about Adorno’s and Scholem’s reactions. Arendt is concerned that Paeschke does not share Scholem’s letters to him with her – which Paeschke motivates with the personal character of those letters. Arendt reads Adorno’s sole public reaction in the Benjamin debate, his “Interimsbescheid” of March 6, 1968, as a defense against some of her accusations. Towards Paeschke, she reemphasizes the inequality between Benjamin and Adorno in their relationship of mutual criticism, which pertained published work in Adorno’s and unpublished work in Benjamin’s case. Noting the accumulation of publications on the Benjamin debate (the second alternative issue and Tiedemann’s Argument publication), Arendt and Paeschke become increasingly annoyed, if not bored. Since he acted as the main host

512 [Letter Paeschke to Arendt, 7 March 1968], ibid.
515 Ibid.
517 [Letter Arendt to Paeschke, 31 March 1968], ibid..
518 [Letters Arendt – Paeschke, 15 April and 26 June 1968], ibid.
of the original debate by publishing the two reviews of the letter edition in spring 1967, Paeschke becomes concerned about the scattering of the debate into an uncoordinated “Separatkrieg” in which “jeder au seiner anderen Ecke schießt.” Arendt concludes in June 1968, “dass mir an der ganzen Diskussion mit den Frankfurtern nicht sehr viel gelegen ist” and notes her frustration with the second alternative special issue. Their correspondence surrounding Arendt’s Benjamin essay ends with the publication of Arendt’s postscript response to Pollock’s “Zuschrift” in October 1968.

Paeschke appears as a strong stimulating figure in Arendt’s intervention in the Benjamin debate, as he drew her attention to and supplied her with major apropos publications, and invited, if not pressured her to publish her essay in German and in Germany from the start. Thus, he became an important interlocutor for the development of the main arguments of Arendt’s essay – in its German form. The other editorial figure who significantly stimulated the shape of the American version of Arendt’s essay is “Bill” Shawn of The New Yorker. In contrast to Paeschke, Shawn motivates Arendt to reduce the complicated interna pertaining to the details of the German Benjamin debate and adapt the essay to an American audience unfamiliar with the debate and Benjamin himself. Shawn becomes an important interlocutor for Arendt’s emancipation from the German debate in the US and prompts her to make her arguments about Benjamin completely clear independent from it. Arendt first announces her Benjamin manuscript to him in July 1967: This was about six months after her mentioning it to Paeschke, while the Benjamin debate in Germany was already escalating, and before her contract with Harcourt, Brace and World was finalized.

519 [Letter Paeschke to Arendt, 5 April 1968], ibid.
520 [Letter Arendt to Paeschke, 26 June 1968], ibid.
She explains that Helen Wolff, publisher of the Benjamin volume, would send him a copy, and that Zohn is the translator and that she is “very doubtful about the first part” as she fears it is irrelevant to American readers: “It is probably without interest to the American reader, too polemical, I too involved; also not well organized.”

Arendt adopts, in her own way, Shawn’s suggestion to pin down why she thinks Benjamin is relevant: She “might want to consider adding, somewhere near the beginning […] a paragraph giving a brief portrait of Benjamin and telling a little about the character of his work and why it was significant.” In reworking her essay, Arendt combines this suggestion with another one made by Shawn: that she should basically keep all arguments except for her long excursus on Benjamin’s “Goethe essay and its aftermath” which he considers, adopting her own concern, “too involved.”

But rather than dropping the Goethe essay issue altogether, Arendt renders it the central piece of her introductory characterization, by including and commenting on an exceptional and pivotal block quotation of it (which I will elaborate on in the next chapter). This change is documented in her correspondence with Zohn who translated her German version over the summer of 1967 and whom Arendt asks in October 1967 for a quick translation of Benjamin’s “Wahlverwandtschaften Essay […] pp. 55 to 56, end of paragraph […]” The main point of her essay is also announced in this exchange, as Arendt motivated her request with the purpose “to explain what Benjamin meant by a literary critic.” The significance of how Arendt ultimately inserts the excerpt is discussed in the next chapter. Important to note here is that all editors – Shawn, Paeschke, Wolff, as well as Fertig – and the translator Zohn were crucial figures for the development of Arendt’s essay. Indeed, its argumentative shape would

524 [Letter Shawn to Arendt, 11 August 1967], ibid.
525 [Letter Shawn to Arendt, 2 October 1967], ibid.
probably not have been the same without this intense, complex network of simultaneous correspondences. On November 21, 1967, Arendt sends “the new version of the Benjamin essay” with a “drastically changed” first part to Shawn as well as to Helen Wolff.527

The production history of Arendt’s essay outlined here demonstrates that the initial context was the American Benjamin edition, though Harcourt first granted the copyrights to Merkur for the German version. While Arendt was apparently not certain that the essay would appear in German at all at first, she drafted it in German from the start – for which she provides different reasons to different interlocutors, including that she “found it easier”,528 “found it easier and more appropriate,”529 that she was skeptical about translations from English into German,530 but also considered it a “Privatvergnügen.”531 Ultimately, she wrote two different essay versions, adapted to the German and US context, respectively. The Benjamin debate about the controversy of Adorno’s and Scholem’s editing and interpretations of Benjamin’s works is less important in the American context where Arendt’s own interpretation of Benjamin becomes more amplified. Overall, this publication and production history shows that Arendt’s Benjamin portrait emerges from and is grounded in a strong editorial stance, driven by the agenda of preserving and promoting Jewish European literature transnationally. In fact, her editorial project continued even after Illuminations: in the early 1970s, she envisioned a second American volume of Benjamin’s works

with Helen Wolff, for which she collected material specifically related to Tiedemann’s successive publications of parts of Benjamin’s planned Baudelaire book.\textsuperscript{532} While she did not live to realize this project, Peter Demetz claimed to complete her plans with his 1978 Bejnamin edition \textit{Reflections} which would become a crucial occasion for Sontag’s Bejnamin portrait.\textsuperscript{533}

### 3.4 Drafting Traces

Deeply embedded in her editorial work, significant experiences of experimenting with different genres of literary criticism accompany Arendt’s drafting of her Benjamin essay. Three genres are specifically important for understanding how her Benjamin essay (and similar essays) evolved: the lecture, the review and what \textit{New Yorker} editor Shawn calls the “profile.”\textsuperscript{534}

Long before writing her Benjamin essay, Arendt sends Shawn an unpolished “lecture on Brecht” in March 1965, asking if he “would at all be interested.”\textsuperscript{535} Shawn is excited: “No piece of writing since ‘Eichmann in Jerusalem’ has affected me so deeply.”\textsuperscript{536} He considers her lecture a “profile”, which he defines as “a partial portrait rather than a full portrait or a pile of facts or a biography.” Arendt’s profile pins down “the essence,” in her own exceptional way, according to Shawn.\textsuperscript{537} This classification invites a nuanced perspective on the genre of the “portrait” which Arendt’s literary essays have recently been discussed as.\textsuperscript{538} Where Shawn claims for the \textit{New

\textsuperscript{535} [Letter Arendt to Shawn, 28 March 1965], Ibid.
\textsuperscript{538} Geulen, “Bucklicht Männlein, 41“; Young-Bruehl, \textit{Arendt}, x.
Yorker that the magazine would not publish “essays,” the “profile” appears to be the journalistic version of the more literary “portrait” essay.

Many of Arendt’s portraits (or profiles, for that matter) were presented first in lectures or talks. Like the Brecht portrait, Arendt’s Benjamin essay was presented in lectures first: at Freiburg university in July 1967 and at the New York Goethe House in January 1968. Both talks are significant foils for both eventual portrait versions. The German Freiburg talk starts in medias res, situating Arendt’s discussion of Benjamin in the “Kontroverse” of which she claims to be largely ignorant. Rather than elaborating on the debate, Arendt focuses on what she considers its central concern; Benjamin’s conflict with Adorno and Benjamin. Implicitly citing Adorno’s note on “misunderstanding,” she quickly clarifies that she thinks Adorno and Scholem both misunderstood Benjamin and that their misunderstanding points to the essential characteristic – “das Wesentliche” – of Benjamin. Rhetorically, she thus seems to employ what Adorno dismissed as a weak argumentative, essentializing strategy, the recourse to “misunderstanding.” However, rather than in some kind of essentialist identity, Arendt locates Benjamin’s “Wesentliche” quality in his poetic method, in that he “dichterisch dachte.” Challenging Adorno’s and Scholem’s Marxist and Zionist readings of Benjamin, Arendt argues that Benjamin had stronger affinities to the “Dichter” Brecht and Goethe. Arendt’s emphasis on Benjamin as a literary writer is similar to

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540 Ibid.
544 Ibid.
Heißenbüttel’s challenge to Adorno and Scholem. Yet, she does not reference him, which matches her claim to relative ignorance of the “Kontroverse.”

Considering that Arendt was well informed about the debate, this appears as a rhetorical strategy to assume an independent position in the debate which shows in her reading: Goethe, whom no one had yet affiliated with Benjamin in the Merkur debate, becomes the most significant reference for Arendt’s Benjamin because of his notion of the “Urphänomen.” Benjamin was looking for “das Urphänomen der Geschichte” and used ideologies like Marxism at most as a “heuristisch-methodische Anregung” to find it, Arendt argues. Adorno’s and Scholem’s misunderstanding consisted of, according to Arendt, their misrecognition of Benjamin’s poetic character as failed (Marxist) philosophy. They demanded from Benjamin a “Metaphysik oder auch Theologie” which he never really cared about. In the Freiburg lecture, Arendt develops most of her main claims about Benjamin almost in the final form they would appear in the German printed version in Merkur which I elaborate on in the next chapter.

The Goethe House talk (of January 1968) is an intricate mix of the German printed version and the already drafted American version in German. Arendt begins with a prefacing section on “Nachruhm” which was one central development of the American version but never became part of a German printed version during her lifetime. Before mentioning the Benjamin controversy at all, she presents her claim that Benjamin was genuinely incomparable because he thought poetically without being a poet and that he at most could be considered a critic. Thus, Arendt

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546 Ibid.
547 Ursula Lodz posthumously merged versions in Arendt, Menschen in finsteren Zeiten, 185-209.
emancipates from the rhetoric of “misunderstanding” and rather proposes her own reading first; a reading that introduces Benjamin in a de-essentializing way. In contrast to the Freiburg talk, the Goethe House talk already features the motto of the hunchback, including the lines of folk poetry that would become the epigraph of the Merkur version.

Overall, the differences in the introductory pages of her talks show that Arendt adopted the talks to her target audiences, changing the argumentative focus on her portrait according to the respective context of presentation. In both cases, Arendt addresses her audience directly. For instance, she assumes that the German one knows about Benjamin and the controversy – “dass ich voraussetzen dürfte, dass Sie oder viele unter Ihnen mit seinen Schriften vertraut wären, und ich hoffe, dass Sie auch die kürzlich erschienene zweibändige Briefausgabe kennen, an die sich, wie mir Adorno mitteilte, eine Kontroverse angeknüpft hat.”549 While she presupposes her German audience’s familiarity with the debate, she embeds her Benjamin portrait for her American audience in the conceptual environment of “Nachruhm,” theoretically motivating her speaking about Benjamin as an important yet tragically marginalized European figure, implicitly referencing Benjamin’s own concern with an art work’s afterlife.550 Both her talks contain the central arguments of the German and English printed versions, and some formal features that distinguish them. Hence, they appear as significant steps on the way between drafting and publishing.

Apart from minor handwritten lines edits, Arendt’s drafts are generally relatively complete from the first version onwards. She taped typoscript pages together, crossed out or added sentences and sections occasionally, taped typed additions to some sections, rearranged parts, edited grammatical mistakes and rephrased snippets here and there. But overall, the drafts available in

550 Cf. Footnote 231.
the Library of Congress suggest that she typed out largely complete, well thought-through compositions.\footnote{As she maintains to do in her televised interview with Gaus: Hannah Arendt, “Fernsehgespräch mit Günter Gaus (Oktober 1964),“ in \textit{Ich will verstehen}, ed. Ursula Ludz (München: Piper, 1996), 44-71.}

### 3.4.1 Reviews as Training Field for Portraits

Reviews are another highly important genre in which Arendt trained her specific mode of writing about literature.\footnote{Cf. Meyer, \textit{Arendt}, 215.} Before the war in the early 1930s, Arendt had published a few reviews that were mostly academic but demonstrate a commitment to making her voice heard and thus could be considered the beginning of her career as a public writer.\footnote{Meyer, \textit{Arendt}, 19ff.} A recurring concern in her reviews is the respective author’s citational method and their historical perspective; she either criticizes the lack of historical evidence or praises its transparent corroboration of claims. For instance, in 1931, Arendt acknowledges the comprehensive collection and precise synopsis of Rilke’s works in a scholarly volume on Rilke (\textit{Rilkes Umarbeitungen}), for which she was probably considered qualified based on her earlier interpretation of Rilke’s poetry, co-authored with her then husband Günther Stern.\footnote{Hannah Arendt and Günther Stern, “Rilkes ‘Duineser Elegien,’“ \textit{Neue Schweizer Rundschau} 23, no. 11 (1930): 855-871.} The same year, Arendt reviewed Hans Weil’s \textit{Die Entstehung des deutschen Bildungsprinzips} as a historically reliable foundation for any modern discussion on “‘Bildung.’” Arendt acknowledges Weil’s style of providing evidence to verify his claims; she appreciates his “Distanz des Verstehens“ as an important “neue Möglichkeit des Zugangs zur Welt und zur Wirklichkeit.”\footnote{Hannah Arendt, “Weil, Hans: Die Entstehung des deutschen Bildungsprinzips,” \textit{Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik} 66, no. 1, 1931, 200-205, here 205.} In 1934, she reviewed Käthe Hamburger’s \textit{Thomas Mann und die}
Romantik. Highly critical of Hamburger’s inexplicit notion of the romantic era as genuinely German, she finds fault with a lack of evidence for her claim that Mann is part of that tradition. The absence of “wissenschaftliche Belege” and historical contextualization is at the core of her criticism. Arendt argues that the sources Hamburger did provide corroborated her claim of similarity between Mann and the romantics.

Between 1943 and 1949, Arendt published several reviews on a variety of books in different magazines, covering novels, autobiographies (Stefan Zweig), literary histories, theory and historical books. Randell Jarrell, a poet and review publicist for The Nation whom she met through her work at Schocken, prompted Arendt to contribute five reviews to the newspaper. Her reviews of these years already show central qualities of her singular style of writing about literature in her portraits. For instance, in 1946, she reviewed Robert Gilbert’s Meine Reime Deine Reime, praising the close proximity Gilbert’s poetry maintained to local Berlin culture despite his exile. Gilbert’s work demonstrates for Arendt that it is possible to reappropriate the German language from its devaluation by the Nazis. Gilbert’s language succeeds to “recapture the dialect,” as Arendt argues, listing significant features of an (by implication) antifascist linguistic register based on “its own peculiar humor and full of strange, indirect, involved patterns of speech.” As I argue in the next chapter, appropriating language in such a singular way is also significant in Arendt’s Benjamin portrait.

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558 Cf. Arendt, Ich will verstehen, 260-272.
3.4.2 Traces in the Denktagebuch

Arendt’s editing of and writing on Benjamin left some scattered drafting traces in her Denktagebuch. As the note book is a documentation of Arendt’s thoughts rather than of matters of daily life, it does not provide much detailed information on how she experienced the issues addressed in her correspondences. However, the thoughts developed during the time of her writing of the Benjamin essay provide a fruitful background for understanding some main concerns of her Benjamin essay.

The edited Denktagebuch begins in 1953, and the most relevant notebooks for the production of the Benjamin essays are volumes twenty-four to twenty-six, covering the years 1963 to 1969, assuming that Arendt started thinking about her Benjamin essay beginning with Howard Fertig’s request that she contribute the introduction to the envisioned edition. Overall, her notes are more or less remotely linked to her publications, like her lingering concern with truth and lying and their political relevance during the years between her publication of Eichmann in Jerusalem in 1963 and “Truth and Politics” in 1969. But her use of the notebook is irregular, and does not explicitly inform about her publications, writing plans or private life. Given the exceptionally intense criticism of her Eichmann trial report of this time, such relative silence on all personal matters suggests that Arendt did not use the notebook for documentary or therapeutic purposes, with a few exceptions.

Beginning with 1965, Arendt takes notes more frequently, focusing on the relationship of thought and language which she considers intricately close: “Alles existiert für das Denken, wofür die Sprache ein Wort hat. Wofür die Sprache kein Wort hat, fällt aus dem Denken heraus.”

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560 Arendt, Denktagebuch, 617-764.
561 Arendt, Denktagebuch, 617-642; Arendt, Ich will verstehen, 294f., 304.
562 Cf. Arendt, Denktagebuch, 670-701 for entries on her own death, travel, and a dream.
563 Ibid., 642.
While this entry of November 1965 is by no means explicitly connected to Arendt’s Benjamin edition or essay, her theoretical linking of language and thought suggests that her writing about Benjamin is also an act of keeping him alive for the realm of thought. More specifically, one note draws attention to the relevance of prepositional language in her essay, and what mode of thinking she thereby engages in: “Etwas denken ist nicht dasselbe wie über etwas nachdenken. […] Etwas denken – an etwas denken (erinnern) – über etwas nachdenken – ganz verschiedene Modi.” As I argue in the next chapter, Arendt realizes another modus of thinking in her Benjamin essay, one unmentioned here: thinking with.

These prepositional modes of thinking do not coincidentally sound Heideggerian – Heidegger is a recurring reference in the notebook. In September 1968, she references him concerning the processuality of thinking: “Heideggers Denken ist Dancken. Das ist richtig, wenn man gewissermaßen mit dem Strich denkt – denkend fortsetzt, dass man ist. Er könnte sagen: Alles andere Denken sei gegen den Strich, führe vom Sein fort.” The conditional “richtig, wenn man […]” shows that Arendt reconstructs how Heidegger conceives of thinking as thanking without necessarily subscribing to this notion. Indeed, that Arendt rather thinks against than with the mainstream is suggested by an intertextual reference of the above note to a letter by Benjamin to Scholem of February 20, 1939, consisting in an indirect citation: Recommending Arendt’s book on Rahel Varnhagen to Scholem, Benjamin writes:

Auf mich hat dieses Buch großen Eindruck gemacht. Es schwimmt mit starken Stößen wider den Strom erbaulicher und apologetischer Judaistik. Du weißt am besten, daß alles was man über ‘die Juden in der deutschen Literatur’ bis dato lesen konnte, von eben dieser Strömung sich treiben ließ.

564 Arendt, Denktagebuch, 643.
565 Ibid., 697.
566 Benjamin, Briefe 2, 804.
The difference between writing with or against the current is, as I argue in my next chapter, central to Arendt’s portraiture. Ironically, Benjamin’s observation of how Arendt challenges mainstream Jewish views of Rahel Varnhagen anticipates well how Arendt challenges dominant readings of Benjamin in the *Merkur* debate in very similar ways. However – to reuse the metaphor and circle back to her aforementioned play on prepositions – Arendt swims against the current of dominant interpretations but *with* the current of the subject in discussion, namely Rahel, and Benjamin respectively. As I will argue, Arendt thus stands between Heidegger’s complicity and Benjamin’s observation of her critical distanciation; she draws on both for her method of thinking and writing.

Heidegger transpires more generally as a significant interlocutor in how Arendt envisions her portrait collection *Men in Dark Times*. In the first entry explicitly related to her Benjamin publications, Arendt references in March 1967 “Ad Menschen in finsteren Zeiten” a note by Heidegger on the darkening effect of the public sphere’s light.567 In contrast to Heidegger, Arendt historicizes the idea that the public hinders true insight into the conditions of human being. While this was true for the “erste Hälfte des Jahrhunderts,” it is not generally true. In fact, Arendt considers the “‘Man’” causing the darkness as a *social* rather than *political* phenomenon that had hegemonically dominated the political space. Thus, Arendt understands the public as a space that is exactly the condition in which a human being can appear in its real form.568 This interpretation appears almost verbatim in her preface to *Men in Dark Times*, which I elaborate on in the next chapter.

Concluding the year 1968 with a cryptic note, Arendt jots down stops on a trip to Europe at which she secured several publishing contracts that were partly realized during her lifetime. Her

567 Arendt, *Denktagebuch*, 664.
568 Ibid., 664.
visit at “Paeschke – Merkur” hints at her Benjamin essay publication with him.\textsuperscript{569} A significant aftermath of her publications on Benjamin, which themselves are not addressed in her Denktagebuch, is her reference to Benjamin in her penultimate note of December 1968: Planning a seminar and lecture on “Philosophy and Politics” at the New School in New York for 1969, Arendt addresses the need for change in academic training and a reform of disciplines based on the active involvement of research in politics and society.\textsuperscript{570} Her starting point is the student protests “against curriculum in the Humanities […] the University as an institution […] the society of which the University is a part.”\textsuperscript{571} The first thought Arendt jots down references an important point she develops in her Benjamin essay: “The past has become irrelevant. Tradition – past no longer tradierbar, nur zitierbar (Benjamin). The past no longer the majority in Kant’s Geistreich.”\textsuperscript{572} While she does not explain the connection between this Benjaminian thought and the issue of academic curriculum and the institutional development of the university, the note shows how central her Benjamin essay remains for Arendt’s thought, specifically with respect to the topic of tradition. It also demonstrates that his citational approach to tradition helps Arendt rethink training for academic research and the dominance of teaching in the academic world – or at least understanding the student protests better.

Two further notes are relevant for the Benjamin essay. In one entry of 1963, Arendt quotes Jaspers: “‘Was an die Öffentlichkeit gelangt, hängt, direkt oder indirekt, am Geld.’ Hier die Gefahr der Interessentengruppen, die immer über mehr Geld verfügen als derjenige, der unabhängig – keiner Interessentengruppe angehört.”\textsuperscript{573} This entry reminds of the fatal link between funding and

\textsuperscript{569} Arendt, Denktagebuch, 696 and 1124f..
\textsuperscript{570} Ibid., 702, 1126.
\textsuperscript{571} Ibid., 702.
\textsuperscript{572} Ibid., 702.
\textsuperscript{573} Ibid., 629.
intellectual production that had tragic consequences for Benjamin: Specifically in his asymmetrical relationship to the Institute for Social Research, which put Adorno in a position of power over Benjamin, his lack of financial security had fatal consequences for his work. As a genuinely independent writer, Benjamin’s production was perpetually endangered to fall prey to the more financially powerful.

In May 1968, after she had already integrated a prefacing section on posthumous fame into her American talk and essay, Arendt attributes a melancholic affect to the concept of fame: A solution to Homeric contempt for the “Nur-Menschliche” is the “melancholische Ausweg: der Ruhm bei Göttern und Menschen.”

Fame, being famous amongst gods and men, protects against being meaningless, elevates otherwise insignificant flesh to something significant. Fame is melancholic because it reaches beyond mortality while not actually overcoming it. The link between fame and melancholy is key for the relationship between Arendt’s and Sontag’s portraits because both work towards enlarging Benjamin’s posthumous fame, though Arendt de-emphasizes Benjamin’s melancholic character while it is at the core of Sontag’s portrait.

Some aftermaths of Arendt’s Benjamin essay are documented in later notebooks. For instance, in April 1970, she reflects “On the difficulties I have with my English readers,” showing her high awareness for her American audience. She notes a cultural difference in genre expectations with methodical implications. Her theoretical tracing of ideas and concepts in literary history, she complaints sarcastically, is alienating to her American audience:

What this adds up to is that the whole notion of thinking a matter through is alien to English ‘philosophy.’ For instance: I said that Benjamin thinks poetically, i.e. in metaphors. Thus far everything is okay. But I then raise the question of what is a metaphor (which naturally leads me to Homer who invented it as an instrument of poetry) and what does a metaphor

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574 Arendt, *Denktagebuch*, 683.
575 Ibid., 683.
576 Ibid., 770f.
achieve – the unity of the world. These considerations, according to our English friend, have nothing to do with a profile of Benjamin.\textsuperscript{577}

This note demonstrates how her Benjamin essay did not quite fit the American reader’s association with the genre of the “profile.” As I will argue, the term “portrait” is more fitting.

**3.5 Reading Traces**

Arendt’s claims about Benjamin in her portrait are themselves traceable, to a certain degree, in the apropos literature she read in preparation for it. Arendt marked up her books modestly but meaningfully. She rarely took notes in the margin which renders the sparse existing marginalia all the more significant. As to her reading of texts relevant to the Benjamin debate, her archived library at Bard College holds only a few items she marked up.\textsuperscript{578}

She read Gershom Scholem’s Leo Baeck memorial lecture in Lux Furtmüller’s English translation.\textsuperscript{579} As she did not sign or date it, it is not clear when she exactly read it. But Scholem delivered the lecture after their last exchange of letters: His announcement in July 1964 that he would be in New York in October of the same year to deliver the annual Leo Baeck-Lecture on October 21 remained without response.\textsuperscript{580} The Leo Baeck lecture hence marks the end of their troubled relationship which had suffered from two specifically difficult conflicts, one upon Arendt’s publication of her 1946 article “Zionism Reconsidered” and the other upon Arendt’s report on the Eichmann trial in 1963, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*.\textsuperscript{581}


\textsuperscript{578} Cf. Hannah Arendt Personal Library. This collection is housed in the Stevenson Library at Bard College. https://blogs.bard.edu/arendtcollection/.


\textsuperscript{580} Hannah Arendt. *Der Briefwechsel*. Berlin: Jüdischer Verlag, 2010, 465f..

\textsuperscript{581} Ibid., 609ff.
Her precise but somewhat rushed pencil underlines and margin marks refer to some of Scholem’s reminiscences about important events in Benjamin’s life, Scholem’s notes about his relationship with Benjamin, as well as some of his main arguments – some of which Arendt adopts in her essay. The first major mark identifies Scholem’s argument about Benjamin’s attraction to and oscillation between Marxist “historical materialism” and “Judaism” as a main point. Thus, Arendt also notes Benjamin’s in-betweenness here, which she observes in her correspondence with Paeschke in 1966.

Figure 3.1: “Marxist politics [] and with Hebrew” in Arendt’s copy of Scholem’s Benjamin lecture

Per underlines, Arendt marks how Scholem grounds his relationship to Benjamin in “Judaism”, tracking his narrative of how he met Benjamin in “the autumn of 1913” at a discussion “between the Zionist youth, and Jewish members both of […] and the Free German Student Association.” Some of Scholem’s phrasings are apparently specifically interesting to Arendt, for instance concerning Benjamin’s reputation – that he “was the subject of an esoteric whispering campaign.”

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582 [Gershom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin*, The Leo Baeck Memorial Lecture 8 (New York: Leo Baeck Institute, 1965)], Hannah Arendt Personal Library, Stevenson Library at Bard College, 5, 6, 10f., 19, 20f..
583 Cf. Footnote 486.
585 Ibid., 5.
“profound sadness,” “personal ruthlessness” and his “Chinese courtesy.” Scholem’s impression of Benjamin’s secluded, asocial character is also underlined: He spoke “without so much as a glance at his audience.”

Arendt will include these marked-up points in her portrait, most of them with reference to Scholem. Likewise, three further arguments will become part of it: Arendt underlines Scholem’s point that Benjamin was a collector: “his most enduring personal passion was the collecting of books” and that he practiced a certain kind of commentative, narrative philosophy but was forced into literary criticism to earn his living: a “free-lance writer […] homme de lettres – compelled to earn his living by his pen.” Specifically important to Arendt is Scholem’s impression of Benjamin’s opacity and failure to make himself understood. She underlines and marks with crosses Scholem’s notes regarding how Benjamin’s style was so difficult that academics and even “Kraus […] did not understand a word of it.” Important for Arendt’s eventual main claim, as stated in the Denktagebuch entry above, “that Benjamin thinks poetically,” is probably Scholem’s relating of Benjamin to literary writers – Proust, Kafka and Brecht – which she marks with crosses and underlines:

Figure 3.3: “Brecht” in Arendt’s copy of Scholem’s Benjamin lecture

587 Ibid., 5.
588 Ibid., 7, 11, 13, 14.
589 Ibid., 13f.. Cf. also Figure 3.2 Appendix.
Two further narratives interesting to Arendt are firstly Scholem’s anecdote that Benjamin was obsessed with miniatures and that it was “his never realized ambition to get a hundred lines onto an ordinary sheet of notepaper.”

Secondly, Arendt marks with several crosses in the margin Scholem’s anecdote about the loss of Benjamin’s *Deutsche Menschen* in a Swiss book seller’s cellar. This anecdote shows that Arendt was well aware of the politically precarious circumstances under which Benjamin worked and lived, which endangered the reliable archiving of his estate and ultimately contributed to the editorial problems discussed in the Benjamin debate. Both anecdotes will reappear in her portrait, with references to Scholem.

The only question mark in the margin pertains to Scholem’s argument that Benjamin’s Marxist orientation was stimulated by his affection for a woman while his marriage to “the daughter of one
of the well-known pioneer members of the Zionist movement, Professor Leon Kellner, the editor
of Theodor Herzel’s Zionist writings” did not have such influence on his concern with Judaism.
Arendt’s question mark suggests that she doubted or had questions about Scholem’s argument but
it is not clear how exactly. At the least, the idea that Benjamin’s love affairs had an influence on
his work seems dubious to Arendt.

Figure 3.6: “?” on claims about a “woman’s influence” in Arendt’s copy of Scholem’s
Benjamin lecture.

While Scholem’s Leo Baeck lecture is an important intertext for Arendt’s portrait, the main source
of her arguments and references is the 1966 Briefe edition.592 Her two copies of it show some
underlines, crosses and vertical lines in both volumes but the most striking notes are indices in the
back of each volume. Arendt listed a large number of keywords with page numbers. Volume one,
for instance, lists “Sprache, Zionismus, Paris, Kant, Bibliothek, Palästina” as first keywords. Some
page numbers are crossed out, some are organized by framing lines. At the bottom of the list in
volume one, Arendt identified crucial years and page numbers for three keywords: “Baudelaire –

Hannah Arendt Personal Library, Stevenson Library at Bard College.
The notes with exclamation marks reference commentaries by Benjamin on his Goethe essay, whose centrality for her portrait therefore also already shows in her reading marks. The “Baudelaire” note references a letter from Benjamin to Hofmannsthal on January 13, 1924, in which Benjamin comments on his Goethe essay before its publication, explaining his method as one committed to language as the medium of truth. That this letter is significant to Arendt is suggested by another note in the back, referencing the same letter: “Hofmannsthal Brief 329.” (Figures 3.9) How Benjamin uses language to access a certain kind of historical truth is a main point in her reading of his Goethe essay.

The second volume lists keywords in the same manner, starting with “Institut, Sammler, [unkenntlich], Gescheiterten [...] Kafka!, Jerusalem, Brecht, Hofmannsthal, Kommunismus.” (Figures 3.10) Overall, the keyword lists are much denser in this volume – maybe because it contains Benjamin’s later letters including his increasing desperation and frustration about his conflicts with the Institute for Social Research. Again, a note on “Baudelaire – erste Version”

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seems central as it is marked with an exclamation mark and linked per an arrow to pages listed for “Wiesengrund”:

![Figure 3.11: Index in Arendt’s 1955 copy of Adorno’s and Scholem’s edition of Benjamin’s Briefe](image)

The underlined pages reference Benjamins conflicted correspondence with Adorno of the late 1930s about his Baudelaire essay which show how Benjamin defends himself yet also feels pressured to submit to Adorno’s and the Institute’s demands: “mich den Anregungen des Instituts gegenüber gefügig zu zeigen.”\(^{594}\) Arendt’s exceptional note-taking of this correspondence indicates that Benjamin’s relationship to Adorno was specifically significant to her. Throughout both volumes, Arendt underlines and marks up with crosses but comments little in the margins. Where she does, central themes addressed in her keyword lists reappear, like for instance “Brecht” and Marxism: “Haben alle [nur?] Marx gelesen.” (Figure 3.12) The development of a thought is hinted at in her note “Scholem & Wiesengrund vor allem gegen Brecht” in volume two:

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Overall, Arendt appears mostly interested in Benjamin’s relationship to poets like Brecht, Kafka, Hofmannsthal and Baudelaire apart from his correspondence with Scholem and Adorno. In her reading of *Versuche über Brecht*, edited by Tiedemann in 1966, Arendt also lists some keywords in the book jacket and marks up one biting comment by Tiedemann that considers Brecht a doctrinaire influence on Benjamin:

Strikingly, Benjamin’s *Schriften* are not listed in the Bard archive. Also, there are no books by Adorno. This corroborates the assumption that Arendt never really read Adorno except for the “Interimsbescheid,” which Paeschke sent her on March 21, 1968. As for other actors in the

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Benjamin debate, Arendt’s copy of the *alternative* special issue of fall 1967 is archived at Bard. She appears to read the issue for editorial information and for some claims pertaining to the history of the Benjamin debate. Her mark of a reference of Heißendüttel’s spring 1967 *Merkur* review corroborates that she knew of it even though the text is not archived at Bard. Her exceptionally intense marks suggest that Arendt might have had a strong reaction to some claims, for instance, two question marks and an added date show that she questioned the *alternative* methodically where evidence was not provided. (Figures 3.15-16) Three exclamation marks suggest that the editor in Arendt was excited to learn about the Potsdam archive as an alternative to Adorno’s locking away of Benjamin’s estate:

![Figure 3.17: Potsdam Archive, Arendt’s copy of alternative 1967](image)

Other notes pertain to the edition and first publication of the “Kunstwerk” essay in French. One mark singles out the “Urphänomen” in an essay on Benjamin’s Goethe essay. (Figures 3.18-19) This term was at that point already pivotal in her Benjamin portrait which she had sent to Paeschke before reading the *alternative* issue.

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599 In October 1967, cf. Footnote 496.
Overall, Arendt’s reading traces demonstrate that she read some pivotal publications in the Benjamin debate. Where it would be speculative to argue that she copied some of Scholem’s or Adorno’s arguments, her reading traces show that she at least knew that her arguments overlapped with theirs, and at points she references Scholem at least. Three observations based on Arendt’s reading traces corroborate that Arendt approached her work on Benjamin based on a strong antagonistic attitude to Adorno and the Frankfurt School: the absence of texts by Adorno in her archived library, Arendt’s obvious attention to Benjamin’s conflicts with Adorno in the letter edition and her marks in the *alternative*.

How does this antagonism translate into her portrait? Attending to its “Logik des Produziertseins” in the next chapter, I argue that Arendt increasingly moves away from the *Merkur* debate through her transatlantic perspective. Strongly informed (literally *put into form*) by her editorial agenda, Arendt distinctly develops her portraiture through a specific citational style in the shift from the German to the American version of her portrait.

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600 Szondi, “Traktat,” 286.
Chapter 4: Arendt’s Benjamin Portrait – Close Reading

“Hofmannsthal […] called it ‘schlechthin unvergleichlich’ (‘absolutely incomparable’), and the trouble was that he was literally right […]. The trouble with everything Benjamin wrote was that it always turned out to be sui generis.”

Hannah Arendt. “Walter Benjamin,” *Men in Dark Times*, 155

Arendt’s Benjamin portrait is distinct from all other interventions in the *Merkur* debate in argument and style. This distinctive quality becomes most evident through a transatlantic, comparative perspective. Already the difference between the lectures of 1967 and 1968 shows how Arendt develops her portrait in the transatlantic transition. While her main claim remains the same – “dass er [Benjamin:CM], ohne ein Dichter zu sein, dichterisch dachte”⁶⁰¹ – the framing changes: the Freiburg lecture of summer 1967 stages her claim directly as a challenge to Adorno’s and Scholems’ readings of Benjamin while the New York Goethe House lecture of 1968 offers the broader theoretical embedding of posthumous fame, moving the *Merkur* debate context to the background of her reading. In their published forms, the German and the American portrait amplify this transatlantic development by stylizing it: Set in writing, her portrait shows on its surface, rather than merely claims, how Arendt considers Benjamin a surface rather than depth thinker. From the German to the American version, it becomes increasingly clear how Arendt takes issue with Adorno’s and Scholem’s disappointed readings of Benjamin in terms of a lack of “depth.” In Arendt’s understanding of Benjamin as a poetic thinker, depth is contained in how Benjamin attends to the past by surfacing it and she positions herself as a critic of Benjamin as well as his interpreters by negotiating depth and surface in her particular mode. Therefore, her portrait is illuminating for the *Merkur* debate as well as for the current debate on criticism.

Similar to Szondi, Arendt quotes extensively and thus writes with Benjamin – making him part of the surface of her portrait – to show his singularity. Unlike Szondi, however, Arendt does not always clearly distinguish her object language (quotations from Benjamin) from meta language (her own writing). Thus, her voice at points seems to merge with Benjamin’s – an impression which Eva Geulen called “Mimikry ans Objekt,” as I mentioned before. But this merging is countered through a narrative contextualization and a performative audience address through which Arendt maintains distance from Benjamin. In other words, Arendt’s featuring of Benjamin on the surface of her portrait through citation is mediated by historical depth and reception-focused communication. Not only herein, Arendt’s portrait exceeds the literary focus of Szondi’s interpretation: Addressing and accounting for Benjamin’s singularity is an existential, political concern to Arendt where it is primarily an aesthetic, literary one to Szondi. In the following, I attend to how Arendt increasingly sharpens this distinctive style of her portrait, and with it also her argument about Benjamin, by comparing the German and the American versions in a close reading. Subsequently, I trace how Arendt’s critical style evolved in adjacent works.

4.1 Close Reading

As announced in the lectures, Arendt’s main argument about Benjamin is basically the same seemingly simple one in both essay versions, namely that Benjamin “thought poetically, but he was neither a poet nor a philosopher.” The main underlying proposition is that rather than in ideas, Benjamin was interested in appearances: “what profoundly fascinated Benjamin from the

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603 MDT, 156; “Benjamin I,” 62: “Was an Benjamin so schwer zu verstehen war, ist, daß er, ohne ein Dichter zu sein, dichterisch dachte […]”. In the American version, the same claim is: “What is so hard to understand about Benjamin is that without being a poet he thought poetically […]” MDT, 166.
beginning was never an idea, it was always a phenomenon."604 This interest in appearances shows, according to Arendt, in Benjamin’s preference for metaphors, for the everyday and adages, folk poetry and miniatures, for instance.605 The concern with appearance motivates Arendt’s affiliation of Benjamin with other poets like Brecht and Kafka, Hofmannsthal, Homer and Shakespeare – and above all, Goethe.606 Indeed, Benjamin’s Goethe essay – a “Meisterwerk deutscher Prosa,” as Arendt calls it – is central to Arendt’s characterization of Benjamin.607 Goethe plays a special role because his concept of the “‘Urphänomen’” captures for Arendt how Benjamin linked thought and appearance in a poetic way:

Das Urphänomen aber ist keine Idee, aus der sich eine philosophische oder theologische Theorie entwickeln ließe. Es ist vielmehr ein konkret und ‘materiell’ Auffindbares, in dem Bedeutung (dies goethesche aller Worte kehrt bei Benjamin immer wieder) und Aussehen oder Erscheinung, Wort und Ding, Idee und Erfahrung zusammenfallen.608

The link between idea and experiential reality as represented by the “‘Urphänomen’” is poetic, according to Arendt, because the essential poetic principle, metaphor, works in the same way; it “establishes the correspondances between physically most remote things […]” and “enables us to give material form to the invisible […] and thus to render it capable of being experienced.”609 In Arendt’s portrait, the “‘Urphänomen’” is not only a metaphor for metaphor but also the paradigmatic concept for how surface and depth are linked in Benjamin’s work: while a phenomenon is something that appears to aesthetic perception and is hence a thing of the surface, the “ur” adds historical depth to this materiality, pointing to a temporal development inherent in

604 MDT, 164; “Benjamin I,” 60.
605 “Benjamin I,” 50, 61f., 63; MDT, 158, 163, 165f., 168.
606 These affinities are discussed with respect to different qualities of Benjamin’s work. For instance, Kafka is referenced with respect to difficult father-son relationships and with respect to Benjamin’s relation to Zionism and the German language. Homer, in turn, is referenced in the context of Arendt’s illustration of metaphor as a poetic principle. Cf. “Benjamin I,” 51, 55, 62, 63; “Benjamin II,” 209, 218-220; “Benjamin III,” 305, 308, 313; MDT, 160, 166, 167, 170f., 172, 184f., 193, 205.
607 “Benjamin I,” 51.
608 “Benjamin I,” 58; MDT, 164.
609 MDT, 166; “Benjamin I,” 62.
the phenomenon. Arendt emphasizes that Benjamin’s underlying interest was historical; He hoped to access the original moment of history poetically, namely through citation. As I will elaborate below, Arendt argues this had become possible after the “break in tradition” through which the transmission of the past had lost its authority and therefore “would no longer require any interpretive or explanatory commentary” but could simply be cited.

While Goethe’s term, and its linking of surface and depth, has specific weight for Arendt’s characterization of Benjamin – both portrait versions conclude with it, giving Goethe the last word, as it were – Arendt’s adverbial characterization quoted above (that he “thought poetically”) emphasizes that he is not a poet like Goethe, but only “understood language as an essentially poetic phenomenon.” Arendt considers Benjamin methodically poetic but not actually a poet in terms of profession.

From the German Freiburg lecture to the American publication of her portrait, this core argument remains the same. Indeed, the overall argumentative structure I will elaborate on below is almost identical in the German and the American versions – after all, Arendt commissioned Zohn to translate the German draft into American English instead of writing a new version from scratch. However, Arendt’s rhetorical focus shifts as she adapts the text to the respective audiences. While the German version pivots mainly on how Benjamin thought poetically, the American version frames this argument by asking how Benjamin understood his task to be that of the critic.

It would be misleading, however, to assume that, based on Arendt’s respective portraits, a German reader would therefore consider Benjamin a poet, while an American one would think of

611 “Benjamin I,” 50, 58; “Benjamin III,” 305; MDT, 163, 193.
612 “Benjamin III,” 314; MDT, 206.
613 MDT, 205; “Benjamin III,” 314.
him as a critic. Arendt’s main point is that Benjamin cannot be easily grasped by any kind of categorization: Benjamin cannot be assimilated into any kind of ideology because he is genuinely “incomparable,” as Arendt states in the American version. (MDT, 155) Underlying the ‘poetic thinker’ argument, this appeal to Benjamin’s singularity helps to understand how Arendt herself negotiates surface and depth – aesthetic approximation and historical contextualization – in her portrait through citation and narrative. The role of singularity for Arendt’s portrait also illuminates why Arendt affiliates Benjamin with a canonical Western literary tradition and offers the two categories of the poet and critic despite dismissing categorization as insufficient for understanding Benjamin. Taking a closer look at both versions, I examine in the following how Arendt argues that Benjamin “thought poetically,” and critically, in order to mark and mediate Benjamin’s intricate singularity without isolating him.

4.1.1 German version

As in the case of the lectures, the development from the German to the American version of the portrait is generally one of emancipation from the Merkur debate and increasing emphasis on Arendt’s own argument and her singular style of portraiture. This development also shows in the step from the lecture to the portrait. While the challenge to Adorno’s and Scholem’s readings of Benjamin is similarly central to the German portrait version as it is to the Freiburg lecture, it is significantly decentralized. Structurally, Arendt shifts her agenda of correcting Adorno’s and Scholem’s “Mißverständnis“ from the beginning (where it is in the lecture) to the middle of the

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614 However, Liliane Weissberg has argued, based on the German version, that Benjamin is precisely not a critic for Arendt because of his poetic character. Cf. Liliane Weissberg, “Ein Mensch in finsteren Zeiten: Hannah Arendt liest Walter Benjamin” in Affinität wider Willen? Hannah Arendt, Theodor W. Adorno und die Frankfurter Schule, ed. Liliane Weissberg (Frankfurt a.M.: Campus, 2011), 177-209, 197
first part of the German version. Despite this rearrangement, the lecture remains a significant foil for the essay. Arendt takes over parts of the lecture verbatim, for instance the identical phrasing: “Das war ein Mißverständnis in mancherlei Hinsicht.”

In the American version, Arendt does not address this “Mißverständnis” explicitly – the respective three pages of the German version are simply dropped – which suggests that from the Freiburg lecture to the American version, Arendt increasingly foregrounds her own reading rather than dwelling on others’ misinterpretations of Benjamin. In other words, she reduces her involvement in the debate through the transatlantic transition, as New Yorker editor Shawn had suggested.

Instead of opening her German portrait with the charge against Adorno’s and Scholem’s misunderstanding, Arendt directly introduces her main argument that Benjamin was a poetic thinker by adopting one of Benjamin’s own most important literary motifs; namely the image of the “Bucklige,” which Arendt had already used in her correspondences with Helen Wolff and Hans Paeschke. Like all of the three parts of Arendt’s portrait (in German and English), this first part, also titled “Der Bucklige,” introduces this motto image through an epigrammatic quotation; Arendt quotes eight lines from Clemens Brentano’s and Achim von Arnim’s folk poetry collection Des Knaben Wunderhorn, which features the folk song. Based on Benjamin’s own repeated reference to and quotation of the image, Arendt takes it as representative of him. The image is

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616 “Benjamin I,” 57.
618 Cf. Footnote 520.
621 “Benjamin I,” 50.
prominently featured in major works like *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, *On the Concept of History*, and Benjamin’s Kafka essay.\(^{622}\) For Benjamin, in Arendt’s reading, it captured what Arendt had observed in her reading of his letters; That there was little in his life “was nicht schiefging.”\(^{623}\)

Her insight sets the sombre tone of the German version, yet she does not explicate the image's political dimension: Apart from in the folk song context, the image also circulated as a caricature with antisemitic currency, inviting antisemitic stereotyping in nineteenth-century publications like the *Münchner Bilderbogen*.\(^{624}\) By opening her portrait with this image, the antisemitic historical context and the stigmatization Benjamin struggled with become central concerns of Arendt’s portrait from the first few pages – albeit only implicitly, as part of the cultural semantic baggage of the hunchback figure.

Thus, Arendt’s distinctive negotiation of surface and depth reading becomes evident: Through citation, Arendt presents Benjamin on the aesthetic surface of her portrait, providing imagery and quotes which render her claims about Benjamin apparent. However, these quotes are embedded in an historical context which Arendt attends to in order to deeper understand Benjamin’s work and life. The depth thus added to the surface establishes critical distance between Arendt and Benjamin.

This is important because Arendt’s portrait prominently features Benjamin on its surface in both language versions. His words are “auffindbar” (to use the aforementioned description of Goethe’s “Urphänomen”) everywhere, in manifold quotations and paraphrases, most of which


\(^{624}\) [Münchner Bilderbogen 3,[1850], no.49-72, no.69], Heidelberg historic literature – digitized, https://doi.org/10.11588/DIGLIT.51432.22.
Arendt includes in both versions. She draws so heavily on Benjamin quotations – mostly from the letter and work editions – that they become default references for her essay to the extent that she leaves the decision to include the page references to her publisher’s discretion, as I demonstrated before. Her sentences are so deeply interwoven with Benjamin quotes that it is at points difficult to discern Benjamin’s and Arendt’s voices. As I noted before, Eva Geulen has called this stylistic quality “mimicry of the object.” Often has Arendt been therefore mistaken as identifying with her object; as if she was herself a “pearl diver,” and like him concerned with Benjamin as an “Urphanomen.”

But Arendt’s portrait is not a “pile[] of debris” of the kind that Arendt considers Benjamin’s life to have been. On the contrary, her portrait exactly aims at rescuing some of the debris by reintegrating them in her narrative, yet without assimilating their debris character. Eva Geulen has argued that Arendt approximates Benjamin, yet also maintains critical distance from him through narrative contextualization. Rather than presenting a pile of scattered fragments, Arendt narrates Benjamin’s life “als eine Folge von solchen Scherbenhaufen,” reconstituting a degree of coherence and consistency to what she argues Benjamin experienced as utmost fragmentation, caused and represented by the hunchback. While Arendt invites the reader to imagine how Benjamin experienced the painful link of “Missgeschick” and “Ungeschick” (bad luck and clumsiness) by providing his hunchback image for it, she relativizes this experience to a certain degree through a

626 Cf. for instance “Benjamin I,” 51ff.: “Daß er eine solche Professur mit all den damit verbundenen Verpflichtungen nicht wirklich wollte – ‘Vor fast allem, was mit dem glücklichen Ausgang gegeben wäre, graut mir’, ‘die altfränkische Postreise über die Stationen der hiesigen Universität ist nicht mein Weg’ – steht auf einem anderen Blatt. Er hatte schon sehr unwillig sich zur Dissertation entschlossen, da er das Doktorat für einen Zweck hielt, ‘der fürwahr die Mittel nicht heiligt.’”
629 MDT, 159; “Benjamin I,” 51.
historical narrative, reducing its overpowering, stifling, stigmatizing force by attending to its “background.” She demystifies the hunchback’s inexplicable impact by attending to the historical and political conditions to which Benjamin fell prey.

Arendt’s historical narrative has three different foci in the three respective parts of her portrait. Overall, this narrative structure is the same in the American version. In the following, I take the German version as the basis for reconstructing the narrative because it was drafted there first. In the first part, Arendt examines how Benjamin’s career as a writer was defined by the close connection between “merit, great gifts, clumsiness, and misfortune,” touching upon major examples of his works, including his Goethe essay Goethes Wahlverwandschaften, his intended “Habilitation” on the German Tragic Drama, and the “Baudelaire-Text.” These works specifically mark for Arendt how Benjamin’s financial insecurity, his publications, and his social relationships to authoritative figures in the academic and literary scene were linked. Arendt argues that on the one hand, the idiosyncratic quality of Benjamin’s work challenged his audiences, specifically academics who did not appreciate Benjamin’s quotational “tollste Mosaiktechnik.” On the other hand, Arendt argues that Benjamin clumsily, with a lack of political sensitivity for networking, forfeited his chance for recognition by powerful figures of the literary scene (like Gundolf, whose Goethe book Benjamin’s Wahlverwandschaften essay attacked) through his own folly. As the most financially fatal conflict arising from his work, Arendt elaborates on Adorno’s and Scholem’s disappointment with Benjamin based on his Baudelaire essay. The tragedy of this misfortune, Arendt suggests, consisted in the fact that it was based on the aforementioned

630 “Benjamin I,” 211; MDT, 174.
631 “Benjamin I,” 53: “Da brauchten nun wahrlich weder Antisemitismus noch schlechter Wille [...].“
632 MDT, 195; “Benjamin I,” 51.
634 “Benjamin I,” 53; MDT, 160.
635 Ibid.
misunderstanding, which is only addressed explicitly in the German version. How Benjamin used Marxism only as “heuristisch-methodische Anregung,” rather than being really ideologically committed to it, however, is addressed in both versions.636 Based on their misrecognizing of this methodical preference, Arendt argues, Adorno and Scholem had to be disappointed with the lacking dialectics in Benjamin’s work. They failed to consider Benjamin as what he actually was, namely the most important “Kritiker” of his time, whose relationship to poets like Brecht and Goethe Arendt considers much more important for his work than abstract ideologies.637

The second part, “Die finsteren Zeiten,” demonstrates how Arendt’s biographical narrative of the first part creates critical distance from Adorno’s and Scholem’s appropriations of Benjamin, in addition to mediating Benjamin’s self-image. Arendt wrests Benjamin away from ideological appropriation by providing a historical perspective, showing how Adorno’s and Scholem’s misunderstandings of Benjamin are based on a lack of attention to the socio-political conditions of his life. (This is already hinted at in the first part, when Arendt explains some of Benjamin’s “Mißgeschick” as inevitably based on the “circumstances” in Germany.638) In Arendt’s challenge to Adorno and Scholem, two different kinds of depth readings are at stake: a historicist versus an ideological one. Arendt explains Benjamin’s flirting with different kinds of ideological systems like Marxism or Zionism historically and argues that measuring Benjamin’s work in terms of “Philosophie oder Metaphysik oder auch Theologie,” misses the point.639

Arendt does not relinquish the notion of depth per se but uses it non-ideologically. This becomes clear in an ironic reusing of the “Tiefe” in the German version: Citing Brecht on how depth is poetically useless because it brings nothing to appearance, Arendt explores the depth of

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636 “Benjamin I,” 59; MDT, 163.
637 “Benjamin I,” 61.
638 “Benjamin I,” 52f.; MDT, 161f.
639 “Benjamin I,” 58.
Adorno’s and Scholem’s misunderstanding: “‘Die Tiefe ist eine Dimension für sich […] worin dann gar nichts zum Vorschein kommt.’ Das Mißverständnis aber reicht tiefer.” Adorno’s and Scholem’s misunderstanding, in Arendt’s opinion, is not only that Benjamin was never as ideologically committed as they thought but also that Brecht was not the first and prime poetic interlocutor for Benjamin, albeit an important one. Even more decisive, Arendt claims, was Goethe’s influence, which shows in Benjamin’s early works “aus der vormarxistischen Periode,” largely neglected by Adorno. So the depth Arendt adds to Adorno’s and Scholem’s perspective is a production historical perspective. But also, Arendt provides historical context for Benjamin’s experienced misfortune, relating his motifs and interests to the time and place of his life. She links the figure of the “flâneur,” for instance, closely to Benjamin’s experience of Paris as a city that allowed the foreigner to feel at home because its public spaces were simultaneously intricately private; they were “inside and outside at the same time.” Arendt’s elaboration on Benjamin’s attraction to the flaneur figure is largely descriptive as she attributes it to Paris as a city per se rather than considering it solely as Benjamin’s idiosyncracy: “strolling, idling, flânerie – Paris streets actually invite everyone to do [my italics:CM].” Similarly, Arendt’s claim that Benjamin found the mode of existence most fitting to his work in Paris exile is more descriptive than evaluative; she provides historical background for the “homme de lettres,” with its modern professional correlate, the critic or essayist. This position was so intricately linked to Benjamin’s French exile that he could only identify with it in French, as Arendt argues: “Nicht zufällig wählte er die französische Sprache, um diese Ambition mitzuteilen: ‘Le but que je m’avais proposé …

640 “Benjamin I,” 58.
641 Ibid.
643 Ibid.
644 “Benjamin II,” 212; MDT, 176.
c’est d’être considéré comme le premier critique de la littérature allemande […]”

Quoting Benjamin’s French self-description, Arendt marks its importance for Benjamin while maintaining the foreign character of the profession to the German context which was considered something “anrüchig Subversives” in Germany, as she explains.

Countering this German derogatory reputation of the critic, Arendt is interested in understanding, rather than evaluating, Benjamin’s attraction to this French position of the ‘first critic of German literature.’ It is not “verständlich,” she claims, without the historical context of what was called the “Jewish question,” and specifically the question of how to claim one’s place in a language and culture without assimilating into its Anti-Semitic mainstream. In this context, Arendt argues, Benjamin’s interest in the position of the critic is, like his trifling with Zionism and Marxism, explicable as a rebellious solution to the question of assimilation. Indeed, Benjamin was actually not interested in “the ‘positive’ aspect of either ideology” (of Marxism or Zionism) but in “the ‘negative’ factor of criticism of existing conditions.”

Through historical recontextualization, Arendt reconsiders what appears as Benjamin’s clumsiness and misfortune in the first part as his reaction to the Anti-Semitic culture in Germany in the second part. Thereby, she increases critical distance from Benjamin as she ascribes him more agency (albeit limited by the historical circumstances) than the mythical figure of the hunchback allows for: Given the devastating political reality, Benjamin sought “eine Position außerhalb des Literatur- wie des akademischen Betriebes“ because, Arendt argues, he did not want to assimilate into “bourgeois illusions and untruthfulness.”

Accounting for this historical background of

645 “Benjamin II,” 212; MDT, 176f.
647 “Benjamin II,” 218f.; MDT, 183.
648 MDT, 188; “Benjamin II,” 220.
Benjamin’s life and work, Arendt motivates her claim historically that Benjamin thought poetically and aspired to being a critic rather than identifying him with one of the two competing rebellious ideologies of Marxism or Zionism. Hence, her historical account counters Adorno’s and Scholem’s attempts of forcing Benjamin back into the Jewish tradition or true Marxist dialectics, respectively.\textsuperscript{650} Rather than assimilating him to these traditions, the second part of Arendt’s portrait historically motivates how Benjamin’s poetic mode of working was an attempt at rethinking tradition itself: After the “break in tradition” – the “Zusammenbruch der Tradition,” which Arendt does not further elaborate on at this point – Benjamin sought a new way of relating to the past, and Arendt considers his answer to be his poetic method, which is the main topic of the third part of her portrait.\textsuperscript{651}

The epigram of the third part remains within the topos of the sea invoked by the image of the “Schiffsbrüchiger” by the motto quote of the second part.\textsuperscript{652} Drawing on four lines from Shakespeare’s \textit{The Tempest}, Arendt introduces the pearl diver as the figure through which Benjamin responds to the disastrous shipwreck of his historical moment. With this metaphorical opening, the third part specifies how Arendt thinks Benjamin used the “positiven Erkenntnischancen” of his catastrophic position without giving in to any “Erlösungslüge” by committing to Marxist or Zionist ideology.\textsuperscript{653} Shakespeare’s verses introduce the “pearls” of past life that “suffer a sea-change,” that somehow get transformed into “something rich and strange.”\textsuperscript{654} At the end of the third part, Arendt characterizes Benjamin as the pearl diver:

\begin{quote}
Dies Denken, genährt aus dem Heute, arbeitet mit ‘Denkbruchstücken,’ die es der Vergangenheit entreißen und um sich versammeln kann. Dem Perlentaucher gleich, der sich auf den Grund des Meeres begibt, nicht um den Meeresboden auszuschachten und ans
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{650} “Benjamin I,” 56; MDT; 162f.
\textsuperscript{651} “Benjamin I,” 58; MDT, 193.
\textsuperscript{652} “Benjamin II,” 209; MDT, 172.
\textsuperscript{653} “Benjamin II,” 222; MDT, 190.
\textsuperscript{654} “Benjamin III,” 305; MDT, 193.
Tageslicht zu fördern, sondern um in der Tiefe das Reiche und Fremdartige, Perlen und Koralen, herauszubrechen und als Fragmente an die Oberfläche des Tages zu retten, taucht es in die Tiefen der Vergangenheit, aber nicht, um sie so, wie sie war, zu beleben und zur Erneuerung abgelebter Zeiten beizutragen. Was dies Denken leitet, ist die Überzeugung, daß zwar das Lebendige dem Ruin der Zeit verfällt, daß aber der Verwesungsprozeß gleichzeitig ein Kristallisationsprozeß ist [...].

Drawing on Shakespeare and Benjamin himself ("Denkbruchstücke"), this metaphorical description of Benjamin’s mode of thinking summarizes what the third part explores: How citation became Benjamin’s decisive historical method when he realized the irreparability of the “break in tradition and the loss of authority.” In place of transmitting the past, Arendt argues, Benjamin envisioned citation as a “method of ‘drilling’” to transplant elements of the past into the present. Arendt attributes his specific method of citation a surrealist quality based on an arrangement of quotes without interpretation, commentary or “any accompanying text.” Beginning with his Goethe essay, Arendt points out, Benjamin turned away from the scholarly world and its citational conventions of positioning quotes in footnotes “to verify and document opinion,” by rendering quotations his main text. Thus, preservation of the past becomes for Benjamin paradoxically premised on the destruction of its coherence: “the heir and preserver unexpectedly turns into a destroyer.” Consistent, binding truth, Arendt argues, was replaced for Benjamin by metaphorical statements – by what was immediately “significant or interesting.” Looking closely at how Arendt makes this argument shows that while she is referencing Adorno here, she does not take his position: “Was Adorno so sehr an Benjamins späteren Arbeiten mißfiel” is historically

655 “Benjamin III,” 314; MDT, 205f.
656 MDT, 193, 202f.; “Benjamin III,” 305.
657 MDT, 202; “Benjamin III,” 312.
658 Ibid.
659 Ibid.
660 MDT, 310; “Benjamin III,” 310.
mediated in Arendt’s portrait as she considers Benjamin’s preference for metaphor “legitim” and in keeping with the period.662

Given Arendt’s repeated references to Adorno, her relationship to him has been misconceived in a way that shows how crucial it is to take Arendt’s transatlantic perspective into account.663 For instance, in her essay “Walter Benjamin and the Right to Acedia,” Françoise Meltzer argues that Arendt, like Adorno, dismisses the poetic quality of Benjamin’s work and criticizes Benjamin in terms of a Calvinist or Marxist work ethic.664 Like Adorno, Meltzer suggests, Arendt stands at the beginning of a “veritable Benjamin industry” of scholarship whose concern is the protection of the diligently, methodically working “homo academicus” against the seduction of acedia that Benjamin paradigmatically represented.665 In her opinion, Benjamin rebelled against “the methodical life.”666

Meltzer’s reading shows ex negativo how attending to both versions of the portrait and their production and publication histories is crucial in order to understand the nuances of Arendt’s position on Benjamin. Reading the American version (in Illuminations) in isolation apparently ironically allows for aligning Arendt with Adorno – an affiliation Arendt would certainly not have appreciated much, as her anger towards him and the Institute for Social Research, as documented in her correspondences, demonstrates. Because Meltzer neglects the German version of the portrait, in which Arendt’s criticism of Adorno and Scholem is more explicit, her reading of Arendt’s portrait is lacking in two respects: Firstly, it overlooks that Arendt stages her argument of Benjamin as a poetic thinker exactly against Adorno’s (and Scholem’s) readings of Benjamin

662 “Benjamin III,” 311; MDT, 201.
663 Bejamin I, 50ff., 56ff.; MDT, 154, 162f.
665 Meltzer, Hot Property, 146.
666 Ibid., 154.
as a philosopher; that Benjamin is not a philosopher is a positive distinction rather than a defect for Arendt.\footnote{Meltzer argues that it is a defect. Cf. Meltzer, \textit{Hot Property}, 134, 136, 153.} Secondly, it misplaces Arendt in an academic camp in which she was certainly an actor but which was not her only affiliation, as I demonstrated in the previous chapter. Not only biographically, Arendt’s relationship to the academe was ambivalent – more importantly, her writing style breaks with academic conventions, which specifically the American version of her Benjamin portrait shows, as I elaborate on below.\footnote{Ibid., 131, 133, 142, 148.} Admittedly, Arendt contrasts Benjamin’s oddness with “dem normalen deutschen Geistesleben” and she associates this oddness with his preference for France. However, she considers both with a similar ironic tone, speaking of the “normal” German academic clientele as “diese Herren” whose modest “Bildung,” Arendt suggests, did simply not suffice to understand Benjamin’s work.\footnote{“Benjamin I,” 53.} Meltzer’s reading aptly points to the critical distance Arendt takes to Benjamin’s work but she overemphasizes this distancing due to a lack of awareness for the German version where Arendt marks her distance from Adorno and Scholem more explicitly.

Rather than collapsing Arendt’s into Adorno’s critical stance on Benjamin, Eva Geulen suggests that Arendt’s distancing from Benjamin consists exactly in her historically gained observation that Benjamin was too contemporary to be revolutionary: The idea is that where the break in tradition had already occurred, breaking with it had lost its political potency and therefore risked becoming reactionary. According to Geulen, Arendt presents Benjamin’s concern with “Echtheit,” “Ursprung,” and “reine[r] Ursprünglichkeit oder Authentizität” as a regression to a pre-modern ahistorical, auratic stage.\footnote{“Benjamin III,” 309; MDT, 199.} Specifically Arendt’s linking of Benjamin to Heidegger
in this context shows, for Geulen, that Arendt critiques both rather than rehabilitating Heidegger. Arendt argues that Benjamin’s mode “dichterisch zu denken” overlaps with Heidegger’s existential phenomenology because for both, “das Nennen, nicht eigentlich das Sprechen, das Wort und nicht der Satz” were the bearers of truth. This linking of Heidegger and Benjamin has been considered highly controversial because of Arendt’s neglect of methodological differences in their work, Benjamin’s own skepticism about Heidegger and, most obviously problematic, Heidegger’s fascism. While this reference to Heidegger may well be an artefact of the German publication context, Arendt’s referencing of Heidegger is actually not new; as I have demonstrated, Adorno discusses Benjamin in relationship to Heidegger as well.

However, Arendt’s critical distance from Heidegger and Benjamin – and Kafka for that matter, who participated in the same project of destruction – only shines through in the third part; it is difficult to pin down as Arendt never explicitly states her disagreement with them, let alone self-reflectively explicates her own methodological alternative. Geulen argues that Arendt “verweist [...] mit Recht auf die ‘Zweideutigkeit der Geste’ des destruierenden Zitats.” But the ambivalence Arendt points out is just that Benjamin (like Kafka in this passage) wanted to preserve and destroy at the same time – “Bewahren- und Destruierenwollen” – without explicitly discussing how this double desire is problematic. Geulen’s suggestion that what Arendt finds fault with is Benjamin’s commitment to the idea of aura provides an interpretive hint at where Arendt differs from Benjamin but this difference remains unarticulated in Arendt’s portrait itself. Indeed,

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672 “Benjamin III,” 311-13; MDT, 201-203.
673 Benjamin, Arendt und Benjamin, 21-31.
674 Cf. Footnote 297; Benjamin, Arendt und Benjamin, 21-31. As the Freiburg lecture was the first occasion at which Arendt and Heidegger met again, Arendt’s referencing of Heidegger in her portrait has been considered a tribute to him.
her critical perspective on Benjamin is intimated only subtly, for example by the adjective “merkwürdig” which appears three times in only one section in which Arendt discusses the “Einebnung” of differences through Benjamin’s type of collecting and its auratic concern with authenticity.

Rather than as an explicit claim, Arendt marks her critical distance stylistically. More specifically, this distance surfaces in the difference between Benjamin’s citational style and her own, with its strong narrative contextualization. The specific nature of this difference – and Arendt’s critical distance from Benjamin, Heidegger and Adorno, for that matter – becomes much more evident in the American version where Arendt introduces Benjamin to an audience largely unfamiliar with him. As I show for the American version, which also illuminates Arendt’s citational style in the German version, her criticism of Benjamin is constructive – performative and promotive – rather than destructive. However, as Meltzer’s reading of Arendt’s portrait in the American version shows, this constructive character only becomes evident against the background of the German portrait and its Merkur debate context. Understanding Arendt’s intricate critical perspective on Benjamin hence requires the transatlantic comparison.

Nuancing Meltzer’s and Geulen’s interpretations, a close attention to the stylistic differences between the German and the American portrait versions shows that Arendt’s critical distancing is also an intimate, caring approximation rather than debunking criticism. Examining the American version in comparison to the German one not only helps to understand how and why Arendt’s citational style differs from Benjamin’s. Also, the American version shows more clearly

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679 Liliane Weissberg has drawn attention to the interweaving of biographical narrative and citation in Arendt’s Benjamin essay but their relationship remains vague as Weissberg focuses on Arendt’s use of narrative but the type of narrative remains also unclear between categories such as fairy tale, sketch and palimpsest. Cf. Weissberg, Affinität, 196ff., 202, 204, 207.
wherein Arendt’s critical alternative to Adorno’s and Scholem’s editorial and interpretive appropriations actually consists in terms of a nuanced negotiation of surface and depth reading.  

4.1.2 American version

Apart from the dropped pages explicating Adorno’s and Scholem’s “Mißverständnis,” the American version of Arendt’s portrait differs from the German version in three main respects: a) a preface-like section on posthumous fame precedes the “hunchback” beginning of the first part, b) an exceptionally long block quotation from Benjamin’s Goethe essay links this preface and the hunchback part and c) a few footnotes in which Arendt vehemently attacks Adorno’s and his pupil’s Tiedemann’s Benjamin editions are abridged or cut completely in the translational transition from the German to the American version along with the three “Mißverständnis” pages. Where Arendt herself calls these changes “drastic[…],” examining them appears significant even where the portrait versions match in all other respects.  

Attending to these distinctive features of the American version in the following, I argue that Arendt’s challenge to Adorno and Scholem is more decentered here compared to the German lecture and portrait versions as it is more sharply conveyed stylistically instead of through explicit argumentation. Thus, the portrait’s distinct critical character independent of the Merkur debate context becomes more clearly visible. It emerges from an amplified citational style through which Arendt performatively preserves and promotes her subject. Thereby, the historical depth Arendt provides in the German

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680 Thus, I am expanding on and nuancing Geulen’s suggestion that Arendt’s critical writing is characterized by how she quotes the past. Cf. “Bucklicht Männlein,” 53: “wie sie diese Vergangenheit zitiert.”

681 MDT, 153-158ö “Benjamin I,” 56-60.

version is complemented by a focus on reception that links the contextualization of Benjamin in his time to the reader’s present moment.

4.1.2.a Drastic Changes – The Block Citation

The block quote is the change that most “drastically” demonstrates how Arendt simultaneously creates intimate proximity while also increasing critical distance from Benjamin through her citational style. As I demonstrated in the last chapter, Arendt inserts the block quote upon William Shawn’s (New Yorker editor) request to include a short introductory passage pinning down why Arendt considers Benjamin “significant.” The quote shows the centrality of Benjamin’s Goethe essay for Arendt’s portrait. The beginning of the quote reads:

In the introductory paragraphs to the essay on Elective Affinities, Benjamin explained what he understood to be the task of the literary critic. He begins by distinguishing between a commentary and a critique. (Without mentioning it, perhaps without even being aware of it, he used the term Kritik, which in normal usage means criticism, as Kant used it when he spoke of a Critique of Pure Reason.)

Critique [he wrote] 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. (MDT, 156)

The quote continues for almost a full page and culminates in Benjamin’s comparing of the critic to an “alchemist.” Paraphrasing this comparison, Arendt closes her framing of the quote by noting its unconventional singularity:

The critic as an alchemist practicing the obscure art of transmuting the futile elements of the real into the shining, enduring gold of truth, or rather watching and interpreting the historical process that brings about such magical transfiguration – whatever we may think

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of this figure, it hardly corresponds to anything we usually have in mind when we classify a writer as a literary critic. (MDT, 157)

This concluding commentary clearly marks that Arendt distances herself from Benjamin’s characterization of the literary critic’s “task.” To be more precise, Arendt does not distance herself so much but, using the first person plural, anticipates her American reader’s potential feeling of estrangement from Benjamin’s metaphorically complex conception and models a possible response. Such distancing through an explicit audience address – “whatever we may think of this figure […]” – is missing in the German version. A point where it would have possibly been fitting, for instance, could have been the similarly metaphorically heavy concluding passage of the portrait’s third part, quoted above in German – and analogously in English: “this thinking, fed by the present, works with the ‘thought fragments’ it can wrest from the past and gather about itself. Like a pearl diver who descends to the bottom of the sea […]” (MDT, 205) While this conclusion of the third part is provided without explicit critical distancing in both versions, the American reader, in contrast to the German one, is primed to take it “with a pinch of salt.” Based on Arendt’s critical comment on the Goethe essay block quote, the American reader is prepared to read Arendt’s poetic description of the pearl diver as her attempt at capturing Benjamin’s method without identifying herself with it. The German reader cannot draw on a similar preparatory distancing exercise.

Taking a closer look at Arendt’s framing of the block quote, this priming of the American reader points to a crucial quality of Arendt’s use of quotations. In contrast to the smooth weaving in of Benjamin quotes in the rest of the essay (in both versions), the block quote, in its unusual length, suggests that the reader’s attention ought to be momentarily arrested in a direct encounter with the translated Benjamin. What work does this arresting do? Rather than detaining or confining
Benjamin, it arrests to set free: Handing her reader Benjamin’s own words in translation (so that they may understand it), Arendt invites them to join her in interpreting the passage rather than providing an ultimate, correct interpretation of it: She does not actually specify the difference between Benjamin’s conception and what “we may think of this figure,” or what “we usually have in mind when we classify a writer as a literary critic.” By gesturing at the fact that we – herself and her readers – may have preconceptions from which Benjamin’s conception might differ, Arendt suggests that reading Benjamin requires reflecting on one’s own understanding of the “critic” in order to arrive at one’s own judgment about how Benjamin might have meant the term.

To understand how Arendt stimulates the reader’s judgment, let me take a closer look at her citational style. Considered theoretically, her implicit invitation of her readers to judge for themselves can be understood as a performative mode of citation. Arendt’s framing of the quote invites the reader to co-constitute the meaning of critic in Benjamin’s metaphorical description: Apart from her gesturing at the opacity and idiosyncrasy of Benjamin’s conception in her concluding comment, Arendt also subtly irritates and thus stimulates a reflection of the reader’s conception of critic in her introduction to the block quote. This stimulation has a transatlantic twist because Arendt presents an ambiguous English translation of the meaning of “Kritik.” Suggesting that Benjamin used a Kantian notion of criticism, Arendt at the same time translates the title of Kant’s first Kritik as “Critique,” which implies that the German “Kritik” is critique rather than criticism. (MDT, 156) Thus, Arendt gestures at the convoluted conceptual history of criticism and

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its relation to *critique* without clarifying its literary or philosophical contexts, let alone its meaning in the US as opposed to Germany. Rather than marking the differences, Arendt implicitly raises the question what criticism is. Performatively drawing out the Ancient Greek root of the term “κρίνω,” which means ‘to distinguish, to interpret, to question, to judge,’ Arendt invites the beginning of a new shared understanding of *critic* by facilitating a textual encounter that tragically never took place historically: Benjamin’s contact with an American audience. Through this encounter, Arendt explicitly expands the vivid plurality of voices of the past that enlivens her portrait generally – featuring such authoritative figures of the Western literary tradition as Heidegger and Homer, Kafka and Brecht, folk poetry and Shakespeare apart from Benjamin – to include her readers. Thus, Arendt turns the quoted Goethe essay “Stelle” into a proper *Bau-stelle* for her American reader by neither settling the question of “whatever we usually have in mind when we classify a writer as a literary critic” nor defining the “we.” Indeed, the meaning of “critic” falls back on the act of interpretation itself, which renders it self-referential and collaborative. Arendt models for the reader how to think with Benjamin, inviting them to decide if they want to belong to her “we” and if their ideas about what a critic is and does accord with Benjamin’s description. “What a critic’s task is,” consists of the judgment Arendt induces the reader to engage in.

This performative embedding of the block quote highlights a general feature of how Arendt quotes in both versions: Rather than presenting a Benjaminian “Scherbenhauen” of isolated

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685 *Logeion Online*, s.v. “κρίνω,” accessed December 6, 2023, https://logeion.uchicago.edu/%CE%BA%CF%81%CE%AF%CE%BD%CF%89; *Logeion Online*, s.v. “κριτης,” accessed December 6, 2023, https://logeion.uchicago.edu/%CE%BA%CF%81%CE%B9%CF%84%CE%AE%CF%82.

quotes, Arendt embeds quotes in her prose, rendering them part of her narrative. In other words, quotations are mediated by Arendt. As I argued with reference to Geulen’s reading, Arendt’s “mimicry” is counterbalanced at least to a degree by the critical distance she creates through her narrative mediation. The explicit embedding of the block citation calls for a more nuanced analysis of this depth for which the theoretical differentiation between citation and quotation is apropos. While both, citation and quotation, draw on the “embedding capacity” of discourse, citation does more than quotation. Goodman et al. define that both, citation and quotation “typically entail the reproduction of an earlier utterance in a way that marks that utterance as temporally and perhaps also ontologically distinct from the current speaker or context.” In their differentiation of quotational versus citational reproductions, they argue that citations somehow “transcend quotation” by recontextualizing in a different way.

Benjamin’s case is one prime example of how citation can exceed quotation. Drawing on Arendt’s observation of Benjamin’s “collecting of quotations,” Annie Pfeifer has discussed Benjamin’s citational practice, as paradigmatically develop in the Arcades Project, “as a form of textual or bibliographical collecting” that compiles and juxtaposes sources without interpretive

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689 MDT, 194; “Benjamin III,” 306.
mediation rather than commenting on the quoted text. Rather than embedding quotes in a linear narrative or chronology, Benjamin “decontextualizes, despoils, and appropriates.”

If citation is a decontextualizing mode of using quotes in Benjamin’s case, Arendt’s style would exactly not be citational. However, I consider the defining quality of citation in Pfeifer’s conception to be the absence of interpretation which Benjamin effects through decontextualization. Adorno finds fault exactly with Benjamin’s withholding of “Deutung” and “theoretische Interpretation” in his Baudelaire essay. Meltzer, in turn, criticizes Adorno exactly for finding fault with this quality of Benjamin’s writing, arguing that the interpretive standard Adorno invokes and demands misrecognizes the core of Benjamin’s project to use quotes non-linearly, and “unmediated by an authorial commentary (unannexed).” In contrast to Meltzer, who reads Arendt to invoke the same citational standard, I consider her to actually present a similarly critical stance towards interpretation as Benjamin, yet with a different twist, which her citational style shows. Rather than blasting context altogether and doing with “no interpretation” whatsoever, Arendt’s performative mediation of quotes defers interpretation, rendering the completion of her contextualization the task of the reader. In terms of depth and surface, Arendt does not merely add historical context to her analysis of surface phenomena in Benjamin’s work like the flaneur but also extends the depth into the future by involving her reader in completing the interpretive act.

690 Pfeifer, To the Collector, 118. Great divide. Affiliating Benjamin’s genuinely modern practice with postmodern aesthetics, Pfeifer reads Benjamin’s Arcade Project as the “paragon of Roland Barthe’s definition of a text as ‘a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture.’”

691 Pfeifer, To the Collector, 118f., 7. Pfeifer acknowledges the politically ambivalent status of appropriation as a genuinely modernist practice that can challenge authoritative claims over cultural heritage but is also a neutral, mundane human behavior.


693 Meltzer, Hot Property, 156.
While the block citation of the US version shows how Arendt’s mediation of quotes is performative, this quality also applies to Arendt’s general weaving of quotes in both versions. For instance, Arendt does not really resolve the metaphorical opacity of the Benjamin quote “Denkbruchstücke” in the third part, leaving its interpretation to the reader. (Are these fragments just literally quotes or also other elements of language or culture?) Also, while she provides ample socio-historical context for Benjamin’s conception of the critic in both versions, defining its ultimate meaning – interpreting it – remains the task of her readers, who thereby themselves are invited to become critics. Like Benjamin, Arendt cites but she cites performatively. Via this citational difference, Arendt maintains critical proximity and distance to Benjamin. While this difference and distancing remains implicit in the German version, wrapped up in estranging terms like “merkwürdig,” it becomes more explicit through the block citation in the American portrait.

4.1.2.b Drastic Changes – Posthumous Fame

Moreover, Arendt provides a theoretical motivation for her citational style in the second major change implemented in the American version: the prefacing section on “posthumous fame.” Nowhere else does Arendt name the problem that her portrait addresses as explicitly:

In the case of Benjamin that trouble (if such it was) can be diagnosed in retrospect with great precision; when Hofmannsthal had read the long essay on Goethe by the completely unknown author, he called it ‘schlechthin unvergleichlich’ (‘absolutely incomparable’), and the trouble was that he was literally right, it could not be compared with anything else in existing literature. The trouble with everything Benjamin wrote was that it always turned out to be sui generis.

The problem with being “absolutely incomparable” is, according to Arendt, that social recognition is based on comparability according to established criteria of social or professional classification:
The point is that in society everybody must answer the question of what he is – as distinct from the question of who he is—which is his role and his function, and the answer of course can never be: I am unique, not because of the implicit arrogance but because the answer would be meaningless. (MDT, 155)

Accordingly, someone who is “absolutely incomparable” is unlikely to receive social recognition in the form of fame, which, in contrast to “mere reputation” is economically effective enough to sustain a life. (MDT, 154) One problem hinted at here is that insofar as Benjamin’s economic situation became increasingly desperate, he would have urgently needed the financial benefits not only of a stable income but also of being famous. While her discussion of the financial implications of fame silently reminds us of the debate over the Institute for Social Research’s lack of financial and promotive support, which Arendt gestures at in her portrait’s first part, she makes sure not to accuse anyone specifically in this section: “Posthumous fame is too odd a thing to be blamed upon the blindness of the world or the corruption of a literary milieu.” (MDT, 154) Arendt mentions that accessibility to Benjamin’s works was crucial for his posthumous fame but Adorno’s and Scholem’s editorial impact is only marginally mentioned. Implicitly, she gestures at the significance of her own edition.

While oddness and blame suggest that posthumous fame is worse than fame, Arendt claims a higher value for posthumous fame than for fame, arguing that “it is less arbitrary and often more solid” and “seldom bestowed upon mere merchandise.” (MDT, 153) With this mysterious tone about what posthumous fame actually is, Arendt creates suspension for the reader and the desire to experience this “odd” phenomenon themself. Rather than being “shocked by Benjamin’s rise to prominence,” as Meltzer argues, Arendt’s prefacing section on posthumous fame is meant to boost,

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694 She introduces the “friend of his youth” and “his first and only disciple” only in a side comment as acquaintances “whose names at that time were still unknown.” Their work and letter editions she references even before mentioning their names, decentralizing their role as those “responsible for the posthumous edition of his works and letters.” (MDT, 154)
and to initiate in the US, this prominence. Indeed, the prefacing section shifts the focus away from
grief and blame about missed opportunities and the unchangeable past to the potential of
rehabilitation in the present; Arendt’s upfront situating of her portrait in the German debate in the
German version and the Freiburg lecture makes room for a much broader, theoretical
contextualization in the American version that creates a more general point of access for her
audience. In contrast to the Goethe House lecture which already included the prefacing section on
“Nachruhm,” Arendt’s staging of Benjamin’s posthumous fame in the American written version
moves beyond the sadness Arendt associates with fame generally, as her Denktagebuch note on
how fame is linked to melancholy shows. Accordingly, the sad, fateful image of the hunchback,
which opens the portrait in its German version, makes room for a more positive point of access.

Like the hunchback figure, posthumous fame was a concern of Benjamin himself, as I
mentioned before. Indirectly, the American opening thus stays close to Benjamin, providing a first
taste of what his criticism was concerned with. As Arendt does not mark this implicit citation, one
could argue that this opening is an example of her mimicry. With the “trouble” of Benjamin’s
incomparability in mind, which her portrait attends to according to the posthumous fame opening,
the function of her mimicry becomes evident here: It is meant to facilitate the “[i]mmediate,
instinctive” acknowledgment of Benjamin’s work as “absolutely incomparable,” which is the
necessary and sufficient condition for “posthumous fame,” as Arendt illustrates with
Hofmannsthal. Posthumous fame is premised on an appreciation of “uniqueness, that absolute
originality which can be traced to no predecessor and suffers no followers” as valuable rather than
as meaningless. Hence, Arendt’s prefacing section provides the central term based on which she
considers Benjamin worthy of posthumous fame: his “uniqueness.” Prepared through the

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695 Cf. Footnote 574.
“posthumous fame” section, the American reader’s curiosity is stimulated to experience Benjamin’s “uniqueness” themself.

The block citation shows that the “uniqueness” Arendt ascribes to Benjamin is not meant in an isolating way, relegating Benjamin to the realm of incomprehensibility or meaninglessness which the statement “I am unique” triggers, as Arendt notes. (MDT, 155) Rather, Arendt renders Benjamin’s incomparability comparable, communicable; the block citation shows how she attends to Benjamin’s “sui generis” character by provocingly remarking his strangeness, yet also mediating it in the same stroke as her polemic rhetoric of “it hardly corresponds to” exactly creates the correspondence it questions. Arendt emphasizes Benjamin’s exceptionality, marking him as different. But rather than othering him in an exclusionary way and relinquishing him as an outdated figure – as Meltzer argues – this marking operates in terms of the Merkwürdigkeit that Arendt points out in the third part (“peculiarities” in the American version (MDT, 198)). The remarkability Arendt ascribes to Benjamin matches Attridge’s notion of “singularity” as “being inventive in its difference.” In contrast to “uniqueness,” Attridge argues, “singularity” pluralizes identity by “introducing otherness into the sphere of the same.” 696

Through the prefacing section in the American version, it becomes evident that Arendt is actually concerned with Benjamin’s singularity – which stays implicit in the American version – not only as a quality that was central to his work in terms of “Echtheit” and authenticity but also as a quality attributed to himself. 697 Again, one could be tempted to therefore identify Arendt’s with Benjamin’s critical concern. However, examining how exactly Arendt stages Benjamin’s “uniqueness” sheds light on how she moves beyond the question of authenticity and identity; how

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696 Attridge, The Singularity of Literature, 91.
697 “Benjamin I,” 60; MDT, 197, 199f.
she embraces the difference inherent in mimicry. Ironically, this can be understood in terms of Benjamin’s notion of aura.

4.1.3 Interactive Aura – Adopted by Arendt

Through her changes in the American version, Arendt draws on a nuanced understanding of aura, as articulated by Benjamin across several drafts and texts: On a San Pellegrino note, the Little History of Photography (1931) and the Baudelaire essay (1938), Benjamin considers aura an interactive phenomenon that emerges from someone’s investment of something to return the gaze, rather than designating an objective quality of authenticity. As I argue in more detail in my Sontag chapter, this interactive conception of aura receives significant literary potentiality in Benjamin’s Kafka essay (1934) and in Berlin Childhood around 1900 (1938), where the auratic investment in a photograph stimulates a portrait and a literary transformation of the actual photograph.

This transformative understanding – Caroline Duttligner has called it “post-auratic aura” – complicates the famous definition of Work of Art essay of “aura” as “the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be.” Where the interactive condition yielding the phenomenon is emphasized, its intricate embeddedness in historical context becomes significant: Benjamin argues in the Work of Art essay that aura is destroyed in the age of technological reproduction as its “authenticity” – “here and now of the work of art – its unique existence in a particular place” –

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700 Benjamin, Selected Writings, vol. 3, 101-134, here 122; ibid., vol. 4, 251-284, here 255; cf. also Pfeifer, To the Collector, 93, 269; Duttligner, “Imaginary Encounters,” 79, 90.
gets lost. But by thinking aura as an interactive phenomenon, he shifts the focus from the idea of an original object to the “here and now” of the process of reception. In other words, the deictic frame of reference shifts from the object to the observer. When aura appears upon an observer’s investment of an object with the ability to return the gaze, it is not tied to the object’s originality anymore and thus also detached from changed conditions of technological reproduction; “post-auratic […] aura” appears also in the era of mechanical reproduction.

Through performative citation and in the posthumous fame preface, Arendt draws on Benjamin’s auratic “uniqueness” as a phenomenon that arises from interacting with his work. In terms of his “post-auratic aura,” Arendt invites to bemerken, or simply sich merken – to recognize and remember Benjamin in the startling singularity he presents. Arendt prompts the reader to read his work critically in a sense of reflecting on its specificity in interacting with it. The focus is facilitating the process of engagement with his work, and allowing her audience to imagine their own Benjamin, rather than authoritatively presenting – celebrating or debunking – one that is seemingly authentic.

Thus, Arendt draws exactly on arguably the politically most problematic concept in Benjamin’s work which specifically shows in his citational style. In Geulen’s reading, Arendt challenges the lack of commentary and contextualization in Benjamin’s citational style which facilitates a re-auratization by obliterating historical differences and relinquishing contextual specificity. In this reading, Benjamin fails to counter the end of tradition that had already happened anyway, which invites abuse for new ideological intent and therefore has reactionary risks.

701 Benjamin, Selected Writings, vol. 4, 253f.
702 Cf. Pfeifer, To the Collector, 93, 269; Duttlinger, “Imaginary Encounters,” 94.
703 “Benjamin III,” 312; MDT, 203.
Adorno had challenged Benjamin in just that way in his Baudelaire-letter of November 1938: that his deferral of interpretation conjured up the auratic power of the materiality featured in his essay. Circling back to the vocabulary of surface versus depth reading, Arendt’s charge against Benjamin would in this sense be a lack of depth and an aestheticization of surface. However, in Pfeifer’s reading, Arendt “gestures toward the collector’s interventionist, revolutionary stance that disturbs ‘mindless complacency.’” That Arendt can be read both ways suggests that her reading of Benjamin does not resolve the ambivalence inherent in his work but mediates it, by staging his singularity through her performative citational style.

4.1.4 Access over Authenticity – Preservation through Promotion

The clearest sign for Arendt’s mediation of Benjamin as singular (or “inventive in its difference” rather than unique, is that she presents Benjamin’s works solely in translation. As Arendt emphatically marks the untranslatability of the original in other cases, the absence of the German here is striking. All the more so as her exchange with her publishers (Paeschke and Fertig, for instance) and the translator Zohn suggests that she is very much concerned with the quality of translation. Her increased concern with accessibility (rather than authenticity) in the American version surfaces also in her decision to provide the English translation for the French quotation of Benjamin’s self-identification as a critic – while she provides only the French in the German version. As a note to her translator Zohn shows, Arendt wanted the text “to be adjusted

704 Benjamin Briefe, vol. 2, 783-786.
705 Pfeifer, To the Collector, 146.
706 Attridge, Singularity, 91.
707 Arendt often quotes bilingually, or only provides the original. Cf. MDT, 2, 3f., 6, 7f., 12; “Benjamin III”, 305. Cf. also BPF, 7, 44. Cf. Arendt, “Fernsehgespräch mit Günter Gaus,” 46f.
708 “Benjamin II,” 212; MDT, 176f. Maybe Arendt presupposed higher French literacy in her German than in her American audience.
to an American audience.”

Maybe presenting Benjamin’s often-obstinate German, in exceptional length moreover, would have overtaxed an American audience largely unfamiliar with him and the German language, especially since Arendt was the first to introduce Benjamin in translation.

Overall, the American version helps to see more clearly wherein Arendt’s alternative to the “great many negative statements” consists which, Arendt argues, one would need to fit Benjamin into a common (job) description as society never got an answer to the “what” question in his case. (MDT, 156) In contrast to Adorno and Scholem, who dwell on how Benjamin did not fit the frameworks they applied to his work, Arendt provides her citational alternative that stylizes (shows in writing) the one “positive” category she offers, namely the critic. Instead of mistaking him for a philosopher, scholar, philologist, theologian, translator, for a Marxist or Zionist, Arendt considers Benjamin as a critic, a fitting figure because of the profession’s in-betweenness; as I demonstrated in my framing chapter, criticism bridges academic and public institutions concerned with preserving, analysing, evaluating, and also between promoting literature and literature itself. But as a categorical description, even critic fails to grasp the “who”, which only the act of utterance itself can convey. Therefore, Arendt states that Benjamin was a critic only in the subjunctive mood, through the adverbial phrase “that he thought poetically,” and by means of the performative block citation.

710 Benjamin, Arendt und Benjamin, 42.
711 Meltzer, Hot Property, 135.
713 Arendt’s adverbial emphasis of Benjamin’s poetic character can be read as another attempt to avoid categorization: “I shall try to show that he thought poetically, but he was neither a poet nor a philosopher.” MDT, 156.
714 Meltzer fails to acknowledge this. Meltzer, Hot Property, 151: “the category into which she finally classifies Benjamin (having earlier grouped him with the ‘unclassifiable ones’) […]”
The American version also illuminates Arendt’s indebtedness to and critical distancing from Benjamin. While her implicit suspicion about Benjamin’s concern with the “Kriterium der Echtheit” conveys a critical stance towards one specific reading of the concept of aura, her performative citational response to it, as amplified by the block citation, develops another reception-focused reading, pointing to the ambivalence inherent in Benjamin’s work itself. Moreover, Arendt’s intricate inheritance and development of Benjamin’s definition of the critic consists in her focus on reception. Arendt’s focus on creating access rather than claiming to know and conjuring up a supposedly “original” Benjamin can be read as a continuation of Benjamin’s own recurring thoughts on reception processes, fame and the “afterlife” of art works that he discusses repeatedly in different contexts. In *The Task of the Translator*, an essay that was supposed to conclude his book on the critic, Benjamin argues that in its afterlife, a work of art always changes: “For in its afterlife – which could not be called that if it were not a transformation and a renewal of something living – the original undergoes a change.” Drawing on Julian Hirsch’s *Genesis des Ruhmes*, Benjamin was concerned with the role of critics in creating and boosting great works of art’s fame. He became increasingly concerned with the contemporary productivity of reception, shifting his focus to concepts like “Nachleben” and “Erfolg.” Even in the *Work of Art* essay, Benjamin acknowledges that preservation implies change in his discussion of how aura is embedded in tradition, arguing that the “uniqueness of the work of art is identical to its embeddedness in the context of tradition” and that “tradition is thoroughly alive and extremely changeable.”

715 Pfeifer, *To the Collector*, 95, 269f.
718 Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, 256.
This notion of tradition as malleable is a key condition and result of Arendt’s Benjamin portrait. In contrast to Benjamin, she does not contribute “blasting” the tradition further, as Benjamin arguably did with his decontextulazing, fragmentizing and therefore auristicizing citational style. Rather, she fleshes out a seed planted in Benjamin’s idea that tradition is “changeable” rather than hopelessly broken. With her performative citational style, she creates a transatlantic tradition for Benjamin, herself and her readers by linking of such seemingly incompatible figures as Goethe and Heidegger, Shakespeare and Brecht, Homer and Kafka. In both portrait versions, Arendt finds: “there was no such thing as a ‘return’ either to the German or the European or the Jewish tradition.” Yet, Arendt closely links Benjamin to Goethe, undoubtedly still the most paradigmatic author of the German literary canon. This affiliation can be dismissed as a distorting act of “assimilation” with a tradition that Benjamin precisely rebelled against. In this sense, Arendt would exactly commit the assimilationist mistake she charges her fellow Jewish refugees with in her 1941 polemic “We Refugees,” which was that “We adjust in principle to everything and everybody.” But such dismissal fails to acknowledge the critical nuances implied in the performative way in which Arendt stages Benjamin’s singularity. The reason why Arendt marks Benjamin’s “uniqueness” is precisely to protect him against ideological appropriation – while also creating an audience for him.

Charging Arendt with assimilating Benjamin would have a cynical taste to it where Arendt’s motivation is to make Benjamin “significant” to a global readership and to compensate for some of the tragic, historically and politically conditioned lack of recognition Benjamin suffered from during his lifetime. Another way to understand Arendt here is to invert the

719 MDT, 195; “Benjamin III,” 306.
720 Arendt, “We Refugees,” 272.
assimilative direction: Arendt appropriates the German literary canon for Benjamin (and for herself) rather than assimilating him with it. Karen Feldman has noted that this appropriative stance also serves Arendt’s own writing, arguing that she “invents a specifically literary authoritativeness” through citation, creating an authoritative “literary provenance” for herself and her objects. In critical continuity to Benjamin’s work itself, Arendt simultaneously re-integrates Benjamin in a canonical literary tradition and poetic context while also emphasizing the critical character of his work; namely that it is irreducibly singular in a way that requires ever new interpretive efforts on part of every single reader to understand it.

4.1.5 Changing the Terms of the Benjamin Debate

To account for Arendt’s performative citational style is not only important for a nuanced understanding of her critical approximation of Benjamin. Even more importantly, it shows how Arendt counters what she criticizes as Benjamin’s ideological appropriation by Adorno and Scholem. Arendt’s alternative consists in featuring Benjamin on her portrait’s surface more prominently than them while adding the historical and reception-focused depth. Compared to Arendt’s portrait, Benjamin’s voice is strikingly absent in Adorno’s and Scholem’s essays about him – a fact that Heißenbüttel was the first to note in his two Merkur reviews. These texts contain many fewer quotes (from Benjamin or others), let alone any block citations. As I argued, there is little of the “leibhafte [...] Fühlung mit den Stoffen” Adorno observes in Benjamin’s work to be found in Adorno’s own essays. In contrast to Adorno, who mentions but does not cite

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722 In turn, Meltzer’s case shows that aligning Arendt with Adorno is only possible when overlooking Arendt’s citational distancing. Geulen has noted that Arendt’s historical perspective challenges ideological appropriation. Cf. Geulen, “Bucklicht Männlein,” 41, 46f.
Benjamin’s “Sätze” behind which the reader is to sense something.\footnote{Cf. Benjamin, \textit{Schriften}, XIX.} Arendt features Benjamin as a conversational partner on the surface of her portrait, rather than merely telling the reader about him. In this sense, Arendt not only provides more evidence for her claims about Benjamin than Adorno but also presents rather than represents Benjamin, her evidence being the “Gegenstand” Benjamin himself.\footnote{Cf. Ibid., XIV.}

While Arendt demonstrates that she is familiar with Adorno’s and Scholem’s essays on Benjamin – she explicitly credits them for arguments or anecdotes she references – she emancipates herself citationally not only from Adorno but from the German debate more generally.\footnote{MDT, 161, 163, 164, 169; “Benjamin I,” 54, 59, 60f.} Her distancing from a German academic style of providing evidence becomes especially clear in the changes she makes to four footnotes in the first section of the American portrait.\footnote{Cf. “Benjamin I,” 50, 55-57 – in comparison with MDT, 161 164, 167. These footnotes were added in the process of writing the German essay after noticing the debate. Cf. Fries, “Ende der Legende,” 411f.} Of particular importance is Arendt’s abridging of (what was in the German version) an exceptionally long footnote, wherein she accuses Benjamin editor Rolf Tiedemann (a former student of Adorno’s) of pompous and philologically questionable editorial ethics. Tiedemann’s “polemische Interpretation,” Arendt argues, distorted Benjamin’s insistence on a philological method in his Baudelaire essay. She considers this distortion to serve an appropriation of Benjamin for a speculative, sociological philosophy of art in Adorno’s fashion.\footnote{“Benjamin I”, 56f.} Where Arendt drops this tirade against Tiedemann’s “professoraler Wichtigtuerei” from the American version, it actualizes the independence she ascribes to Benjamin in another footnote (also dropped) in which she emphasized “[d]ie Unbestechlichkeit von Benjamins Urteil, die letztlich unantastbare Unabhängigkeit.” (MDT, 55, 57)
Ironically, Arendt’s tone in the tirade against Tiedemann is quite polemic, so much so that one could indeed accuse her of being guilty of her own charge (that of a “polemische Interpretation” as opposed to a “philologische Erklärungen”). Doing without the tirade in the American version, Arendt resists engaging in the heated debate. That she thereby also skips the ethical charge of a lack of philological rigor is to her advantage as she adheres to the invoked scholarly rigor only loosely, if at all. In contrast to other major works – like her dissertation on Augustine or, more apropos, her Brecht essay – Arendt provides very few footnotes in both versions of the Benjamin portrait, indicating a non-scholarly citational mode. Further, the block citation most clearly exhibits Arendt’s unwillingness to relegate quotations to the notes where they would merely “verify and document” scholarly opinions. Also, the block citation is marked only by an inquit “[he wrote]” and Arendt’s intext reference; there is no footnote reference for the quote, which would have unambiguously identified it as such. (MDT, 156) Paeschke’s decision to drop the references in the German version indicates the non-scholarly quality of the portrait: Too many interrupting brackets would turn the reader into a philologist, Paeschke argued. While the ultimate shape of her portrait was not supposed to be scholarly, Arendt still meticulously checked references in galleys and proofs, as her correspondence with New Yorker publisher Shawn shortly before the first American publication in his magazine suggests.

However, Arendt’s main challenge to Tiedemann is not that he fails to deliver evidence for his claims but rather that he claims to provide the one correct interpretation that is true in the sense that it could be proven. Arendt’s key comment in the dropped tirade is: “Benjamins wirkliche

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730 “Benjamin l”, 57.
731 As I argued this was agreed on together with Paeschke. Cf. Footnote 500. The Brecht essay features plenty of poetry block quotes. Cf. MDT, 207-249, specifically 214, 219-223.
Stellung bedarf keiner ’Beweise,’ die Herr Tiedemann ja auch nicht gibt.“\textsuperscript{734} In other words, a claim about Benjamin that requires proof is always already wrong; Benjamin’s work is self-evident, Arendt suggests, it displays its truth without proof. Similar to Szondi’s use of quotes as “Hinweise,” rather than “Beweise,” Arendt grants Benjamin substantial agency in the critical act of interpretation. But Arendt’s alternative is more reader-oriented, as the block citation clearly shows. She provides Benjamin—“Stellen” based on which her readers may themselves encounter “Benjamins wirkliche Stellung.”\textsuperscript{735}

Thus, Arendt’s portrait changes the terms of the debate, shifting the focus from \textit{correctly} understanding to \textit{understanding} Benjamin as an open-ended process. Specifically the American version realizes this shift with the performative block citation, which presents Benjamin as a critic: as an in-between figure whose professional and ideological identity becomes a question of interpretation. Arendt tentatively suggests that Benjamin was \textit{at most} a critic, if he was anything at all (apart from \textit{someone}).\textsuperscript{736} Performatively handing over the question of the critic to her reader in the American version, she suggests that there is not \textit{one} correct understanding. Indeed, in Arendt’s portrait, \textit{correctness} of reading Benjamin rather consists in the self-reflective awareness of repeated failures to describe or classify Benjamin once and for all. Understanding Benjamin correctly, in Arendt’s sense, literally remains an open-ended project, freed from those whom she elsewhere calls the “Herren Interpretaster.”\textsuperscript{737}

\textsuperscript{734} “Benjamin I,” 57.
\textsuperscript{736} Cf. “Benjamin I,” 57f.; MDT, 156.
\textsuperscript{737} Arendt, \textit{Der Briefwechsel}, 640.
In contrast to Adorno and Scholem, Arendt thus renders the task of criticism a central question in her portrait via citation, exposing her own limits and challenges in these (citational) terms.738 Thereby, she transforms her initially direct challenge to Adorno’s and Scholem’s appropriations into a stylistic difference which only really becomes evident if one attends to the American and German portraits comparatively. By handing over significant critical power to the reader, Arendt emancipates herself and Benjamin from the German academic context, transitioning to a more publicly-oriented political criticism.

4.1.6 Transatlantic “Wirkung”

Arendt’s transatlantic editorial and publication practice challenges persisting paradigm of national, monolingual literary history.739 To account for how Arendt bridges national and linguistic borders means shifting away from framing her portrait as a reaction to the Merkur debate.740 Rather than a passive coincidence, Arendt’s engagement with Benjamin overlapped with the debate for some time but preceded it significantly.741 The publication of Arendt’s Benjamin portraits coincided with the finalization of her editorial work on Benjamin in America and must therefore be considered as one piece of a much more comprehensive editorial puzzle. The public debate escalated only after she had fought for about twenty years to publish Benjamin in the US.742

Limiting Arendt’s intervention to its German half helps to reinforce the Frankfurt School’s

738 Adorno does not explicate his own interpretative method leading to the “correct understanding” but comments on his editorial method on the last two pages of his introduction. Cf. Benjamin, Schriften, XXV – XXVII.
740 This has been the tendency in Frankfurt School focused approaches even where the goal is rewriting the School’s history. Cf. Fries, “Ende der Legende.” Cf. also Mattner, “Transatlantic Benjamin.”
742 Benjamin, Arendt und Benjamin, 146.
discursive dominance, even as that dominance is problematized, as her transatlantic alternative is lost from sight.\textsuperscript{743}

While it seems that Arendt adopts the title of Unseld’s collection \textit{Illuminationen}, suggesting a connection with, and continuation of, the German Benjamin reception,\textsuperscript{744} her triple publication in the US wrests Benjamin away from German ideological provincialism. (As I argue below, her title is more probably a tribute to Karl Jaspers than to Unseld.) This widespread approach targeted broader audiences through the \textit{New Yorker}, as well as two non-academic books. The \textit{New Yorker} publication in particular augments the unique \textit{Wirkungspotential} of her editorial, performative portrait and its distinctness from the masculine idea of “Wirkung” that she famously dismisses in a televised interview from 1964.\textsuperscript{745} Indeed, Arendt’s commitment to a trans-academic audience with such a popular magazine as the \textit{New Yorker} suggests that she after all wanted to have an impact.\textsuperscript{746}

Considered in terms of surface, the magazine publication amplifies her portrait’s quality of mediation and accessibility through highly suggestive, engaging advertisements to a degree that risks a manipulative, commercialized contextualization. Because this imagery has a commercial function, it could be challenged as misusing Arendt’s Benjamin portrait as a selling point – arguably a worse kind of ideological appropriation than Adorno’s and Scholem’s interpretive,

\textsuperscript{746} On the \textit{New Yorker’s} popularity: Ben Yagoda, \textit{About Town: The New Yorker and the World It Made} (NYC: Scribner, 2000).
editorial distortions. However, Arendt apparently considered this risk counterbalanced by the fact that she would reach a much broader audience through a medium like the *New Yorker* than through merely a more academic publication. Moreover, the advertisements are strikingly fitting for Arendt’s portrait, underlining her provocative problematizing of Benjamin’s tragic end, commenting subtly on the Benjamin debate as a hub of legends on Benjamin, implicitly invoking aspects of his work and subtly promoting Arendt’s own work. For instance, one advertisement for luxury liners reminds of the transatlantic crossing Benjamin never experienced; a second one advertises a mink dress by Jacques Kaplan with the question “What becomes a legend most?” For the reader of the portrait with the posthumous fame preface, the answer could be: Benjamin. A third advertisement shows a Kodak filming camera, reminding of Benjamin’s fascination for film, which Arendt does not cover in her portrait. A cynical taste has an advertisement for the Martin Marinetta Corporation (for military and spacecraft equipment) with the headline “They died for a good cause.”

![Image](https://archives-newyorker-com.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/newyorker/1968-10-19/flipbook/084/)

**Figure 4.1: Arendt, “Walter Benjamin,” *New Yorker*, October 19, 1968**

Specifically striking is an advertisement for “Acti-Vita Cream” that subtly promotes Arendt’s own work (*Vita aktiva oder vom tätigen Leben* appeared 1960, two years after *The Human Condition*.

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of 1958) – ironically with a stereotypically feminine product and an image that reminds of Arendt’s own profile:

![Image of Acti-Vita Cream advertisement](image)

**Figure 4.2: Arendt, “Walter Benjamin,” New Yorker, October 19, 1968**

Apart from these advertisements, the *New Yorker* adds its own comment on Arendt’s portrait that is apropos to the question of critique versus criticism: The first page features a caricature showing a couple ringing at a door bell, probably exchanging a last preparatory private remark before entering for what might be a dinner invitation. On the level of common sense conversational etiquette, the remark invokes the habit of approaching a discussion through perpetual contradiction, one could call it suspicion or critique, rather than affirmative agreement. In the context of Arendt’s portrait, the remark is apropos on several levels: On the one hand, Arendt’s portrait is her own “au contraire” contribution to the Benjamin debate. On the other hand, negation is central to Adorno’s dialectics. The idiom “to verb someone to death” could be read as a comment on Adorno’s conflict with Benjamin over the Baudelaire work and its fatal consequences. The metaphorical sense of contradicting someone so that they are tired out in a conversation would then have a quite cynical literal meaning in the sense that Adorno’s contradicting of Benjamin has been
read as one factor for Benjamin’s increasing desperation, which, maybe, contributed to his decision to take his own life.

Figure 4.3: “And let’s not to ‘Au contraire’ everybody to death this evening.” Arendt, “Walter Benjamin,” *New Yorker*, October 19, 1968:

Whoever is addressed with this caricature, it provides another level of depth to Arendt’s portrait, another offer for the reader to engage more actively with it and the debate which Arendt only hints at in her American portrait. Similar to how the “posthumous fame” section Arendt adds to the American version a discussion of the general social problem she tackles with her Benjamin portrait, the advertisements hint at the Benjamin debate context only on a general level, very subtly signposting some political, ethical issues raised in the portrait, accessible to an audience unfamiliar with the debate.

Addressing her active reviewing and commentative publication practice, I already argued that a broader reach was important to Arendt from the beginning of her writing career. Exceptional to the Benjamin essay is in this context its genuine transatlantic initiative. Given the popularity of *Illuminations* as an introductory college edition to Benjamin’s works, Arendt’s portrait until today accounts for the fact that “Deutsche Literatur wird nicht ausschließlich in deutscher Sprache geschrieben und gelesen“ and “Literatur macht nicht an Grenzen Halt.“ 748 *Illuminations* remains

much more globally-prominent than German editions like Suhrkamp’s *Illuminationen*, circulating in other major languages such as Chinese.749

4.2 The Portrait – Political, Philosophical, and Stylistic Preliminaries

How much Arendt’s Benjamin portrait contributes to the development of a distinctive kind of critical style can be systematically examined by broadening the perspective to other parts of her work. Between her arrival in the US in 1941 and 1968, Arendt increasingly developed a repertoire of theoretical vocabulary and stylistic elements related to her editorial work and the task of criticism. An obvious intertext is *Men in Dark Times*, in which the Benjamin portrait is surrounded by similar portraits. *Men in Dark Times* brings up the question of the philosophical underpinnings of Arendt’s concept of criticism which I will explore in other parts of Arendt’s work predating *Men in Dark Times*, including *The Human Condition* and *Between Past and Future*.750

Overall, Arendt’s concept and style of criticism builds significantly on her reading of Karl Jaspers. Contradicting the assumption that the Benjamin portrait indicates a conciliatory relationship to Heidegger, which Geulen already challenged, the critical concept Arendt articulates suggests that, via the genre of the literary portrait, she in fact realizes significant philosophical tenets of her reading of Jaspers.751

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749 Searching WorldCat reveals a variety of languages into which *Illuminations* was translated, including Korean, Polish, Swedish, Lithuanian, Spanish, just to name a few. Cf. “WorldCat. Search results for ‘kw:Illuminationen au:Benjamin,’” WorldCat, OCLC, accessed December 7, 2023, https://www.worldcat.org/search?q=kw%3AIlluminationen++au%3ABenjamin&fq=&dblist=638&fc=ln:_25&qt=show_more_ln%3A&cookie.


4.2.1 Illuminating Dark Times

Already in the preface to Men in Dark Times, Arendt describes her project as a challenge to Heidegger’s philosophy. Against his dismissal of the public realm as a sphere in which “‘the they’” and “‘mere talk’” obscure the essence of human existence which, in his mind, requires “solitude,” Arendt embraces just that public sphere as the most important space of appearance for human “deed and word.” (MDT, viii) While acknowledging Heidegger’s “relevance,” Arendt clearly proposes an alternative approach to the “‘dark times’” (of Fascism, the war and the Holocaust, it is implied) in opposition to him. Challenging Heidegger’s “sarcasm, perversely sounding statement, Das Licht der Öffentlichkeit verdunkelt alles;“ Men in Dark Times actualizes Arendt’s conviction,

[that even in the darkest of times we have the right to expect some illumination, and that such illumination may well come less from theories and concepts than from the uncertain, flickering, and often weak light that some men and women, in their lives and works, will kindle under almost all circumstances and shed over the time span that was given them on earth – this conviction is the inarticulate background against which these profiles were drawn. (MDT, ix)]

Based on this conviction, the project Men in Dark Times is to re-illuminate the darkness of the “first half of the twentieth century with its political catastrophes” by attending to the light shed by some “contemporaries” of that era. (MDT, vii) The genre Arendt suggests as fitting for this project is the “profile.” As I demonstrated, the New Yorker editor William Shawn applied this term to her Brecht essay (which is also included in the collection) in spring 1965. He considered it to be “a partial portrait rather than a full portrait or a pile of facts or a biography” that captures the depicted person’s “essence.”752 In the passage quoted above, Arendt touches upon the philosophical rationale behind her embrace of the “profile” as a genre. In Men in Dark Times, Arendt’s rationale

for why and how she turns to people as objects – or rather subjects – of writing instead of “theories and concepts” becomes evident in her essays on Jaspers and Lessing.

4.2.1.a In Conversation with Karl Jaspers

Overall, Arendt’s decision to write on people instead of theoretical concepts points to the emancipation from a Western philosophical tradition that Arendt appreciates in her reading of Jaspers and which preoccupied her in post-war essays such as “What Is Existenz Philosophy.” In her two Men in Dark Times essays on him from the late 1950s, Arendt focuses on how he, unlike other philosophers like Heidegger and Husserl, emphasized the inherent “togetherness” of human existence through a specific communicative style that enlivened dead, dry political concepts. Jasper’s work appears politically and historically potent to Arendt because it locates human agency and truth in “men talking and communicating with each other,” rather than in thinking in solitude. (MDT, 90f.)

Men in Dark Times can be read as an attempt at facilitating communication between different “men” (only two of the twelve essays concern women) to retrospectively rehabilitate their historical agency by showing how they shaped the same period in their own ways. Juxtaposing contemporaries without levelling the differences between them, Arendt does not consider them as “mouthpieces of the Zeitgeist,” as she emphasizes in the preface, but creates a “world anew between them” by considering their unique contributions to a shared contemporary moment. (MDT, viii, 78)

A “world” is populated by persons, rather than subjects or individuals in Arendt’s sense. Arendt’s unit of analysis is accordingly not the private mode of being but the way the person

appears in public where their appearance is beyond the subject’s control, where it achieves “full reality” and is perceived as a “personality,” which is a person’s genuine spiritual element. (MDT, 72) Assigned with approximating this element, criticism is not primarily “literature about literature” but about “the man rather than his work.” (MDT, 71) In contrasting the “subjective” to the “personal,” rather than the “objective,” Arendt not only hints at the emancipative step she takes with Jaspers away from the objectivity standards of scientific disciplines but also the shift from philosophical inquiry to political writing that aims at participating in the public realm by creating a world between persons through communication. In this sense, her portraits are political rather than philosophical criticism.

A seemingly trivial condition for the project of creating a world between persons is that persons are different but in some way related. This point is raised in terms of contemporariness in the Men in Dark Time preface. It recurs in Arendt’s discussion of Jaspers’ rethinking of the Western tradition as emergent from a plurality of origins, through which tradition loses its dogmatic character but remains an accessible resource for “playfully” creating strong ties to the past. (MDT, vii, 84, 87-89)

This grounding of the communicative condition of philosophy in a plurality of origins linking different national cultures points to how Arendt thinks “sameness” and “difference” together in a unit without collapsing them into “uniformity.” (MDT, 89) Structurally, this consideration of sameness and difference in a shared temporal space is exactly what the juxtaposition of “profiles” of “contemporaries” in Men in Dark Times aims at. As Arendt suggests, sameness and difference is the basic condition of humanity because it guarantees the plurality necessary for appearance in a public realm: This realm is not constituted through “universal agreement” but because everyone holds on “stubbornly to what he is” while committing to
“‘limitless communication.’” (MDT, 89) The emphasis of a stubborn difference reminds of Arendt’s claim about Benjamin’s “incomparability.” Arendt’s situating of Benjamin in a literary tradition whilst claiming his irreducible singularity appears exactly as a form of thinking “sameness” and “difference” together.

Not only argumentatively but also stylistically, Arendt’s Benjamin portrait with its performative citation has overlaps with the features she ascribes to Jasper’s philosophical writing. One aspect of this writing is that it targets the “general reading public” and thus cares for a style and register that is qualified for “popularization” without relinquishing philosophical precision. (MDT, 74) Arendt’s emphasis on the illuminating “clarity” of Jasper’s work and personality contrasts with the stereotypical obscurity of “German philosophy” and the darkness that she associates with Heidegger’s relationship to the public realm in the preface. (MDT, 76, 86) Because of his resistance to both “solitude” and “melancholy,” Jaspers could stay genuinely present in his contemporary moment. (MDT, 74f., 78, 86) Through dialogic communicative skills of an oral register like “listening” or “talking” (MDT, 78f.), Jaspers altered the linear chronology of tradition through the spatial dimension of presence and thus facilitated world building between “contemporaries as well as [...] the living and the dead,” Arendt argues. (MDT, 85)

With Arendt’s reading of Jaspers, her own performative citational style in her Benjamin portrait becomes readable as communication with Benjamin, creating nearness to a dead person and a world between her readers, herself and him. Specifically the block citation in the American version points to how she developed a writing style that actualizes what she appreciates most in Jaspers’ work; namely to present a tradition of thought to a public audience rather than represent it to them, by a dialogic, conversational style of communication with persons.
4.2.1.b Re-presenting the Human Condition

How Arendt translates her insights into Jaspers’s philosophy into her own writing can be traced in *The Human Condition* (1958), whose significant overlaps with her American Benjamin portrait make it another significant intertext. Here, Arendt develops more abstract, theoretical thoughts on how to account for, in language, the idea that all human beings are at some level irreducibly unique. In a passage that could have served as an important foil for the posthumous fame section, Arendt addresses the deficiency of language to represent any person’s unique being: “The moment we want to say *who* somebody is, our very vocabulary leads us astray into saying *what* he is; we get entangled in a description of qualities he necessarily shares with others like him; […] with the result that his specific uniqueness escapes us.” (HC, 180f.) As Arendt wrote *The Human Condition* before her Benjamin essay, she apparently turned the linguistic issue addressed here into a sociological one a decade later.755

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt provides theoretical arguments on literary – dramatic and narrative – forms that approximate the “*who*.” The respective passages illuminate how the performative block citation in her Benjamin portrait operates. Arendt argues that human “uniqueness,” which is a self-reflective quality specific to “human plurality,”756 appears only through “[s]peech and action” (HC, 175) and cannot be captured “ex post facto.” (HC, 186) Even artworks, as condensed and transformed objectifications of “the general meaning of action and

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755 The consideration of a person by the pronoun “who” also appears in the afore-mentioned 1949 article on Existenz philosophy, in which Arendt explains that Heidegger had conceived of the “essence” of a person as their “existence” which the pronoun “Who” rather than “What” conveys which shows that Arendt after all built on Heidegger. Cf. Arendt, *Sechs Essays*, 47.

756 Arendt distinguishes human “distinctness” from the “sheer multiplication of inorganic objects” and the variation differentiating “organic life” by arguing that through human’s linguistic capacity for self-reflection – through “speech” and “action”, humans “distinguish themselves” (HC, 175) – the basic quality of plurality (one of two, the other being “equality”), “otherness” or “*alteritas*”, becomes “uniqueness” (HC, 175): “In man, otherness, which he shares with everything that is, and distinctness, which he shares with everything alive, become uniqueness, and human plurality is the paradoxical plurality of unique beings.” (HC, 175).
speech” perpetually miss “the revelatory quality of action and speech” (the disclosure of a unique self). (HC, 187) Written at about the same time as her essays on Jaspers, these claims clearly recall Arendt’s thought that the person is more than their works; it is more ephemeral, appearing only where others are present, in public space. Arendt’s description of Jasper’s philosophical style mirrors this ephemerality by drawing mostly on qualities of oral communication; “dialogue […] listening […] discussion […] silence […] talking.” (MDT, 78f.) While authentic representation seems thus impossible, Arendt discusses drama and biography as two literary genres which make the approximation of human uniqueness possible, potentially even in writing:

Firstly, approaching the moment of self-revelation requires “a kind of repetition, the imitation or mimesis, which according to Aristotle prevails in all arts but is actually appropriate only to the drama, whose very name (from the Greek verb *dran*, “to act”) indicates that playacting actually is an imitation of actions.” (HC, 187) While Arendt emphasizes the importance of a drama’s staging for the proper experience of the revelation of selves,757 her performative citational style, specifically the block citation in the American Benjamin portrait, produces a similar structural effect. Benjamin’s language is inserted into Arendt’s essayistic prose as an act or action is inserted into the world: “With word and deed we insert ourselves into the human world, and this insertion is like a second birth.” (HC, 176) Heightening the interruptive effect of quotation per se through unusual length and line breaks, the block citation is inserted into the flow of Arendt’s prose, imitating essayistically – in writing rather than on the stage – the moment of speaking in which the unique being appears. This overlap suggests that Arendt’s citational style is grounded in her thinking about representation as it is articulated in *The Human Condition.*

757 Arendt uses ‘performance/perform’ repeatedly in *The Human Condition* to designate either the staging of a play in a theatre context in the literal sense, or to state that an “activity” is carried through – including, for instance, “tasks,” “services,” “chores,” “labor,” “work,” “activities,” “the laboring process,” “functions,” and “fabrication.” Cf. HC, 30, 46, 49, 54, 74, 77, 89, 91f., 100f., 103, 118, 122, 126, 135, 138, 140, 141, 145, 162.
The second genre capable of approximating human “uniqueness” apart from drama is the narrative genre of biography: “Who somebody is or was we can know only by knowing the story of which he is himself the hero – his biography, in other words; everything else we know of him, including the work he may have produced and left behind, tells us only what he is or was.” (HC, 185) Linked back to Arendt’s thoughts on the “person” versus the “individual,” and also her disgust at the intellectual, biography allows insight into “who” someone is or was beyond their creations. The political significance of the “story” is that stories are part of the “spiritual” quality of the public realm in which personalities appear and which constitutes what Arendt calls a “‘web’ of human relationships” in which “sheer human togetherness” is realized through action. (HC, 179, 182) Arendt’s “profiles” are likewise media of life stories; the Benjamin essay, for example, is biographical in that it tells Benjamin’s story in three parts, embedding it in historical and social context.758 With Arendt’s proposition that the two forms of mimesis and narrative can approximate a “who,” her approach to Benjamin’s uniqueness in the portrait receives a philosophical motivation; with her narrative and citational style, she attempts to illuminate Benjamin’s personality in a way that reintegrates him in the “‘web’ of human relationships.”

4.2.1.c The Ideal of Humanity

Based on Arendt’s eulogy for Jaspers, a main political ideal driving her use of the genre “profile” is “humanity,” which Jaspers paradigmatically represents for her. (MDT, 73, 76) Another representative of this ideal is Lessing, as is clear from her Lessing Prize Speech of 1959. (MDT, 3-33) In this opening essay of Men in Dark Times, Arendt explains how “humanity” – as a phenomenon of the public sphere that emerges between persons who appear in it – relates to her

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758 Cf. MDT, 171-192, 189; “Benjamin II,” 217f.
thought on Jewish identity, which explains why she seems to assimilate Benjamin to the canonical European tradition discussed above. In the 1930s and 40s, the “conscious pariah” was Arendt’s key figure to rethink the Jewish tradition, beginning with her book on Rahel Varnhagen.\textsuperscript{759} Now, in 1959, Arendt speaks in past tense when stating, “for many years I considered the only adequate reply to the question, Who are you? to be: A Jew.” (MDT, 17) Arendt suggests that her present position has since changed when stating: “Nowadays such an attitude would seem like a pose.” (MDT, 18) In the Lessing speech, Arendt appears to be looking for an alternative to this “pose.” Encircling the notion of humanity as an alternative response to the question “Who are you,” she suggests a reconceptualized, politicized understanding of it that is not based on sentimental affects like compassion but “should be sober and cool,” based in “friendship” and in touch with “the solid ground of reality.” (MDT, 23, 25) With Lessing, Arendt suggests in 1959 that differences should be embraced and truth “commended unto God,” implying that a humane society is constituted through debate and exchange of diverging opinions. (MDT, 31)

While a position taken in a prize speech probably caters to the agenda of the prize to a certain degree – which in the case of the Lessing prize is promoting enlightenment maxims – Arendt’s move from the “conscious pariah” program to a more general political notion of humanity is also observable in the Benjamin portrait.\textsuperscript{760} Benjamin’s remarkable singularity reminds of her

\textsuperscript{759} Benhabib argues that her \textit{Rahel} book was the first occasion at which Arendt articulated her political demand of self-defense in terms of the “pariah” – “parvenu” distinction and her departure from the enlightenment and high modern generations. Benhabib argues that in 1959, when Arendt presented her Lessing Prize Speech in Hamburg, Arendt still considered it a “grotesque and dangerous evasion of reality” to cling to enlightenment ideals of a universal human nature instead of embracing a discriminatory identification like ‘Jewish.’ Cf. Benhabib, \textit{Reluctant Modernism}, 36-38.

\textsuperscript{760} Apart from Arendt, Friedrich Gundolf, Horkheimer and many others have received the prize. Cf. “Literaturpreis. Lessing Preis,” Hamburg Behörde für Kultur und Medien, accessed December 7, 2023, https://www.hamburg.de/bkm/lessing-preis/#:~:text=Die%20Preistr%C3%A4ger%20sollen%20sich%20im,Preis%20gibt%20es%20ein%20F%C3%B6rderstipendiu.
discussion of the figure of the “pariah” in her aforementioned 1944 essay “The Jew as Pariah.”761 While Arendt does not apply the term “pariah” to Benjamin in her portrait, her characterization of him certainly has similar traits. For instance, her emphasis on his ill fit with all kinds of social and ideological camps or categories suggests that he was, like a pariah, an “outcast” rather than one of “those who live in the ordered ranks of society.”762 Further, her linking of Benjamin to canonical figures of the Western literary tradition, despite his irreducible singularity, is structurally similar to her argument that a “hidden tradition” connected such seemingly unrelated figures as Heine, Kafka, Lazare and Chaplin based on the pariah thought in their work.

But in contrast to “The Jew as Pariah,” her Benjamin portrait does not really actualize the demand of self-assertion as a pariah which Arendt formulates in her reading of Bernard Lazare. Only structurally can Benjamin be considered a “‘conscious pariah’” insofar as Arendt does not resolve his otherness but maintains it in her characterization of him as a poetic thinker and critic. Apart from the social-historical background of the so-called “Jewish question,” which she provides in the second part, Benjamin’s Jewishness is not emphasized to the same degree as his poetic, critical character. Indeed, based on the hunchback figure, which has antisemitic currency, Benjamin’s Jewishness is contained in his poetic character. In this sense, Arendt’s Benjamin shares more qualities with Heine’s and Kafka’s poetic and philosophical pariahdom than with Lazare’s political one. Heine’s insight was, Arendt argues, “to recognize in the figure of the schlemihl the essential kinship of the pariah to the poet – both alike excluded from society and never quite at home in this world.”763 Reminiscent of these pariah qualities, Arendt locates Benjamin’s singularity exactly in his poetic thought.

761 Arendt, Sechs Essays, 184–204 and 379–95.
762 Ibid., 68, 188, 203.
763 Ibid., 191, 197.
Yet, as an exchange with Thomas Mann shows – upon reading Arendt’s pariah essay, he excitedly pointed out to her that he had also thought about the “Schlemihl” in literary terms – Arendt considered the poetic outcast *politically* significant rather than merely a literary condition, which the stigmatized was arguably for Mann.\textsuperscript{764} While the “political significance” of Benjamin’s work and life seems to be only an implicit concern for Arendt’s portrait, “The Jew as Pariah” still helps to illuminate its political impetus: Arendt’s conclusion of the 1944 article reads like the portrait’s primary premise: “Social isolation is no longer possible.”\textsuperscript{765} After the National Socialists had turned Western European Jews into pariahs *politically* by denying them citizenship, both the parvenu and the pariah had become “outlaws.”\textsuperscript{766} The main idea of “The Jew as Pariah” is to rehabilitate “the framework of a people” for seemingly assimilated, yet still pariah figures, working towards rebuilding a Jewish literary tradition after the Holocaust. With *Men in Dark Times*, Arendt’s agenda seems to have broadened to include a general American-European humanity rather than a specifically Jewish consciousness. The concept of criticism Arendt drafts with Lessing shows this in terms of the worldliness and communicative open-endedness that she also appreciates in Jasper’s work.

Criticism, in Lessing’s sense, is always taking sides for the world’s sake, [...] Such a mentality can never give rise to a definite world view which, once adopted, is immune to further experiences in the world because it has hitched itself firmly to one possible perspective. (MDT, 7f.)

\textsuperscript{765} Arendt, *Sechs Essays*, 203.
4.2.2 Criticism – “Between Past and Future”

To grasp how Arendt conceptualizes criticism in more detail, I finally turn to a last crucial intertext: *Between Past and Future* (1961), a collection of essays that Arendt composed in the late 1950 to early 1960s. Here, Arendt develops theoretical elements of her concept of criticism and aspects of her citational style corresponding to these. That this collection of experimental “criticism,” as Arendt announces it in the introduction, is relevant to her Benjamin portrait is indicated by the dedication of its first publication as the edition *Fragwürdige Traditionsbestände: Vier Essays* (1957): “‘Dem Andenken Walter Benjamins.’”767 This dedication suggests that Arendt’s position as a critic evolves in close conversation with Benjamin.768 Considering the style of criticism developed in the essays, *Between Past and Future* appears as a significant link between Arendt’s editorial work upon Benjamin’s death in the early 1940s and her portrait of the end of the 1960s. In the preface essay to *Between Past and Future*, Arendt describes criticism as an interpretive, preservative activity concerned with the past that “does not intend to ‘debunk’” but seeks to discover the real origins of traditional concepts in order to distill from them anew their original spirit which has so sadly evaporated from the very key words of political language – such as freedom and justice, authority and reason, responsibility and virtue, power and glory – leaving behind empty shells […]. (BPF, 15)

While evoking her metaphorical characterization of Benjamin’s as a pearl diver, this present-oriented “critical interpretation of the past” is not destructive, like his, but rather constructive, reminiscent of the playful approach to traditional concepts which Arendt observed in Jaspers’ work. The verb “discover” suggests that the encounter with tradition happens on a surface level, somewhere in the open, exposed to aesthetic experience. In terms of the current debate, her critical

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768 In 1961, Arendt replaced this dedication to Benjamin by a dedication to Heinrich Blücher. Cf. *Ich will verstehen*, 291f.
stance therefore seems to be closer related to criticism rather than critique, even though she uses the words interchangeably. (BPF, 14)

Indeed, Arendt seeks to move beyond modern thinkers like Marx and Nietzsche for reasons very similar to the current debate’s concern with critique, on which her characterization of these thinkers provides a new perspective. The problem with Marx and Nietzsche is, as she argues in the essay “Tradition and the Modern Age,” that they contributed to the “break in tradition”—an all-comprehensive modern existential experience affecting everyone on an individual level in form of a lack of spatial and temporal orientation and loss of meaning—because they could not find fresh forms of thought through which tradition could be revived in the creative way of ‘distilling anew the original spirit.’ Based on a lack of historical distance, modern thinkers were caught in turning the traditional philosophical concepts of Western thought over and over without really rethinking them. Thus, they obliterated how tradition as a guiding force “selects and names, […] hands down and preserves.” (BPF, 5f.) Moving beyond the operation of the turn, Arendt seeks to find “unexpected freshness” in tradition through a critical style that draws on block citations very similar to the performative citation of the Benjamin portrait. For instance, Arendt cites two parables in Between Past and Future—Plato’s cave parable and a Kafka parable—which she considers examples of how thought and action, mental operations and reality are played off against each other through “turning-about[s].” (BPF, 36) As Arendt considers the disjunction of experience and thought a fundamental modern problem, she offers an interpretation that aims at

769 “Tradition and the Modern Age,” BPF, 26, 28. Arendt never assigns the break an exact date but indicates that it happened after “the twentieth-century aftermath of formalistic and compulsory thinking, which came after Kierkegaards, Marx, and Neitzsche had challenged […]” and was caused by “the totalitarian movements,” by which she very probably means German National Socialism and Soviet Communism. In the moment of the publication of BPF at least, the “break […] is now an accomplished fact.” BPF, 3-17.

770 which itself invokes the etymology of criticism, whose variation κρίσις was first used in medical contexts to describe the turning point of an illness. Cf. H.-D. Weber, “Kritik, Literaturkritik,” in Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie, eds. Joachim Rüter et al. (Basel: Schwabe, 1971), 1249.
bridging the two. Her suggestion recalls Jasper’s communicative focus on the present which extends the linear chronology of tradition by a spatial dimension through which the present becomes of locus of action rather than a desperate prison, determined by the past.\textsuperscript{771}

Arendt creates this spatial extension of the linearity of time stylistically through citation. Drawing on Immanuel Kant’s aesthetics, Arendt locates the distinctive power of art in its “faculty of arresting our attention and moving us.”\textsuperscript{772} As I argued, the block citation in the Benjamin portrait does both, inviting us to stop and think. In “Crisis and Culture,” considers the critic’s task to be cultivation in the literal Latin sense of “colere – to cultivate, to dwell, to take care, to tend and preserve” of the world and its things.\textsuperscript{773} Arendt’s concept of culture is a conservative one in a literal sense: Culture is what a group of people deems worthy of the world – worthy of preservation. Accordingly, a “cultivated person” is someone “who knows how to choose his company among men, among things, among thoughts, in the present as well as in the past.”\textsuperscript{774}

In Between Past and Future, Arendt drafts a concept of criticism whose core operation – namely the judgment needed “to take care and preserve and admire the things of the world” – remains curiously implicit. She argues that neither the “statesman” nor the “artist” is apt to perform this cultivating judgment but rather assigns it to “the humanist, because he is not a specialist,” who “exerts a faculty of judgment and taste which is beyond the coercion which each specialty imposes upon us.”\textsuperscript{775} As I will argue in my final chapter, her Benjamin portrait – specifically in relationship

\textsuperscript{771} BPF, 11, 283f. Arendt emphatically moves beyond Kafka in her interpretation: “Without distorting Kafka’s meaning, I think one may go a step further.” (BPF, 10f.) Her “step further” consists in an alteration of the “rectilinear” time concept implied in Kafka’s parable by adding a spatial dimension which turns Kafka’s linear model into a “parallelogram of forces” which, in turn, she considers “the perfect metaphor for the activity of thought.” (BPF, 11f.) This spatial extension of the tempo-linear movement is also what Arendt considers unique in Jaspers philosophy of communication. (MDT, 80).

\textsuperscript{772} In the essay “Crisis in Culture” in BPF, 204, 210.

\textsuperscript{773} BPF, 211.

\textsuperscript{774} Ibid., 226.

\textsuperscript{775} Ibid., 225.
with Sontag’s portrait – shows how eventually the critic takes on this humanist task. While Arendt revalues “humanitas” in Men in Dark Times, she moves beyond Jaspers and Lessing with her Benjamin portrait, leaving behind the realm of philosophy for, in her sense, a more political form of writing, namely criticism. (MDT, 73)

4.3 Conclusion

As Arendt transitions between the German Merkur debate and the American editorial context, she transforms her editorial agenda into critical writing by increasingly sharpening a critical form of portraiture whose distinct quality consists in how narrative and dramatic qualities are interwoven through a performative citational style. This style can be read as a critical intervention against Adorno’s and Scholem’s appropriations of Benjamin as well as an emancipatory move against Heidegger’s philosophy and a critical actualization of Jaspers’ communicative philosophy. With Jaspers, Arendt emancipates from the idea that texts (or authors) can be “misunderstood” – which was the core controversy driving the Benjamin debate, and which increasingly disappeared from her writing on Benjamin in the transition from the German debate to the American editorial context.

Overall, Arendt approximates Benjamin to the degree of mimicry, affiliates herself with him and the canonical lineage she constructs for him, while also maintaining an intricate critical distance. The American version shows how Arendt’s citational style has significant performative qualities through which she simultaneously preserves and promotes Benjamin as a writer who stimulates imagination, interpretation and critical thought. Her specific citational style draws on but significantly develops Benjamin’s concept of aura, understood as an interactive, transformative
phenomenon between reader and text.\textsuperscript{776} Arendt’s critical voice in her portrait of Benjamin as a unique writer becomes increasingly distinct in the transition from the German to the American context, while always staying intricately close to Benjamin himself. She simultaneously celebrates and questions Benjamin by creating a singular form of constructive, yet conservative criticism in the genre of the portrait.

Arendt’s energetic editorial efforts demonstrate her commitment to preserving and promoting Benjamin. As her portrait’s production history shows, Arendt composed her portrait in both languages while she was already editing the American Benjamin edition. Hence, her critical position is simultaneously editorial in both versions even though she never edited a German Benjamin edition herself. However, the editorial underpinnings of her portrait only really surface in the American version as more mediation was needed because Benjamin was still largely unknown in the US at that point. Sharpening the reception-oriented qualities of her style – performative citation and the posthumous fame preface – in the American version shows how Arendt works through and beyond her grief over the sadness in Benjamin’s story, turning the melancholy she associates with fame into the curious oddness of posthumous fame.

\textsuperscript{776} Pfeifer, \textit{To the Collector}, 86, 92f.
Chapter 5: Sontag’s Benjamin Portrait – Archival Approximation

Reading criticism clogs conduits through which one gets new ideas: cultural cholesterol."^777

When Sontag published her Benjamin portrait in 1978, ten years after Arendt’s had appeared, it centered precisely on the quality of sadness in Benjamin’s life and work which Arendt had sought to counterbalance: Melancholy. Citing Scholem, Sontag argues that Benjamin was what the French call *un triste*. In his youth he seemed marked by ‘a profound sadness,’ Scholem wrote. He thought of himself as a melancholic, disdaining modern psychological labels and invoking the traditional astrological one: ‘I came into the world under the sign of Saturn – the star of the slowest revolution, the planet of detours and delays. His major projects […] cannot be fully understood unless one grasps how much they rely on a theory of melancholy.’^778 (USS, 110)

If Arendt seeks to free Benjamin from the melancholic sadness of his deprived fame by focusing on the remarkability of his posthumous fame, it seems that Sontag endorses the exact opposite of Arendt’s portrait with her embrace of melancholy. In focusing on this characteristic, for which she cites Scholem as the authoritative reference, Sontag appears to side with Scholem, rather than Arendt, in the Benjamin debate. In the next two chapters, I argue, based on a comprehensive archival study of the production history of Sontag’s portrait and a subsequent close reading, that Sontag’s portrait is more closely affiliated with Arendt’s than it seems at first sight. Despite a striking absence of explicit references to Arendt in contrast to multiple references to Adorno and Scholem – to be elaborated on below – Sontag’s portrait develops central argumentative and stylistic qualities of Arendt’s portrait further.

Because of this apparent absence of traces and clash of interpretive approaches, attending to the *Logik des Produziert-Werdens* of Sontag’s portrait is all the more important to rehabilitate

^777 Sontag, *As Consciousness is Harnessed*, 33.
a lineage that has been lost in the archive. Therefore, I attend to the production history: reading traces, drafting stages and publication phases of Sontag’s portrait in the following. As such an archival look at the portrait’s production history shows, Sontag was intimately familiar with Arendt’s Benjamin portrait. She intensively read and took notes on Arendt’s Benjamin edition and portrait, references to which reappear repeatedly across her work in the 1970s. Moreover, Sontag knew of, and consciously situated her portrait in, the Benjamin debate. As Sontag’s reading traces in texts by different protagonists in the debate and her portrait’s drafting stages demonstrate, she not only reconstructs the main points of core conflict but reinforces, to a certain degree, the opposition to Adorno and Scholem modeled by Arendt. Where this opposition consists of critical and editorial method rather than explicit accusation, it is easily overlooked.

As an important mediator for Sontag’s engagement with Benjamin, Arendt is more generally a significant, yet indirect interlocutor for Sontag in her search for a different kind of criticism, driven by her desire to be(come) a writer rather than a critic. Where Benjamin was a significant source for Sontag in envisioning an alternative kind of criticism from her debut essay collection *Against Interpretation* (1966) onwards, Arendt was at least as significant a source because her edition was the only English one available to Sontag in the 1960s.

In the eponymous title essay “Against Interpretation,” Sontag draws on Benjamin to sketch out an alternative to the kind of interpretation. In contrast to the Freudian and Marxist “elaborate systems of hermeneutics, aggressive and impious theories of interpretation” (AI, 6f.), Benjamin provides a counterexample of a desirable, up-to-date “kind of criticism, of commentary on the arts” that draws more “attention to form in art” and develops a “descriptive, rather than prescriptive, vocabulary [...] for forms.” (AI, 11) In the terminology of the current debate, Sontag
was, like Sedgwick, Felski, Best, and Marcus looking for a critical alternative to critique, or what Ricoeur called “hermeneutics of suspicion.”

Alongside critical figures who bridge the academic-public divide like Northrop Frye and Roland Barthes, Sontag specifically references Benjamin as a critical model. (AI, 12) However, in Against Interpretation, Sontag is still searching for her own way to approach art in writing without falling into the hermeneutic pitfall of substituting the work of art by interpreting it – “I am not saying that works of art are ineffable, that they cannot be described or paraphrased. They can be. The question is how.” (AI, 11) Sontag has been criticized for not actually providing a satisfying alternative to the interpretive method she condemns. Indeed, the principles she presents remain abstract to the degree that she does not apply them yet, at least not in the same essay. For what does it exactly mean to write about art in a way that shows the experience of the “luminousness of the thing in itself” and demonstrates that we “see more, […] hear more, […] feel more”, making art “more, rather than less, real to us”? And in what way is such writing realized in Benjamin’s “formal analysis applied simultaneously to genre and author” in The Storyteller, which Sontag points out as especially promising?

Sontag’s frustration with criticism based on the felt lack of methodological alternatives to the critique mode shows in her preference for the label of the writer. In her semi-fictional recollection of her visit at Thomas Mann’s mansion in California as a high school girl in 1949, she articulates an early aversion to criticism as profane, functional communication about literature, reflecting on her experience of how Mann discussed his own work: “I wanted him to talk like a

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779 Cf. Footnote 33.
780 Dieter, Sontag, 40-100; Steven Best. “After the Catastrophe: Postmodernism and Hermeneutics.” CTheory 12, no. 3 (1988): 87–100, here 91-93.
781 One could argue she does perform some of them in other essays included in Against Interpretation, like “On Camp.” Cf. Dieter, Sontag, 52ff.
782 Moser, Sontag, 67.
book. What I was obscurely starting to mind was that (as I couldn’t have put it then) he talked like a book review.”

Indeed, as her diaries document, Sontag always wanted to become a writer, not a critic. The same self-conception dominates her Afterword at the occasion of the thirtieth anniversary of Against Interpretation in 1996. (AI, 307-312) Yet despite her critical stance towards criticism – or maybe exactly because of it – Sontag is commonly considered a “critic” and often invited to position herself with respect to the relation of her critical versus her fictional work.

As if fighting against being categorized as a critic, she repeatedly downplays her criticism, emphasizing that she prefers producing fictional work. In an interview for The Atlantic with Amy Lippman in 1983, Sontag stated that she would like to argue that there “is no longer any essential difference between a writer of fiction and an essayist.”

Acknowledging a difference, she divides her work into “idea-ridden, […] expository” essays that are concerned with “descriptions of a sensibility,” and essays she calls “portraits”, as paradigmatic examples of which she lists the ”Benjamin and Canetti” essays in Under the Sign of Saturn. If Sontag found a critical genre with which she could move beyond critique in the portrait, and if her Benjamin portrait comes to mind as a prime example of how she did, Arendt was a significant interlocutor in the process. How Benjamin becomes a significant figure in Sontag’s search for a critical genre beyond critique, and how Sontag’s Benjamin is mediated through Arendt from the start, becomes visible by attending to how Sontag’s portrait became what it is.

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784 Rollyson, Understanding Sontag, 2.
786 Sontag, Conversations, 199-205, here 201.
787 Ibid., 201.
5.1 Traces in Publication and Production History

Like Hannah Arendt’s, Sontag’s Benjamin portrait was published three times, in three different contexts between 1978 and 1980.\textsuperscript{788} Entitled “The Last Intellectual,” it first appeared in the New York Review of Books in 1978, secondly as the introduction to the fifth selected Benjamin edition on the American market called One-Way-Street, published by New Left Books (1979), and lastly as “Under the Sign of Saturn” in the eponymous essay collection Under the Sign of Saturn in 1980.\textsuperscript{789}

While the main text does not differ across these three publications, the triple publication is crucial because it indicates a trifold authorial stance combining criticism in a narrow sense (book reviewing), an editorial perspective and a more literary, stylistic one.\textsuperscript{790} Thus, it exactly mirrors Arendt’s publication strategy for her American Benjamin portrait which was likewise published three times in exactly the same set of publication contexts and even at about the same time of year:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Magazine</th>
<th>Benjamin Edition</th>
<th>Portrait Collection</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arendt</td>
<td>“Walter Benjamin” in New Yorker (October 1968)</td>
<td>Illuminations (October 1968)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5.1: parallel publication strategies

Thus, Sontag’s portrait is, like Arendt’s, both a text and a paratext. Similar to Arendt’s case, the transfer across publication contexts surfaces citationally – in an adaption of citations rather than in main text changes. (As I argued, the citational shift occurs from the German to the American

\textsuperscript{788} Poague and Parsons, Sontag Bibliography, 237.
\textsuperscript{790} Poague argues that some “language” does differ but does not specify details. According to my own comparison, the main text does not differ.
context in Arendt’s portrait rather than between the American publication platforms, and affects the main text more significantly because of the block quote and the posthumous fame section. The citational shift is that in the portrait collection *Under the Sign of Saturn*, all footnotes of the magazine and the editorial introduction versions of her portrait (in the *New York Review of Books* and *One-Way-Street*) are dropped—except for three, one of which is newly added. The first one explains who Asja Lacis was, the second one comments on the surrealist quality of Benjamin’s Rowohlt *One-Way-Street* edition (this one is newly added in USS) and the third one on Adorno’s and the Institute for Social Research’s financial support for Benjamin. (USS, 205) In contrast to these three notes, the one explicit reference which Sontag provides to two editions of Arendt’s *Illumination* in footnote 13 of the 18 footnotes disappears in *Under the Sign of Saturn*, along with other footnotes related to Arendt’s essay like one on Benjamin’s Goethe essay. Footnote 13 references Arendt’s volume “Illuminations […], an earlier selection of Benjamin’s essays, edited by Hannah Arendt, which includes the essays on Kafka and Proust.”

As I argue in the next chapter, this editing of the footnotes is a crucial indicator of how Sontag inscribes herself in the Benjamin debate: While she seems to claim clout from Adorno and Scholem by referencing their arguments, and erase Arendt, her method of portraiture has stronger affinities with Arendt’s than with Scholem’s or Adorno’s, specifically in its citational style. Tracing Sontag’s reading on the debate, I suggest below that Arendt was an important interlocutor in Sontag’s creation of her own Benjamin image.

The dropping of footnotes is a reduction of critical qualities that is already prefigured in the magazine version, titled “The Last Intellectual,” whose purpose as a review of Demetz’s 1978

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The New York Review of Books version, the review is identifiable as such only paratextually (through the information provided by the NYRB) and in the footnotes. Some of the 18 footnotes in the magazine version note aspects of the editorial history of Benjamin’s estate – for instance that still not all of Benjamin’s works had been translated or published yet at the moment of Sontag’s writing and that Adorno “criticized” some of Benjamin’s work. However, the main text does not mention Demetz’s role as editor or the volume itself, let alone its position in the editorial history, including that it builds on Arendt’s Illuminations: Demetz claims to complete Arendt’s envisioned project of a second American volume of Benjamin’s work. Accordingly, the multiple references Demetz makes to Arendt’s editorial work, her preparatory role for his edition and to her Benjamin portrait as a model for his own introduction, also remain unmentioned. This lack of transparency with respect to the editorial background therefore also obscures that the edition which Sontag’s portrait introduces features work that Arendt had envisioned for her second Benjamin volume, such as Benjamin’s “Einbahnstrasse.” In this sense, “Sontag’s” edition (she contributes the introduction but did not edit it completely) completes Arendt’s project of a second volume very much like Demetz claims he does – which Sontag leaves unmentioned, even though One-Way-Street features almost the exact same works by Benjamin as Reflections.

In terms of her portrait itself, its relationship to the reviewed volume remains opaque – a hidden riddle of the essay’s production history – which disqualifies it, to a certain degree, as a review: If one assignment of reviewing is to “offer some assessment of [a book’s:CM] merits”, as

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793 Benjamin, Reflections.
794 Sontag, “The Last Intellectual,” 17, 111f..
796 Benjamin, Reflections, vii.
797 Cf. the table of contents of Benjamin, Reflections and Benjamin, One-Way Street).
James Zetzel argues on academic book reviewing, Sontag’s Benjamin essay fails as a review of Demetz’s Reflections as it does not even mention it, let alone contextualize it in comparison to other Benjamin volumes, in the main text, which constitutes ultimately the final book version.798 This is all the more surprising as Sontag’s reading traces of Reflections show aggravated readerly engagement: Sontag appears as a reader who has a strong opinion on Demetz’s editorial work. The fact that she does not engage with it in her portrait indicates that reviewing was not her portrait’s main purpose. Indeed, the shift from the NYRB to the book publications suggests that Demetz’s edition was only an occasion for an essay on Benjamin, rather than its actual subject – and that Sontag aimed at something beyond writing a “review” – something that surfaces in her transition from “The Last Intellectual” to “Under the Sign of Saturn.”

The striking matching of this transition across three sites of publication with Arendt’s triple publication ironically creates a methodological affinity between Sontag’s and Arendt’s portraits consisting, last but not least, of analogous publication strategies, including the reduction of critical qualities such as explicit citation in the form of footnotes, which erases the trace of Sontag’s reception of Arendt’s Benjamin portrait in the portrait itself. Understanding the tension between this undeniable analogy and the seeming absence of any formal or argumentative affinity of Sontag’s with Arendt’s portrait, let alone the absence of explicit references motivates my archival tracing of Sontag’s reading of Arendt, and related relevant figures referenced in her portrait (like Scholem and Adorno), as well as Sontag’s drafting of her portrait.

798 Zetzel, “Anatomy of a Book Review(Er).”
5.2 Reading Traces

The first most obvious reading trace laid by Sontag herself in her photographic opening leads to Scholem by whom Sontag references two essays from the volume *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis* (Schocken, 1976) in her first footnote: Scholem’s portrait “Walter Benjamin” and “Walter Benjamin and His Angel.” While Scholem had presented the former essay as a Lecture at the Leo Baeck Institute in October 1964, and had published it in German and English in 1965, Sontag had apparently only acquired (and read) a copy of the book ten years later, in 1976.799 This is also about ten years after her reading of Arendt’s introductory portrait of Benjamin in *Illuminations* (1968) and Adorno’s essay in *Prisms* (1967). Based on publication and autograph dates, Sontag’s reading of books about or by Benjamin occurs during a ten year span between 1967 and 1980, with an early phase in the late 1960s, and in a later phase in the mid to late 1970s. Thus, her reading is paced by the successive publications of five English language editions of Benjamin’s work, beginning with Arendt’s *Illuminations* in 1968, and concluding with *One-Way-Street* in 1979, the selected edition to which Sontag contributed her essay as an introduction.800

Based on what is accessible in the UCLA archives, Sontag owned almost all of the English language Benjamin editions except, curiously, *Charles Baudelaire: a lyric poet in the era of high capitalism*, translated by Zohn in 1973, and the *Selected Writings* edited by Jennings et al. beginning 1996.801 The UCLA archive also does not indicate that Sontag owned any of the independent publications of single-text translations beginning with “8 Notes on Brecht’s Epic Theatre” which appeared even before *Illuminations* in 1948 and continued appearing throughout

799 Cf. Benjamin, *One-Way-Street*, 458. The book is now in Sontag’s son’s (David Rieff) personal, private library and hence not available to the public or for research.
The early reading phase is clearly dominated by Sontag’s reading of Arendt’s *Illuminations* – the first volume that made Benjamin accessible to her in English translation as she did not read German. *Illuminations* remained an important read: for some reason, Sontag owned two copies of it, the later one of which dates to 1973, initiating the second phase of Sontag’s reading of and on Benjamin. The original 1968 Harcourt, Brace & World hard cover edition held by the Susan Sontag Papers at the UCLA Archives is signed “Susan Sontag 1968,” and the “First Schocken Paperback edition” in its second printing of 1973 is unsigned.

Both volumes show almost identical mark-ups and marginalia of Arendt’s introduction and the Benjamin texts included which suggests that either Sontag copied her own reading traces into the 1973 volume or coincidentally marked up both volumes in the same way. Whatever the reason, this doubling shows that Sontag read *Illuminations* twice and engaged with it intensely, which doubles the significance of her reading traces compared to all other Benjamin volumes she owned only one copy of. All the more so as Sontag carefully notes differences between the two editions, as her note “except for letter to Scholem” shows, specifying the omission of pages “141 – 144 of the original Harcourt […] edition” in the paperback.

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804 Generally, Sontag is an avid, active reader who mainly uses underlines, perpendicular lines, arrows, ticks and “#” to mark her engagement with the respective text. She signs most of her books with her full name and a date which most probably identifies the year of acquisition which might not be identical with the year in which she read the book. For the sake of this study, I will take the year as an indicator of when Sontag read the book.
Overall, Sontag’s reading habits in the orbit of her Benjamin essay corroborate Kai Sina’s thesis that Sontag was “eine hermeneutische Leserin par excellence.”\(^\text{805}\) Sontag’s exceptional attention and repeated return to the details of Arendt’s Benjamin edition and adjacent texts suggest that she proceeded in the Schleiermacher-manner of “‘Besser-Verstehen,’”\(^\text{806}\) in a similar way that Sina observes for her engagement with Thomas Mann’s *Magic Mountain.*\(^\text{806}\) Her reading traces have similar ‘dialogic, indefinite and existential’ qualities as Sina attributes her reading of Mann. Moreover, Sontag’s reading-marks in Arendt’s introduction correlate significantly with her eventual portrait which suggests that her reading of Arendt’s Benjamin is critically productive in a similar way that her reading of Mann is literarily productive.\(^\text{807}\)

Circling back to the systematic and historical vocabulary on criticism, I discuss in my last chapter, in comparison with Arendt, in how far Sontag’s writing is or is not hermeneutical in the same way as her reading.

Generally, Sontag identifies Arendt’s main points, paying heightened attention to her view of Benjamin as a critic between ideological camps: A passage that questions Benjamin’s commitment to Marxism and Zionism is the only passage that is underlined and marked with a

\(^{805}\) Sina, *Sontag und Mann,* 92.

\(^{806}\) Ibid., 93.

\(^{807}\) Ibid., 71-92.
The marked sentence reads: “At the time when Benjamin tried, first, a half-hearted Zionism and then a basically no less half-hearted Communism […]”

Further, Sontag’s focus on Arendt’s reading of Benjamin as a critic shows in her marks in Arendt’s introductory lines to the block quote concerning “the task of the literary critic.” (Figure 5.3) Sontag also underlines Arendt’s cultural historical note that (aphoristic) criticism was unpopular in Germany – or rather “did not exist in Germany […]” (Figure 5.4) – and her view of Benjamin as “the ’last European.’” (Figure 5.5) In combination, these traces show Sontag’s focus on Benjamin’s conflicted relationship to Germany and that claiming him as a European rather than German writer will become a central concern for her.

Sontag takes note of Arendt’s emphasis on Benjamin’s “friendship with Brecht” and of passages concerning the difficulty of being a writer. Also underlined are Arendt’s notes on Benjamin’s poetic method, covering “the wonder of appearance,” the figure of the flaneur, modern and baroque aesthetics, the role of “truth as an exclusively acoustic phenomenon”, collection of books and “quotations” and “surrealistic montage”. (Figures 5.6-13) These traces indicate that Sontag encountered main arguments about Benjamin’s literary method, which reappear in her portrait, in Arendt’s introduction. Arendt’s portrait provides argumentative material for Sontag.

More difficult than tracing Sontag’s perception of arguments about Benjamin is observing where Sontag starts developing her own stance on Benjamin based on reading traces. A first hint at how photography becomes a more central topic for Sontag’s engagement with Benjamin than it
was for Arendt is a passage where Arendt discusses Benjamin’s relation to tradition, elaborating how his method of collecting explodes the order imposed by tradition. A large perpendicular line marks this long paragraph as important, accompanied by underlines of two sentences and two notes of the word “photo” in the margin. As Arendt does not mention photography in this passage – and only marginally in her essay overall – Sontag creates a connection here to a medium that Arendt does not discuss in this context, indicating her own development of Arendt’s argument in reading.

Two pages later, Sontag creates another connection, suspiciously closely related to photography, noting “Barthes” in the margin of a sentence in which Arendt discusses the violence of the “sea-change” she metaphorically attributes to Benjamin’s method.

These two marginalia show that Sontag engaged with Arendt’s respective arguments in a transmedial, transtemporal and transnational manner, linking Arendt’s view of Benjamin as concerned with authenticity and “uniqueness” to the medium of photography and her point on Benjamin’s deconstructive, decontextualizing method to the postmodern French writer Roland Barthes, who also wrote on photography prolifically. As I argue in the next chapter, both links become central
for Sontag’s portrait as Sontag develops her claim of Benjamin as a melancholic by citing photographs in a way that is critically productive in a Benjaminian and Barthesian way.

Surprisingly little attention receive Arendt’s references to Adorno and Scholem but she notes their skepticism about Brecht, specifically in Arendt’s fifth footnote which problematizes Tiedemann’s, Adorno’s and Scholem’s accusations of Brecht to have influenced Benjamin to his disadvantage.  

This close reading of Arendt’s notes suggests that apart from an interpretive interest in Benjamin’s work, Sontag was also concerned with its editorial history. By underlining Arendt’s claim that “he was afraid of Adorno,” she engaged with the Benjamin debate’s question of Adorno’s manipulative influence on Benjamin. Hence, Sontag read with a critical and an editorial eye. One mark in Arendt’s portrait further suggests that Sontag reads with a third eye, namely a stylistic one: Sontag makes one striking note of Arendt’s style that intricately points to her status as a non-native English writer and potential carrier of German stereotypes: In the portrait’s concluding

Figure 5.17: Adorno and Scholem versus Brecht, Notes section in Sontag’s 1968 copy of Illuminations

808 As I noted in the Arendt Chapter, this footnote is the significantly shortened US version of footnote four in the German version. (Figure 5.16.)
paragraph, Sontag crosses out one superfluous “the,” correcting Arendt’s English. Further, she marks the apparently surprising exceptional length of Arendt’s last sentence by brackets “[…]” and the note “one sentence” next to it.

Figure 5.18: “one sentence,” in Sontag’s 1968 copy of Illuminations

For someone whose literary socialization was significantly shaped by Thomas Mann’s *Magic Mountain*, an awareness for sentence length as a supposedly stereotypically German literary phenomenon might not be surprising. However, Sontag’s attention to Arendt’s style stands out in the context of her reading of other portraits of Benjamin. By contrast, in her readings of Adorno’s and Scholem’s works, including texts on Benjamin, Sontag not only engages much less overall but also does not comment on their style. Indeed, specifically Sontag’s correction of Arendt’s American prose suggests that she read Arendt so closely that she intervenes into her grammar, as if it was work in progress and Sontag editing, if not co-authoring Arendt’s text. In his study of Sontag’s reading of Arendt’s book on Rahel Varnhagen, which I address in more detail below, Kai Sina has called her mode of reading Arendt an “identifikatorische[r] Lektüremodus.”

Sontag’s above-mentioned engagement with Arendt’s style corroborates Sina’s claim that she reads Arendt closely, to the degree of identification with her perspective.

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809 Sina, *Sontag und Mann*, 92f.
The singularity of this identificatory mode of reading becomes clear in comparison with Sontag’s reading of adjacent works by Adorno and related figures. The UCLA archives hold a 1967 English edition of Adorno’s *Prisms*, his *Negative Dialectics* (1973), *Minima Moralia* (1974) and Horkheimer’s and his *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1972). The *Prisms* volume is unsigned but if Sontag read it upon acquisition, she read Adorno’s essay on Benjamin—“A Portrait of Walter Benjamin” included in the volume—before Arendt’s portrait. Her mark-ups consist mostly of underlines, arrows, thick perpendicular lines and ticks, with one exceptional marginal note of “Buber” in a passage where Adorno discusses Benjamin’s life-long misery at being considered “too intelligent.” (Figure 5.19) Double perpendicular lines mark Adorno’s points on Benjamin’s attraction to “allegory” and his contrast of inward “melancholic complacency” to “physical, external things.” (Figures 5.20-21) What Adorno mentions in a sidenote here as a minor theme of Benjamin—melancholy—would later become Sontag’s portrait’s major theme. Overall, her reading of Adorno appears to spark less thinking on writing style, method and media than her reading of Arendt, considering the “photo” and “one sentence” marginalia. In her reading of the other Adorno and Horkheimer volumes accessible in the UCLA archives, Sontag demonstrates a lingering interest in how Benjamin features in their work. Indeed, “WB” is often the only marginalia appearing in the books. In her 1973 edition of Adorno’s *Negative Dialectics*, Sontag includes a list of names on the last page. Except for a “Schönberg” page number, Benjamin is the only figure who gets a separate entry with a list of page numbers. Two of the referenced pages show a “WB” in the margin. (Figures 5.22-24)

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Sontag’s 1974 volume of *Minima Moralia* also shows a focus of her reading on Adorno’s comments on Benjamin: Again, she notes “WB” in the margin, underlines sentences or footnotes referring to Benjamin and even marks one whole page by an exceptionally long perpendicular line with a note referencing Benjamin’s Goethe essay: “cf. Elective Affinities.” (Figure 5.26) Overall, Sontag seems determined to grasp how Benjamin featured in Adorno’s work, indicating a will to better understand the different interpretations competing in the Benjamin debate. It appears as if Sontag reads Adorno as Benjamin’s “first and only disciple” – which is the way Arendt introduces Adorno in her portrait, underlined by Sontag:

Sontag’s reading of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in 1973 demonstrates a more general interest in Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s work, including the institutional history of the Institute for Social Research, as her underlines of “Felix Weil” and “Leo Löwenthal” in the introduction show. Sontag’s attention has a feminist focus: she marks the work’s perspective on “women” with perpendicular lines, notes and an incipit. (Figures 5.28-33) This focus suggests that Sontag takes issue with the role of women in Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s work. Like her footnote reference to Asja Lacis, this awareness for the role of women in the *Dialectic* has a cautiously feminist impetus.
However, overall, Sontag’s readings of Adorno appear focused on isolating his claims on Benjamin.

In contrast, Sontag’s reading of Arendt’s work precedes and exceeds Sontag’s interest in Benjamin. Considering her copies of *Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), *Rahel Varnhagen. The Life of a Jewish Woman* (1957), *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1964) and *The Jew as Pariah* (1978), Sontag read Arendt comprehensively beginning in the 1950s and 1960s. While Sontag could have read Adorno’s Benjamin “portrait” before Arendt’s, her reading of Arendt potentially precedes her reading of Adorno by more than ten years, based on the books accessible in her archived library. This suggests that Sontag was more closely familiar with Arendt’s work than with Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s – maybe even before she read the latter, and even Benjamin’s work itself. If these assumptions are accurate, Sontag’s reception of Benjamin – and of his “disciple” Adorno – was embedded in her Arendt reception.

Based on his study of Sontag’s reading of Arendt’s works, Kai Sina has argued that Sontag’s “Arendt-Studium” was focused on the “Komplex des Jüdischen und des Antisemitismus.” Indeed, Sontag’s studious reading traces in *Origins of Totalitarianism* corroborate that Sontag’s reception of Arendt is thematically initiated specifically through her claims about antisemitism and its relationship to totalitarianism; Sontag’s copy shows most traces

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814 Sina, “Worin unsere Stärke besteht.”
in the book’s first section. (Figures 5.34-35) Based on Sontag’s further reading of Arendt’s other works, the question of Jewish political and social history remains central to her Arendt reception.

In this context, Arendt’s book about Rahel Varnhagen receives specific significance: here, Sontag’s interest in Arendt’s discussion of Rahel’s struggle with her Jewishness in the German context is paired with an interest in Arendt’s editorial and critical method as well as her style of portraiture. Sina has pointed out that a small blue incipit paper from the “International Women’s Year 1975” in Sontag’s copy of Rahel – a “Review Copy” – indicates that Sontag had apparently even planned writing about Arendt: “for Arendt essay – passage on the beautiful in Ch. 5”.

Figure 5.36: Incipit in Sontag’s 1957 copy of Rahel Varnhagen: “For Arendt essay – passage on the beautiful in Ch. 5”

Until today, no such essay on Arendt has been found. Sina has argued that Sontag’s specific identificatory relationship to Arendt was the reason for why she could not establish enough critical distance for writing about Arendt. He argues that Sontag read Arendt in a personal and selective mode of reading that indicates an “intellektuellen Distanzverlust” based on her identification with Arendt as a model Jewish women writer.

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815 Sina, “Worin unsere Stärke besteht.”
816 Ibid.
817 Ibid.
Indeed, Sontag’s reading of Arendt’s *Rahel* suggests that she is mainly interested in how Arendt discusses Rahel’s social and personal position as a Jewess. A striking incipit indicates that Sontag isolates the question of assimilation with Arendt’s alternative between “pariah” and “parvenu.” Referencing Arendt’s important distinction, Sontag notes Jewish assimilation as a main point, and tracks it across different Arendt publications, including *Men in Dark Times*:

![Figure 5.37: Note in Sontag’s 1957 copy of *Rahel Varnhagen*: “pariah vs parvenu / (2 choices open to Jews)”, “cf. modulations of ‘lives,’ fame, etc. in *Men in Dark Times*”, “denial of ‘Jewishness’ in exchange with Scholem (Encounter) after publication of Eichmann book”, and “*cf. ‘The Jew as Pariah’ (1959) – ml[?] Arthur Cohen reader”](image)

The connection to *Men in Dark Times* is reinforced in a passage where Arendt demarcates the specific historical perspective provided in her *Rahel* book. Linking this passage to the “Benjamin essay,” Sontag appears to have read that essay as another case of exploring how “assimilation to the intellectual and social life of the environment” affects “a personal destiny.” (Figure 5.38) As Sontag creates the intertextual link based on a passage concerned with method, she appears to be specifically interested in *how* Arendt discusses the issue of Jewish assimilation. This methodological reading focus invites a nuancing of Sina’s claim that Sontag could not take her receptive relationship to Arendt to a productive level because of a lack of personal distance. While her relationship to Arendt might well have been “viel zu ernsthaft” to result into a “sachliche, möglicherweise kritische Auseinandersetzung,” the Benjamin essay reference suggests that via
Benjamin, Sontag methodologically engaged with Arendt, as if her productive relationship to Arendt was mediated through Benjamin; Benjamin as Sontag’s medium to move from reading Arendt to writing with her, if not about her.

Sontag marks up Arendt’s own methodological project description, her self-explications concerning the editorial problems she encountered in her work on Rahel, as well as her style. (Figures 5.39-41) For instance, Arendt’s use of the royal “we” is marked with exceptionally unambiguous underlines and square brackets. (In contrast to these short lines, demarcating the respective word, Sontag usually underlines full lines.) Sontag also identifies Arendt’s notorious agenda to tell Rahel’s story the way she would have told it and, correspondingly, marks Arendt’s goal to limit “criticism” of Rahel to her “self-criticism” and notes her dismissal of interpretive biographical frames like “depth psychology.” (Figure 5.44)

Figures 5.42-43: underlines in Sontag’s 1957 copy of Rahel Varnhagen: “we”; “What interested me solely was to narrate the story of rahel’s life as she herself might have told it. She considered herself extraordinary, but her view of the source of that quality differed from that of others.”; “The criticism corresponds to Rahel’s self-criticism”

In underlining Arendt’s call for the need to understand history – in order to claim more agency than, as Arendt argues, Rahel claimed in her life – Sontag traces Arendt’s distinct historical perspective which she already encountered in Origins by underlining Arendt’s call that comprehending the past means attending to its “reality” without denying, flattening, explaining away or succumbing to any of its aspects but rather “bearing consciously the burden.” (Figure 5.34) Complementing her awareness of Arendt’s call for a clear-minded attention to historical reality, Sontag specifically selects “the beautiful” as the topic for her envisioned “Arendt essay.” She traces the theme of “the beautiful” across different chapters, underlining related sentences
specifically in the first and fifth chapters, “Jewess and Shlemihl” and “Magic, Beauty, Folly.” An exceptionally long perpendicular line marks Arendt’s argument that Rahel’s desire for beauty equaled a desire for overcoming the burden of her own life and the assignment to face the antisemitism surrounding her. (Figures 5.45-47) Sontag identifies Arendt’s main argument (“#HA”) about Rahel correlating to these ideas on beauty – namely Rahel’s retreat to “introspection” and narrativization of “Destiny,” wherein Arendt considers Rahel’s romanticist mistake of conceiving of her life as a “work of art” rather than historically:

Figure 5.48: “To live life as if it were a work of art,” in Sontag’s 1958 copy of Rahel

As Sontag notes Arendt’s problematization of Rahel’s ahistorical fashioning of her own life, which diametrically contrasts Arendt’s principle of “examining and bearing consciously the burden” of reality, she encounters two different methods of dealing with Jewish history and identity. Whatever she planned for her envisioned essay, the keyword “the beautiful” suggests that it would have included a discussion of the relation of aesthetics and history. Sontag’s interest in the topic of “beauty” receives a socio-historical dimension in the context of her reading of Arendt’s Rahel.

A salient indicator that Sontag thought about Arendt’s interpretive method is last but not least her marginalia “HA rationalist” next to a sentence in which Arendt dismisses a recurring dream of Rahel’s as not more illuminative of the core conflicts of her life than her daily life itself. That the dream section in which Arendt narrates Rahel’s dream is significant to Sontag becomes
clear by perpendicular lines in the margin across the three respective pages and a note on the top margin: “animal dream.” (Figures 5.50-52)

Figure 5.49: “HA rationalist,” in Sontag’s 1958 copy of Rahel

Considering such categorization of Arendt’s method of (dream) interpretation – what did Sontag think of Arendt’s historical method and her dismissal of Rahel’s conceiving of her life as a work of art? Where does Sontag stand between Arendt and (Arendt’s version of) Rahel with respect to portraying a life? Considering that the note for the envisioned essay on Arendt was taken on a sheet of the “International Women’s Year 1975,” the context for Sontag’s productive attempt appears to have been feminist in some fashion. She also notes Arendt’s pointing to the “Woman Problem” that aggravated Rahel’s inability to translate her “intelligence and passionate originality” into productive work. (Figure 5.53)

As the references to Men in Dark Times and the Benjamin essay suggest, Arendt’s portraiture is more generally significant for how Sontag continues her thinking about and developing of her own editorial and critical method. Benjamin becomes a specifically important interlocutor as her extended reading of his work shows – which occurred probably between the late 1960s to the late 1970s, when the first five English language Benjamin editions were published. 818

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Arendt’s *Illuminations* remains the central birthplace of Sontag’s critical perspective on Benjamin, with *Understanding Brecht* (1973), *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1977) and *Reflections. Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings* (1978) as crucial subsequent readings.\(^8\) As if primed through Arendt’s introduction, Sontag reads also these other volumes simultaneously with an editorial and an interpretive, critical eye. On the one hand, she attends to all introductions to the respective volumes, tracing publication years of Benjaminian texts across volumes, adding biographical information and references. (Figures 54-59) On the other hand, she dives deep into the Benjamin texts themselves, tracing ideas across texts and marking keywords and sentences important to her by lines or marginalia.

While Stanley Mitchell’s short introduction to *Understanding Brecht* is only underlined in a few passages, Steiner’s introduction to *Origin* shows more intense readerly engagement in forms of marginalia like dates or skeptical “?” (Figure 5.60) Probably indicating her reviewing plans for Peter Demetz’s introduction to *Reflections*, Sontag’s mark-ups are specifically heavy here. She finds fault with his editorial work not only in the introduction but also in the Benjamin texts themselves, reminding herself to cross-check translations, retranslating *in situ* and identifying “Errors” like Demetz’s claim that Benjamin had “stayed again and again” with Brecht by noting in the margin “twice!”

A specifically striking correction in Demetz’s introduction shows how much Sontag draws on her reading of Arendt’s portrait in her Benjamin reception: Underlining Demetz’s claim that Benjamin “had made up his mind to become Germany’s most outstanding literary critic”, Sontag notes in the margin “not correct: ‘most outstanding critic of German lit.’”

This nuanced characterization points back to Sontag’s awareness for Benjamin’s transnational position and his conflicted relationship to Germany. It reinvokes Arendt’s formulation of it, attending to Benjamin’s professional identity with the same caution as Arendt. In her Freiburg lecture draft, Arendt had corrected “dem bedeutendsten Kritiker in deutscher Sprache” for “Kritiker der Zeit.” Following Arendt, Sontag emphatically wrests Benjamin from an

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820 Demetz, Reflections, Xiii.
appropriation for the German national context, distinguishing German language and literature from the nation. Sontag’s corrections demonstrate that she read material on Benjamin very closely, with a high degree of editorial awareness, building on her reading of Arendt who discusses related points— as if she measured introductions subsequent to Arendt’s portrait by it.

The significance of Arendt’s portrait also shows in Sontag’s reading of the Benjamin texts themselves, as its marked-up topics reappear both in *Illuminations* and in the other editions. For instance, Sontag’s significant marginal note on photography reappears in her reading of the Benjamin texts included in *Illuminations*: Sontag marks Benjamin’s own use of a childhood photograph of Kafka in his Kafka essay “Franz Kafka. On the tenth anniversary of his death” and traces Benjamin’s argument about the relationship of photography and “aura” in his “Baudelaire” essay “On some motifs in Baudelaire.” In this essay, Sontag is specifically interested in Benjamin’s discussion of how reproductive technologies change experience, underlining: “The camera gave the moment a posthumous shock, as it were.” (Figures 5.66-67)

Other foci of Sontag’s generally intensive engagement with the whole volume of *Illuminations* include Benjamin’s main motifs and figures like the collector in “Unpacking my library” or translation in “The task of the translator.” Sontag shows specific interest in the topic of the “communicability of experience” which she first underlines in the “Storyteller” essay, tracing it in the “Baudelaire” essay by marking Benjamin’s contrast of “information vs. experience” and in the “Work of Art” essay. (Figures 5.68-71) Like in her *Rahel* copy, Sontag notes Arendt’s editorial decisions, for instance why she excluded Benjamin’s Goethe and Kraus essays. (Figures 5.72-73) In Demetz’s *Reflections*, Sontag’s attention to photography reappears in a note of a connection between “photo” and “Brecht” in the context of *Berlin Chronicle*, an autobiographical text she encountered in this edition for the first time. More generally, Sontag’s reading of
Reflections suggests that she aimed more ambitiously at surveying the breadth of Benjamin’s work, as the volume includes multiple keyword lists of important motifs and people, including again Asja Lacis. (Figures 5.74-77) Sontag notes stylistic qualities of Benjamin’s work that become important in her portrait, as I argue in the next chapter. For instance, Sontag marks Benjamin’s understanding of autobiography and his attitude to be instructive as a writer – “An author who teaches writers nothing, teaches no one.” She isolates important topics and people with keywords like “Trauerspiel”, “temperament”, and repeatedly Asja Lacis whose importance Sontag marks in the aforementioned footnote. (Figures 5.78-79) Throughout, Sontag’s editorial eye is caught by publication chronological details like for “A Berlin Chronicle”: “later than Berliner Kindheit […]” and adds complementary sources like an essay by “Peter Szondi.” (Figures 5.54 and 5.56)

Both in editorial awareness and interpretive focus, Sontag’s reading of Understanding Brecht and of Origin are continuous with Illuminations and Reflections. Her mark-ups of Understanding Brecht demonstrate a continued interest in Benjamin’s criticism. Sontag notes the word “critic” next to two passages in which Benjamin discusses Brecht’s epic theatre as anti-entertainment and political literary criticism. Where criticism is so prominently featured in Arendt’s portrait, and specifically also linked to Brecht, Sontag’s attention to the topic in a volume dedicated to Benjamin’s work on Brecht appears as a continuation of her reading of Arendt’s introduction which emphasizes Benjamin’s relationship to Brecht in exactly his critical capacity. (ILLU, 2, 14) This is also suggested by the reappearance of the attention to photography. There is a margin note of “photo” and an incomplete isolated index in the back of the book, listing two page numbers. (Figures 5.80-82)

Sontag’s micro-level mark-ups suggest that she read Benjamin very closely and with a heightened attention to style. A marginal note of “Trauerspiel” suggests that Sontag continues to
be interested in melancholia, as first marked in Adorno’s portrait and then in the Baudelaire essay included in *Reflections*, where Sontag notes Benjamin’s characterization of Baudelaire as a melancholic and his allegorical method. Despite her lingering attention to melancholy and allegory, Sontag’s references in her reading of *Origin of German Tragic Drama* (probably) two years later in 1977 are strikingly sparse. Demonstrating her familiarity with the Benjamin debate, Sontag notes Steiner’s main point that Benjamin “was not, in any technical sense, a philosopher,” specifically not a Hegelian one, but rather a “lyric thinker” who could have been saved through the “Warburg Institute” rather than through the “Horkheimer-Adorno Institute for Research in the Social Sciences.” (Figures 5.83-87)

Overall, Sontag’s reading traces in her archived books related to Benjamin demonstrate that she comprehensively read (on) Benjamin, covering the two main ideological poles between which Benjamin was situated: Jewish tradition and history, as represented by Scholem and discussed by Arendt in historical, political terms, as well as the tradition of Marxism and Hegelian dialectics as represented by Adorno (and Horkheimer). Her attention to Benjamin’s poetic method and work as a critic is stimulated by her reading of Arendt, whose portrait Sontag reads with a comparably high degree of readerly engagement. Indeed, sparks of her own interpretation and contextualization of Benjamin’s work appear in Arendt’s portrait, rather than in Adorno’s or Scholem’s, or in the introductions to the other Benjamin volumes she owned. Considering this significant attention to Arendt, it is striking that Sontag ascribes Arendt’s crucial point that Benjamin did not identify with any ideological camp or profession (which is marked in her editions of *Illuminations*) to Adorno, as an incipit in *Origin* shows: “Adorno describes B. as not fitting any group, + in Berlin Childhood he says he would have been incapable of [building?] making common cause with anyone […] // his asocial nature”:

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Why does Sontag not credit Arendt with the claim of in-betweenness, given that it is so central to her portrait which Sontag read so intensively. Specifically considering Adorno’s emphasis on Benjamin’s philosophical character, why does Sontag attribute the “not fitting any group” claim to him instead of Arendt? Indeed, Adorno mentions Benjamin’s “asocial nature” in his introduction to the *Schriften* – I quoted the respective passage on the proclaimed “Unmöglichkeit seiner Eingliederung” in my criticism chapter – but Sontag did not read German and the *Schriften* of 1955 are not preserved in her library.\(^{822}\)

Building on Sina’s claim of Sontag’s identificatory relationship to Arendt – maybe Sontag’s reading of Arendt was so intensive that it became part of her own stance, making references to Arendt superfluous because she was always already there. References to other contributors in the Benjamin debate in turn indicate that Sontag did not develop a similarly intimate relationship to them. A similar reference as the one to Adorno above appears in Sontag’s portrait itself, where she situates her main argument, that Benjamin was a melancholic, prominently in Scholem’s legacy. Sontag knew this legacy, and its focus on Jewish dimensions of Benjamin’s thought, well as she read the two essays on Benjamin included in Gershom Scholem’s *On Jews*

\(^{822}\) Cf. Footnote 307.
and Judaism in Crisis (1976) in the later 1970s. As her 1980 copy of Scholem’s autobiographical account From Berlin to Jerusalem suggests, Sontag studied Scholem with a similar focus on references to Benjamin as in her reading of Adorno. Her marginalia note exclusively and with a high frequency “WB” in the margin, with arrows and long perpendicular lines identifying passages pertaining to Benjamin.

5.3 Traces in Drafts, Diaries, other Published Works

By reading and referencing Adorno and Scholem, Sontag draws on the same authorities as Arendt. Rather than diminishing the significance of Arendt’s portrait for Sontag’s work on Benjamin, this observation complements, if not corroborates it: Examining Sontag’s drafting process for her portrait shows how she builds up her own critical stance as a genuinely skeptical one regarding Scholem’s and the Frankfurt School’s relation to Benjamin – a skepticism with a feminist, transnational and trans-medial thrust. Methodologically, Arendt’s portrait remains a significant point of orientation.

5.3.1 Diaries

A first major corpus showing Sontag’s drafting process are her diaries. As a hub of her work and training field for writing, her diaries have a similar status for her work as the Denktagebuch have for Arendt, albeit with a more personal component. She uses them to develop ideas, compose lists, and to repeatedly remind herself not to give in to personal drama but rather

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823 This book is in David Rieff’s personal possession.
824 [Gershom Scholem, From Berlin to Jerusalem (New York: Schocken, 1980)], Series 17: Selected Books from the Library of Susan Sontag, 1783-2001, Box 211, Folder 4, SAP, pages 44, 70, 73, 79, 82, 94, 95, 100, 102, 104, 106, 111, 119, 122, 128, 146. (Figures 5.89-91)
825 In the published editions, David Rieff has cut significant passages, as the archived diaries show. [Diaries 1965-1983], Series 5: Journals, boxes 125-129, SAP.
to focus on writing, to turn herself into a writer. Indeed, there are plenty of comments on the status of note-taking as a form of writing. Most closely descriptive of her own style of journaling is a dense sketch on “The Aphorism” in an entry of April 1980. “The Aphorism. The Fragment – all of these are ‘notebook-thinking’; are produced by the idea of keeping a notebook.” Implicitly anticipating her son’s posthumous publication of her diaries as an important part of her work, Sontag proposes, “the notebook has become an art form,” situating herself in a lineage with Nietzsche, Rilke, Lichtenberg, Wittgenstein and others. This explicit referencing of these aphoristic writers can be linked back to Sontag’s reading of Arendt’s Benjamin portrait: She underlines Arendt’s note on Benjamin’s ambition to become the “foremost critic of German literature” by cultivating, for instance, aphoristic writing, which, Arendt argues, was still unpopular in Germany “despite Lichtenberg, Lessing, Schlegel, Heine, and Nietzsche.” (Figure 5.4) Hence, with her aphoristic writing practice in her diaries, Sontag inscribes herself in a German critical history she had encountered in Arendt’s portrait.

Taking the diaries seriously as a place of aphoristic aggregation of ideas through which Sontag methodologically approximates Benjamin through Arendt, what material do they provide with respect to Benjamin? In accordance with the two phases of her reading on and of Benjamin, the diary volumes of 1964 to 1969 and 1976 to 1981 provide particularly illuminating material concerning the development of her writing on Benjamin. The most striking entry demarcates the beginning of the second phase of Sontag’s Benjamin reception. In May 1978, Sontag reports that she is reading “the new volume” of Benjamin – probably Reflections – and finds herself disappointed by it because of the autobiographical works featured in the edition:

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826 Sontag, *As Consciousness is Harnessed*, 496.
827 Ibid., 13-17, 496.
828 Ibid., 19-258; 393-508.
Figure 5.92: diary entry of 5/14/78: “14 May / Madrid / Reading Benjamin – the new volume – and finding him less extraordinary, less mysterious. I wish he hadn’t written the autobiographical works.”

Despite an apparent lack of excitement, Sontag keeps taking notes on Benjamin, of different length and levels of detail, and on various topics like his work, his life, his habits, and his attitude as a writer. Specifically striking are notes that respond to reading traces. For instance, Sontag comments on Benjamin’s status as “the last European” and “German intellectual” – a note that corresponds to her underlining of the phrase “the last European” in Arendt’s introduction and which seems closely associated with her portrait’s eventual title (in the magazine version), “The Last Intellectual”:

Figure 5.93: diary entry of 5/25/78: “Benjamin thought of himself as the last European. Not just an intellectual but a German intellectual / Kant not Hegel (or Nietzsche) [...]”
Demonstrating the significance for her writing of specific passages encountered in her reading, Sontag also paraphrases Benjamin quotes like the underlined passage from “Author as Producer” in Reflections on how an “author who teaches writers nothing, teaches no one. What matters, therefore, is the exemplary character […]”[829] – which Sontag paraphrases as “An author who teaches a writer nothing teaches nobody anything. The determining factor is the exemplary character […]”:

Diary entry, 1978?

“Benjamin (“The Writer as Producer”): ‘An author who teaches a writer nothing teaches nobody anything. The determining factor is the exemplary character of a production that enables it, first, to lead other producers to this production, and secondly to present them with an improved apparatus for their use. And this apparatus is better the degree that it leads consumers to production, in short that it is capable of making co-workers out of readers or spectators.”

Sontag’s copy of Reflections, “Author as producer,” 233:

“An author who teaches writers nothing, teaches no one. What matters, therefore, is the exemplary character of production, which is able first to induce other producers to produce, and second to put an improved apparatus at their disposal. And this apparatus is better the more consumers it is able to turn into producers – that is, readers or spectators into collaborators.”

Figures 5.94-95: transfer from reading into note-taking

[829] Demetz, Reflections, 233; cf. Figure 5.78.
Rephrasing Benjamin’s passage, Sontag’s diary citation here realizes what Benjamin demands to be the political task of the writer: instigating readers to write. In rewriting Benjamin’s claim, Sontag turns her reading (of his work) into writing, performatively making Benjamin a political author per his own definition. In her portrait, Sontag eventually motivates this procedure of paraphrasing as a Benjaminian way to understand what is read. She cites Benjamin on the role of copying as a way to read, acquire, collect books:

The most praiseworthy way of acquiring books is by writing them, Benjamin remarks in an essay called ‘Unpacking My Library.’ And the best way to understand them is also to enter their space: one never really understands a book unless one copies it, he says in One-Way-Street, as one never understands a landscape from an airplane but only by walking through it. (USS, 125)

By rephrasing Benjamin’s work in her diary, Sontag not only copies Benjamin’s work but also adopts his method of understanding through copying. She was aware that understanding Benjamin correctly was a core issue of the Benjamin debate she knew of – in August 1978, she copies an Adorno quote, in which he presents his dialectical take on how to “understand Benjamin properly”:

Figure 5.96: Diary entry of 8/7/1978: “7 August / Paris / Adorno: ‘To understand Benjamin properly one must feel behind his every sentence the conversion of extreme agitation into something static, indeed, the static notion of movement itself.’”
5.3.2 Notes and Drafts

Indeed, a striking set of notes (probably of the same late 1970s period), available in the Sontag Archive corroborates Sontag’s acute attention to the Benjamin debate: Specifically, five small Italian calendar paper sheets from the months of July and October of an unidentified year show that Sontag took note of core issues of the Benjamin debate, without identifying the debate as such. On the first sheet, Sontag notes the “complicated history of Baudelaire essay” and its “second version published in 1940 (after Adorno’s criticisms).” On a second note, Sontag problematizes Adorno’s and Demetz’s editorial erasure of Benjamin’s and Brecht’s “friend + collaborator” Asja Lacis who, as she notes, introduced Benjamin and Brecht to each other and co-authored Benjamin’s Naples essay:

The note about Adorno’s erasure of Lacis is striking not least because Sontag did not read German and there are no German Benjamin volumes in her library. However, she received the information, Sontag’s notes reconfirm her attention to Lacis which I mentioned before. As Arendt does not discuss Lacis’ role in detail at all, Sontag’s attention to it in her drafts is another sign of the development of an independent stance in the debate which Sontag traces in her reading and notes. will, as I show in the next chapter, be important in her portrait. The feminist undercurrent of Sontag’s repeated reference to Lacis is specifically striking in comparison to her erasure of Arendt. I discuss possible reasons for this citational imbalance in my last chapter.

The notes further list references to adjacent work, showing Sontag’s eagerness to become familiar with important figures around Benjamin, like Horkheimer and Adorno. Sontag also isolates points and information important to her – “Queries, etc” – which again include the attention to “aphoristic form”, pointing to “One-Way-Street B’s book of aphorisms published in 1928.” (Figures 5.101-102) Adorno and Scholem disagreed on the aphoristic quality – and Sontag will eventually side with Adorno in arguing that Benjamin’s seemingly aphoristic preference is rather an allegorical mode of thinking.831

831 USS, 128. In “Benjamin’s Einbahnstraße,” Adomo discusses the short prose of Benjamin’s Einbahnstraße (1928) as “Denkbild” rather than aphorism, arguing that the texts seek to stimulate thought by presenting thought enigmatically – in a dialectical way as they “sowohl dem begrifflichen Denken Einhalt gebieten als durch ihre Rätselgestalt schockieren und damit Denken in Bewegung bringen.” Adorno, Über Walter Benjamin, 56.
Sontag jots down thoughts and ideas for a projected Benjamin essay whose precise occasion and context are not clarified in the notes themselves. Commenting on how Benjamin cites in Figure 5.99 above – noting for the Artwork essay, “Ideas plagiarized, without acknowledgement, by Malraux” – Sontag reminds herself to “put in something on: B’s idea of language.” A recurring phrase again concerns Benjamin as “The Last Intellectual,” reiterating Sontag’s attention to it in her reading and diaries. Reminding herself to end the essay on the issue of the end of the intellectual, Sontag also playfully drafts a possible beginning: A personal note on how Sontag encountered Benjamin’s work for the first time:

“first read him when I was 18 – a mimeographed copy of “Theses on the P of History (last work he wrote), given me, almost clandestinely, by a refugee professor acquaintance (Hans Gerth) in his own translation – and have spent a quarter of a century coming back to + retreating from his work / returning to?”

Figure 5.103: Sontag’s notes on a possible “end” and beginning of her portrait
Sontag’s note that dates her first encounter with Benjamin to when she was 18 (which would have been 1951) is corroborated in Benjamin Moser’s biography, without his referencing of this note. Moser reports based on an oral reference that in Chicago, “Hans Gerth […] gave her mimeographed translations of Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin, a full decade before critical theory made them household names in humanities departments elsewhere.”

Indeed the Institute had circulated a hectographed edition of the theses in the early 1940s, which was also how Peter Szondi first read Benjamin, as I noted. Hence, Sontag’s anecdote could indeed be true but cannot be validated because the respective document is not preserved in her archives. Whether true or not, the story’s rhetorical function is more important: Sontag claims to have had somewhat privileged, immediate access to Benjamin, based on her intimate familiarity with a circle of German Hitler refugees. Indeed, by being provided secret access through a German refugee’s private translation, Sontag situates herself in immediate proximity to exiled Germans, claiming a place amongst those more closely familiar and affiliated with Benjamin. (Moser uses the anecdote similarly to associate Sontag with the beginning of critical theory.) In other words, Sontag affiliates herself with Benjamin, emphasizing the lasting impact Benjamin has on her. Moreover, Sontag inscribes herself into the legendary editorial history of Benjamin’s Thesis – the one text that both Arendt and Adorno had a (competing) last-hand copies of. By claiming to have had another, unofficial copy, Sontag suggests she would be on a similar plane with Arendt and Adorno. In referencing the anecdote along with the doubting question – “they aren’t. Are they?” – Sontag searches her stance towards Benjamin and his presence in translation in the US.

Apart from the calendar notes, Sontag’s notes from the production period of her Benjamin portrait, collected as material concerning Under the Sign of Saturn, generally substantiate her

832 Moser, Sontag, 111-113.
833 Benjamin, Arendt und Benjamin, 9-45.
comprehensive interest in his work’s editorial and critical history as well as her focus on his method. The respective archive file includes many other smaller and larger scraps of paper on which Sontag jots down ideas for the form, themes, and argumentative structure of her future essay. Referencing different works by Benjamin, Sontag thinks through Benjamin’s major themes, like the relationship between meaning and death in Der Erzählter. She thinks about the “ruin” and “fragments”, “B’s love of the city”, how “living means leaving traces” and the “collector liberates”, the “Angelus Novus”, the difference between “fate =/= character”, the Talmud, and “Photographs detachment”, occasionally including a reference: “thinking is a narcotic (Scholem, 226).” (Figures 5.104-109)

The archived Under the Sign of Saturn file further holds a vast number of typewriter drafts whose rather chaotic order indicates the messiness of Sontag’s writing process. Many paragraphs are conjunctive passages of short, abrupt, often incomplete sentences, listing rather than argumentatively developing thoughts in complex sentences. They read as if Sontag tried out thoughts – almost as an extension of her diaries and scrap paper notes, with the difference that the drafts indicate intense reiterative revising strategies: Energetic, if not aggressive, crossing-outs, re-arrangements, arrows, underlines, ticks, crosses, as well as hand-written additions and comments demonstrate how vigorously Sontag edits her first attempts at developing her reading notes into drafts. Only at a certain stage of stability in argument and structure, the drafts get numbered and arranged by colorful paper clips. The archive holds about eight in total of these more organized drafts preceding the publisher galleys.

834 [Drafts, Notes, Rewrites], Series 6: Works by Susan Sontag, Sub-series 6.2, Box 54, File 1, SAP.
The development of Sontag’s drafts happens in close conversation with her readings of other positions on Benjamin, and of Benjamin himself. Overall, the drafts demonstrate that Sontag is acutely aware of the Benjamin debate and its core concern with interpretive and editorial authority over Benjamin’s legacy. She plainly pins down core conflicts and develops her own stance towards them throughout the drafts. The following passage identifies the debate’s main actors as Arendt, Adorno and Scholem, succinctly summarizes their core arguments about Benjamin and emphasizes their centrality through pencil underlines and an addition of a handwritten note:

“Disparities between Arendt’s Benjamin (Jewishness only a sociological fact), Scholem’s Benjamin (strands of Judaism are woven), and Adorno’s Benjamin (Marxist). Poet, Jew, political ideologue and radical aesthetician. // Everyone claims him. Two principle claims. Adorno+Scholem // Fortuitous connection with Frankfurt school. Met Adorno in 1923, but … // Met Scholem in 1915. Didn’t go to Palestine. Didn’t go to America.”

Sontag’s note “Everyone claims him” laconically summarizes the fight over interpretive authority. Strikingly, of her summative characterization of Benjamin as “Poet, Jew, political ideologue and radical aesthetician,” Sontag attributes all qualities to Arendt’s, Scholem’s or Adorno’s
interpretations except for “radical aesthete.” This is the quality that Sontag will develop in her portrait. Hence, this draft prefigures how Sontag herself will claim Benjamin.

Added in belatedly to typewritten drafts, Sontag’s manual alterations in many cases are significant developments of the typewritten thought. Indeed, Sontag appears to get to the next typewriter stage by re-reading and working through a given draft with a pen in hand.

836 Adorno and Scholem are referenced throughout the drafts but Sontag’s reading of Arendt shows up repeatedly in different ways, beyond explicit reference. Apart from referential notes to “Arendt” and “Illuminations,” traces of a methodological orientation at Arendt’s portrait show in Sontag’s search for epigraphs. Amongst the debate positions identified, Arendt’s portrait is the only one in which mottos provide structure prominently. Further, Sontag’s association of photography with Benjamin (in her reading of Arendt’s portrait and her other Benjamin volumes) reappears and, per a handwritten note, gets placed at the beginning of the future portrait. The note “begin essay here / Three photographs” is added to the line “Few photographs have been published of B.” (Figures below) Thus, Sontag’s tracing of the medium of photography across her Benjamin volumes receives heightened importance in the drafts at this point. Apart from these structural notes, Sontag develops first attempts at capturing Benjamin’s appearance in incomplete, note-like sentences: “His hand covers his mouth […] characteristic expression of thinker. He wears glasses. The skin is clear. It is a sensuous face.”

The drafts show how Sontag traces Benjamin’s “positions,” and begins to intervene in the Benjamin debate, emancipating from the positions she read (about or) on Benjamin. Sontag isolates specific ideas, partially reiterating reading traces and notes from the scrap papers: The topic of “melancholy” and its relationship to allegory appear repeatedly in form of handwritten sketches and additions to the typewriter text. Other, related handwritten terms are “Saturn”, “Trauerspiel”, “suicide”, “modernism” and “surrealism.” Sontag thematizes Benjamin’s skepticism against intellectualism, “Professional failure”, “Exile War”, Europeanness, “Sex”, a “temperament.” Benjamin’s in-betweenness is central to her: “All these antitheses; his web of ‘positions.’” (Figures 5.118-124)

Demonstrating editorial reasoning, Sontag starts to position herself on prominent issues like how to deal with Benjamin’s Goethe essay, and trying out propositions about critical and editorial motifs and decisions: “Perhaps the reason B’s essay on Elective Affinities has not yet been translated is not that it is academic (the reason that is supposed to have guided Hannah Arendt to leave it out) but because of B’s attitude to marriage […]”
In a striking handwritten marginal note, she salvages Benjamin from a genuinely German appropriation and proposes a contextualization that foregrounds his position in French exile:

contrary to Adorno, Marcuse, Arendt and other figures [with?] whom B. is often grouped // For Benjamin, models were French, rather than German. Strongly identified with Baudelaire, Proust, Aragon. Though we think of Benjamin as a Weimar product, he spent most of his life abroad, travelling […] real model was France. (Figure 5.126 below)

This recalls her corrective note in reading Demetz’s introduction that Benjamin was not “Germany’s most outstanding literary critic” but the “most outstanding critic of German lit.”

As it reappears across her reading traces and drafting stages, dissociating Benjamin from the German nation appears to have been important to Sontag. Indeed, she situates Benjamin in a tradition of writers who, as she suggests, struggled in and with Germany – “Heine, Nietzsche, Benjamin” – and for whom the “alternative is always France.”
Sontag’s complication of Benjamin’s relationship to Germany exceeds Arendt’s similar argumentative thrust because Arendt does not emphasize France as the alternative as strongly as Sontag does in these notes. However, Sontag adopts Arendt’s focus on Benjamin’s quotational method. Quotation appears increasingly central to how Sontag processes her Benjamin readings in writing. (Figures 5.127-129) Rather than Adorno or Scholem, Sontag draws on Arendt twice in publications of the early 1970s, establishing a connection between Arendt’s Benjamin and the topic of “quotation.”

5.3.3 Adjacent Publications

That the topic of quotation is correlated with Sontag’s reading of Arendt’s Benjamin portrait shows in the short story “Project for a Trip to China”, included in I, etcetera (1978) in which an anonymous “I” ruminates about her relationship to China and her desire to travel there.\(^{838}\)

For the informed reader, this “I” is rather inconspicuously auto-fictional. When Sontag was a child, her parents traded fur in Shanghai, wherefore they traveled to China often, leaving their daughters behind in New York with a Nanny.\textsuperscript{839} Sontag’s father even died in China of tuberculosis.\textsuperscript{840} Crucially, the text draws substantially on fragmented quotations, introducing a plurality of voices and the impression of foreignness. Instead of a coherent narrative, there is just an “I” pondering on its relationship to China and the idea of travelling there. The following quote demonstrates how the text uses quotes to relate apparently unrelated experiences, countering uniformity by celebrating “excursions” to other writers’ wor(l)ds.

From The Great Gatsby, p. 2: “When I came back from the East last autumn I felt that I wanted the world to be in uniform and at a sort of moral attention forever; I wanted no more riotous excursions with privileged glimpses into the human heart.” —Another “East,” but no matter. The quote fits. —Fitzgerald meant New York, not China. —(Much to be said about the “discovery of the modern function of the quotation,” attributed by Hannah Arendt to Walter Benjamin in her essay “Walter Benjamin.” —Facts: a writer someone brilliant a German [i.e., a Berlin Jew] a refugee he died at the French-Spanish border in 1940 —To Benjamin, add Mao Tse-tung and Godard.)\textsuperscript{841}

Quotation appears here closely associated with the theme of travel and being abroad – loosely reminiscent of Sontag’s appropriation of Benjamin for a French, rather than German tradition, which emphasizes his life in exile from Germany. Another, earlier essay corroborates Sontag’s linking of quotes, Benjamin and Arendt. The essay “Melancholic Objects” in the collection \textit{On Photography} (1977) credits Arendt’s “magisterial essay on Benjamin” in which, as Sontag reports,

Hannah Arendt recounts that ‘nothing was more characteristic of him in the thirties than the little notebooks with black covers which he always carried with him and in which he tirelessly entered in the form of quotations what daily living and reading netted him in the way of ‘pearls’ and ‘coral.’ On occasion he read from them aloud, showed them around like items from a choice and precious collection.’\textsuperscript{842}

\textsuperscript{839} Moser, Sontag, 23.
\textsuperscript{840} Ibid., 3, 9, 24, 27f.
\textsuperscript{841} Sontag, \textit{I, Etcetera}, Loc. 213.
These references to Arendt’s Benjamin portrait are punctual and pithy in a similar way that Sina has observed for Sontag’s reading of Arendt more generally: “Sontags Beschäftigung mit Hannah Arendt […] ist punktuell und persönlich.” However, as my inquiry in Sontag’s reception of Arendt’s Benjamin portrait and its intertexts shows, Sontag’s concern with Arendt was also methodological and not exclusively personal. One aspect was apparently specifically significant to Sontag: Arendt’s points about the role of quotation in Benjamin’s work. Invoking Arendt’s Shakespearean motto of the “pearl diver,” Sontag adopts Arendt’s view of Benjamin as an innovative champion of a modern citational method whose historical and political implications with respect to decontextualizing and destruction of tradition, however, Sontag leaves unmentioned. The terse, yet highly charged note “[m]uch to be said about” contains the core of how Sontag draws on Arendt: She is precisely not interested in elaborating on Arendt’s argument, neither by reiterating Arendt’s main points about why and how Benjamin discovered “the modern function of the quotation” or what that function exactly is, nor by situating Arendt’s attribution of this discovery to Benjamin in the so-called Benjamin-debate. Rather than saying more about Arendt’s point, Sontag writes with it by quoting it. Thus, Sontag’s quoting of Arendt itself receives increased weight as it is thrown back on itself without further discursive embedding and explanation, raising the question:

Why would Sontag quote Arendt on Benjamin’s citational method in an essay on photography and in a quasi-autobiographical short story about a displaced Western “I”’s relationship to China? Sontag’s quoting of Arendt on Benjamin’s quotational method in these texts is specifically striking considering Arendt’s conspicuous absence in Sontag’s Benjamin portrait itself. Moreover, this absence is striking because Sontag continues to use the vocabulary of

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843 Sina, “Worin unsere Stärke besteht.”
Arendt’s Benjamin portrait. In her 1996 *Afterword* for the thirtieth anniversary of *Against Interpretation*, Sontag calls the cultural shift between the 1960s and 1990s a “sea-change:” Something had happened “that it would not be an exaggeration to call a sea-change in the whole culture, a transvaluation of values.” (AI, 310) Reading Sontag’s use of “sea-change” as a trace of her reading of Arendt’s Benjamin portrait is speculative to a certain degree but it is a fact that even after decades, she uses the same word that Arendt used to characterize Benjamin’s quotation method with Shakespeare’s metaphor of the “pearl diver.” (MDT, 205)

In this chapter, I traced the emergence of Sontag’s Benjamin portrait from its first initiation through the review occasion of Demetz’s edition *Reflections* to her references to Arendt and Benjamin in adjacent work. I demonstrated how intensely and comprehensively Sontag engaged with the protagonists of the Benjamin debate through reading, note-taking, drafting and in her diaries. Arendt emerges as a significant interlocutor for Sontag. In dialogue with her, Sontag develops major points of her interpretive stance on Benjamin. Throughout, Sontag focuses on Benjamin’s relationship to France, untying him from the German lineage in which she finds him situated. Other foci in her production processes are melancholy and allegory in Benjamin’s work, the role of Asja Lacis as a marginalized significant figure for Benjamin’s life and work and critical methods like autobiography, copying, quotation, and photography. How her deep engagement with the Benjamin debate and Benjamin’s work translates into her portrait, I will discuss in my following close reading.
Chapter 6: Sontag’s Benjamin Portrait – Close Reading

What is the secret of suddenly beginning to write, finding a voice?844

What I write about is other than me. As what I write is smarter than I am. Because I can rewrite it.845

Contrasting the comprehensive depth of her reading of the Benjamin debate, Sontag’s Benjamin portrait seems to be all about the surface. Her fascination with photography turned into a writing method, Sontag portrays Benjamin in aesthetic rather than historical terms, focusing almost exclusively on the poetic principles of his work rather than his life and its historical context. She draws on the full potential of portraiture to present a historical figure aesthetically rather than represent it historically. Producing an informational, factual representation of the historical person Walter Benjamin is not her portrait’s main point. Neither does the portrait present an interpretation of Benjamin’s works in the Marxist or Freudian modes Sontag exorcizes in “Against Interpretation.” (AI, 6f.) Instead, the portrait pivots on Benjamin as a cipher of what Sontag elsewhere calls a “sensibility,” namely the aesthetic temperament of “melancholy.” (USS, 111)

Thus, Sontag’s portrait looks pretty different from Arendt’s, providing ample historical context of Benjamin’s life and work. Moreover, Arendt is not credited as an interlocutor in Sontag’s portrait in contrast to other figures of the Benjamin debate like Scholem and Adorno. (USS, 111ff.) That Arendt only appears in one footnote – which disappears in the transition from the magazine review version to the book version – is striking considering that from her reading traces to the drafting of her portrait in diaries and notes, Sontag intensely engaged with Arendt’s portrait. As I demonstrated in the last chapter, Sontag not only starts developing her own stance

844 Sontag, Reborn, 149.
845 Sontag, Where the Stress Falls, Loc. 4013.
on Benjamin in her reading of it but Arendt appears as a significant reference in published work preceding her Benjamin portrait. Furthermore, the similarity between Sontag’s and Arendt’s publication strategy with Arendt’s suggests that the latter was an important point of orientation.

For a more precise understanding of the relationship between Arendt’s and Sontag’s portraits, a closer look at Sontag’s portrait itself is required. How does Sontag argue that Benjamin was a “melancholic”? (USS, 110) If the portrait became an attractive alternative for her to what she calls the “aggressive and impious” mode of critique in “Against Interpretation,” what kind of portraiture does she develop in writing about Benjamin – and how is Arendt relevant for how she does it? In the following close reading, I argue that Sontag’s intense engagement with Arendt’s edition and works more generally shows in her portrait argumentatively and stylistically. Moreover, I explore how Sontag develops the aesthetics explored with Benjamin and Arendt in the 1960s to 1980 further in later works. Overall, Sontag’s Benjamin portrait shows that what seems like an aestheticist approach at first sight is informed by an ambitious deep dive into her object’s history, which is signaled by the portrait’s attentive exploration of aesthetic surfaces.

While Sontag’s relationship to Arendt seems to have been marked by respect and admiration for an authoritative intellectual role model to the degree of hampering “anxiety of influence” (to channel Harald Bloom’s phrase), Sontag increasingly embodies a public persona that has significant similarities to Arendt in the way they prioritize literature as a medium for transatlantic, political understanding.846 Their Benjamin portraits are first hints at how Sontag approximates Arendt methodologically, allowing for their work to converge in this sense.

6.1 Close Reading

With the key term melancholy, Sontag simultaneously references but also moves beyond the Benjamin debate. That Sontag inscribes herself into the debate is suggested by her indirect citation and adoption of Adorno’s dictum – as cited by Arendt – that what is at stake is understanding Benjamin correctly. She frames her melancholy claim by announcing that Benjamin’s “major projects […] cannot be understood [emphasis:CM] unless one grasps how much they rely on a theory of melancholy.” (USS, 110) Moreover, Sontag recites main arguments circulating in the debate, like Benjamin’s fascination for the figure of the flâneur, that he was a collector who trusted more in things than in people and that he had a preference for miniatures. These aspects of Benjamin’s work, Sontag suggests, are governed by the overarching quality of melancholy, which is itself one of many characteristics Adorno and Scholem ascribe to Benjamin and which Arendt only implicitly negotiates with the figure of the hunchback. However, Sontag builds her essay on melancholy in a structural rather than a semantic sense. This structural role of “melancholy” in Sontag’s portrait has been noted by scholarship before. For instance, Sayres observes that Sontag “avoids the content of Benjamin’s ‘positions.’” According to Poague, melancholy is “not only a theme but a structure, a geometry of space and time, a charting of distances and affiliations.” But how does melancholy as “a structure” precisely work? What kind of affiliations does it create? And what does Sontag’s use of melancholy imply for her portrait’s relationship to Arendt’s, and other positions in the debate?

Sontag’s distinct intervention is precisely not explicating the proposed “theory of melancholy” but rather pivoting on melancholy as an aesthetically productive mode of
experiencing the world – as a “temperament.” What Sontag calls “temperament” appears to be something beyond life and work but closely linked to both – something reminiscent of what Arendt posits as the “who” in contrast to the “what” that Benjamin was or produced. However, Sontag is not so much concerned with Benjamin’s personal singularity and incomparability as with melancholy as a transpersonal creative aesthetic experience that surfaces textually in this specific work.

While Sontag does not use the word sensibility in the portrait, temperament reminds of her definition of the term in the diaries as the “humus for the intellect.” However, Sontag distinguishes the portrait from her “idea-ridden, […] expository” essays that are concerned with “descriptions of a sensibility.” Rather than by “description,” Sontag’s portrait explores the temperament of melancholy itself methodologically as a literary motor – what the temperament is, depends on what it does textually. In the portrait, the sensibility takes over, as it were, so that Sontag’s essay itself becomes, to a certain degree, melancholic.

Given this structural role of melancholy, an interpretative approach to her portrait that tries to disambiguate what melancholy means exactly misses the point. The alternative the portrait affords is instead reminiscent of the kind of interpretation envisioned in “Against Interpretation”: to consider it descriptively by showing “how it is what it is, even that it is what it is, rather than […] what it means.” (AI, 14) In other words, Sontag affords reading Sontag with Sontag by attending to how her portrait creates the experience of a melancholic Benjamin. Attending to this “how” in the following, I argue that Sontag’s melancholic Benjamin has more in common with Arendt’s remarkable, critical Benjamin than it seems at first sight.

851 Sontag, *As Consciousness is Harnessed*, 33.
852 Sontag, *Conversations*, 201.
853 Poague and Parsons, *Sontag Bibliography,*
6.1.1 “How it is what it is”

The most obvious intertext Sontag cites to show where Benjamin developed a “theory of melancholy” is his *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*: “the book published in 1928 on the German baroque drama (the *Trauerspiel*; literally, sorrow-play).” (USS, 110) In this context, Sontag explains that melancholy implied an allegorical, spatial relationship to time through which “the baroque dramatists seek to escape from history and restore the ‘timelessness’ of paradise.” (USS, 116, 119) Benjamin’s baroque, Sontag argues, is “a world of things (emblems, ruins) and spatialized ideas.” (USS, 119) While Sontag’s sketch of the allegorical dynamic of baroque melancholy in Benjamin’s intended *Habilitation* is quite straightforward, melancholy plays a more complicated role in her portrait overall as her portrait adopts melancholy as a writing method to negotiate the historical distance between herself and Benjamin.

The first definition provided in the passage introducing “melancholy” shows that Sontag withholding an explicit clarification of the term. First, she displaces the definition into French: He was what the French call *un triste.*” Leaving the French without direct translation, the reader can only guess that *sadness* plays a role for melancholy through the subsequent Scholem quote: “he seemed marked by ‘a profound sadness,’ Scholem wrote.” (USS, 110) But *sadness* seems not to exhaust the meaning of *melancholic* as, third, Sontag quotes Benjamin himself on the astrological meaning of the term whose metaphorical opacity she leaves unresolved except for marking its contrast to “modern psychological labels”: “He thought of himself as a melancholic […]: ‘I came into the world under the sign of Saturn – the star of the slowest revolution, the planet of detours and delays […].’” (USS, 110) So far, melancholy hence appears to be a state of being and feeling
characterized by slowness and deferral that is not psychologically explicable and, for Sontag, in some way linked to French culture.

The French association is more than linguistic play. It is the first hint at how Sontag seeks to counter Benjamin’s appropriation for a German tradition through basically all participants of the Merkur debate, including Arendt, as she argues in her drafts: “contrary to Adorno, Marcuse, Arendt and other figures [with?] whom B. is often grouped // For Benjamin, models were French, rather than German.” (Figure 5.126) Accordingly, Sontag heavily emphasizes Benjamin’s affinity to French modernists like “Baudelaire, Proust, Aragon.” However, German writers like Kafka, Kraus, and Goethe remain equally central – while Heidegger and Brecht are only referenced adjacently, rather than as poetically important interlocutors. These references indicate wherein Sontag’s intervention in the Benjamin debate consists: by deemphasizing the ideological, political, German dispute over associating Benjamin with Heidegger (and hence fascism) or Brecht (and communism), Sontag situates Benjamin in a transnational, German and French literary lineage. Like Arendt, she considers him a literary rather than philosophical or political figure but she expands Arendt’s affiliation of Benjamin with the German literary tradition (Goethe) transnationally by emphasizing the connections to French literary modernism.

Moreover, she adds a postmodern reference implicitly. Melancholy has an intricate literary potentiality that resounds strongly with her reading of Roland Barthes. Almost simultaneously with her Benjamin portrait, Sontag wrote and published her portrait of Barthes as the introduction to her edited Barthes Reader (1981), titled “Writing Itself: On Roland Barthes.” As I demonstrated with Sontag’s reading traces, she creates the connection between Benjamin’s

855 Ibid., 110f., 117, 122, 125, 128, 130f., 133.
photographic aura and Barthes in *Illuminations* herself. Without explicitly referencing Barthes, Sontag’s portrait reads Benjamin in terms of what she considers Barthes’ “one great subject: writing itself.” Melancholy is the temperament that propels this textual self-creation. This is suggested in the autobiographical, or rather autographical, dynamic of melancholy: “Benjamin projected himself, his temperament, into all his major subjects, and his temperament determined what he chose to write about.” (USS, 110) A few pages into the portrait, Sontag notes again that reading Benjamin “under the sign of saturn,” as the title announces, means approaching him as a textual cipher:

“The mark of the Saturnine temperament is the self-conscious and unforgiving relation to the self, which can never be taken for granted. The self is a text – it has to be deciphered. (Hence, this is an apt temperament for intellectuals.) The self is a project, something to be built. (Hence, this is an apt temperament for artists and martyrs, those who court ‘the purity and beauty of a failure,’ as Benjamin says of Kafka.)” (USS, 116)

While Sontag suggests here that Benjamin could have been considered an intellectual, artist or martyr where he is a melancholic, she does not explicitly attribute any of these categories to him. Rather than joining the dispute about Benjamin’s professional affiliation, Sontag shifts the focus to how, for Benjamin as a melancholic, the self becomes a textual cipher in a Barthian, poststructuralist sense of “writing itself.” The self creates itself through writing which is why it is a cipher which “has to be deciphered,” albeit in infinite reiteration because the melancholic self constantly recreates itself through writing. Corresponding to this self-textualizing quality of the saturnine temperament, Sontag’s interpretive principle prioritizes the “work” over the “life”: “One cannot use the life to interpret the work. But one can use the work to interpret the life.” (USS, 111)

Sontag is less interested in the historical Benjamin than in him as an aesthetic figure as it surfaces in his literary work. Neither theory nor history is Sontag’s main concern but the aesthetic quality

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and productivity of melancholy. In this sense, Sontag focuses on surface rather than depth; on criticism rather than critique.

Sontag demonstrates how she turns Benjamin into a cipher in her portrait’s opening section through photographic ekphrasis; she translates her impressions of his photographic image into her writing via four photograph descriptions, without a presentation of the photos themselves. Based on the books in her archived library, she encountered the following photographs:

![Figures 6.1-3: Benjamin in Sontag’s copies of Reflections, Understanding Brecht, Illuminations](image)

Covering the later part of Benjamin’s short life, the photographs Sontag describes trace his appearance from “1927” over “the late 1930s” to “1937” and “1938,” (USS, 109) pivoting on Benjamin’s “gaze of the myopic” and preparing Sontag’s main claim that Benjamin was a melancholic. (USS, 109) Her main observation – “In most of the photographs he is looking down, his right hand to his face” – matches all the images cited above. However, an important photograph might have been Germaine Krull’s portrait of 1927 which is provided in Jenning’s et al. contemporary US edition:

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The photographic opening is the only moment in the text where Sontag appears as an “I,” staging her encounter with the depicted photographs in a descriptive present tense: “In most of the portrait photographs he is looking down, his hand to his face. The earliest one I know shows him in 1927 – he is thirty five […].” (USS, 109) The “I” marks her limited, personal perspective early by conceding to know only some photos of Benjamin but maybe not all: “The earliest one I know shows him […].” (USS, 109) This perspectivity also shows in a lack of descriptive distance: Providing mostly close-ups of Benjamin’s physical appearance, of his posture, his surroundings and of what he does in the image, the “I” seems intricately focused on certain aspects of the referenced images. She exposes her perspective by tentative words like “seem.” Still, there is a striking combination of microscopic detail and generalizing judgment about what kind of person Benjamin was. From a general statement about Benjamin’s posture – “In most of the portrait photographs he is looking down […]” – Sontag quickly jumps into details, combined with summative judgments about his appearance: “with dark curly hair over a high forehead, mustache above a full lower lip: youthful, almost handsome.” (USS, 109)

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While the “I” clearly marks her subjective encounter with specific details of the photograph here, she has stepped back completely by the end of the photographic opening – and she does not return. This vanishing of the “I”, announced in the generalizing judgment proposed, affects the historical distance implied by her photographic encounter with Benjamin: First, she stages herself as thrown back upon reconfiguring Benjamin’s appearance across an eclectic selection of photographs: As the past moment when the photo was taken is forever passed, the “I,” belatedly attempting to encounter Benjamin, is left with her impressions of the sitter in her present tense.

But the historical distance increasingly loses relevance as the “I” complements her view inter-subjectively, by citing Gershom Scholem. Sontag corroborates her interpretation of the photos historically by retelling an anecdote about his first encounter with Benjamin that has crucial similarities with her just presented photographic encounter. As Sontag quotes him, Scholem remembers watching Benjamin from the distance, albeit a spatial rather than temporal one, at a “joint meeting of a Zionist youth group” where Benjamin appeared as a speaker. In Scholem’s memory, Benjamin looked away into “‘a remote corner’” just as Sontag sees the photographed Benjamin looking “into the lower right edge of the photograph.” (USS, 109) By parallelizing her photographic impression of Benjamin with Scholem’s impression of Benjamin live on a stage, Sontag reduces her historical distance from the dead Benjamin by means of reciting Scholem’s in-person experience of an alive Benjamin. She draws on Scholem’s status as Benjamin’s contemporary and “close friend” to bring herself closer to Benjamin, or vice versa (Benjamin closer to her).
This approximation, aiming to overcome historical distance, surfaces in Sontag’s use of present versus past tense in this short paragraph. The change in tenses remains an illuminating indicator of the relationship of historical references and close readings throughout Sontag’s portrait. Generally, the present tense dominates – most of her portrait consists of close readings. However, in scattered references mostly to Scholem, some to Adorno, Sontag adds in historical anecdotes. In most of these historicizing references, Sontag uses past tense: “as Scholem has pointed out […] He was […]”

As the Scholem reference in the opening section suggests, Sontag’s historical references serve her approximation of Benjamin by affiliating herself with Benjamin’s contemporaries. This strongly reminds of Sontag’s self-staging as closely familiar with the circles of German refugees in the US, through which she supposedly gained privileged access to Benjamin’s works, as she suggests in her notes. In Scholem’s anecdote, even the alive Benjamin was always already remote – a distant, charismatic figure on a stage, inviting others’ projections but remaining aloof and to a certain degree inaccessible. Thus, the historical distance between Sontag’s “I” and the photographed Benjamin is analogized to a distance attached to Benjamin’s character, which suggests that historical distance actually makes little difference for understanding his temperament. All the more so as the result of the impression appears to be the same: Sontag suggests that her experience matches Scholem’s despite their vastly different temporalities of encounter with Benjamin, last but not least by adopting his claim of the melancholic Benjamin.

Ultimately, Sontag’s portrait aims at overcoming historical distance in service of aesthetic understanding. Meaningful aesthetic encounters, Sontag suggests, can occur despite historical

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860 The link to Scholem’s anecdote is in present perfect, the past tense that is closely linked to the present tense: “His close friend Gershom Scholem has described [...]” (USS, 109) The anecdote itself is told in simple past: “Benjamin was a leader. He spoke [...]” (USS, 110)

861 Cf. USS, 117, 119, 121, 123, 133.
distance. Indeed, Sontag’s focus is not describing Benjamin historically, as a writer of the past, but rather *presenting* him through his work, as a cipher, on the textual surface. Given her historical distance from the historical person Benjamin, and her desire to belong to the admired group of European refugees, which I observed in my archival chapter, approximating Benjamin aesthetically, as a cipher, appears as a logical strategy to reduce distance and increase proximity. However, one could question if her portrait really portrays Benjamin where it is mainly concerned with a “temperament,” rather than with the historical person Benjamin. But the significant proximity of Sontag’s portrait to Benjamin’s work complicates such a charge. She does not simply force her own interest in melancholy on Benjamin but gains it from his own work. Indeed, she adopts the melancholic temperament insofar as she tries to “escape from history” like the baroque dramatist, in order to meet Benjamin on a timeless aesthetic level. (USS, 116, 119)

In fact, Sontag’s portrait is grounded in Benjamin’s own method of self-writing: In the very first intertextual reference of the portrait, Sontag cites Benjamin’s Kafka essay: ‘‘He who listens hard doesn’t see,’ Benjamin wrote in his essay on Kafka.” (USS, 109) Citing this note on the visual versus the auditive sense, Sontag seems to hint at the potential of language as a medium of encounter that can transport across time and space better than photography, which might be the reason why she refrains from providing the photographs. More importantly, however, the Kafka essay quote invokes just that Benjamin essay on the tenth anniversary of Kafka’s death that could itself be considered a portrait and which features a childhood photograph of Kafka which Benjamin describes in a similar way as Sontag does in her opening, noting details like the “[p]alm branches in the background” or the “oversized, wide-brimmed hat of the type worn by the Spaniards” which Kafka is holding:

There is a childhood photograph of Kafka […]. It was probably made in one of those nineteenth-century studios whose draperies and palm trees, tapestries and easels, placed
them somewhere between a torture chamber and a throne room. […] Immensely sad eyes dominate the landscape arranged for them, and the auricle of a large ear seems to be listening for its sounds.\textsuperscript{862}

In Sontag’s copies of \textit{Illumination}, this passage marked with a perpendicular line.\textsuperscript{863} A closer look at Benjamin’s Kafka essay shows that Sontag’s quoting of it in her Benjamin portrait actually provides a trace to the genealogy of her photographic method, its relation to “melancholy,” and how Sontag draws on Benjamin’s concept of aura for her turning of Benjamin into a textual cipher.

\textbf{6.1.2 Interactive Aura – Adopted by Sontag}

Like for Arendt, the nuanced sense of aura as an interactive reception-based phenomenon becomes central for Sontag even though the concept itself is not cited in her portrait. Unlike Arendt, however, Sontag develops Benjamin’s link of interactive aura, melancholy and photography, as I noted in describing her reading traces: In Arendt’s introduction, Sontag associates “photo” with Arendt’s discussion of Benjamin’s view of the collector’s destructive relation to tradition. (ILLU, 44) This association suggests that Sontag considers photography to be a medium that affords something similar to the collector’s replacement of content with “originality or authenticity” through which a strange inversion of past and present occurs: Attending to an old object’s “’genuininess,’ its uniqueness,” (ILLU, 44) the collector – according to Arendt’s reading of Benjamin – invests the old object with newness, with presence, “which is directed against tradition and the authority of the past.” (ILLU, 44f.)

In her reading of the Baudelaire essay in \textit{Illuminations}, Sontag connects this collapse of temporal distance from the phenomenon of “aura” which Benjamin discusses across three pages,

\textsuperscript{862} Walter Benjamin, \textit{Selected Writings}, vol. 2, part 2, 800; ILLU, 118.
\textsuperscript{863} Cf. Figures 5.66-67, Appendix.
through a long perpendicular line and the keyword “photo.” In a self-citation, Benjamin describes here the interactive sense of aura I referenced in my Arendt chapter: Early portrait photography is invested (for instance by figures like Baudelaire) with the auratic “unique manifestation of a distance” exactly at the moment of the looming disappearance of aura through technologies of mechanical reproduction. (ILLU, 18) Photography on the one hand upsets the condition of aura – that “our gaze” be returned (ILLU, 188) – because the camera does not answer the sitter’s gaze, creating the impression of deadliness, of something “inhuman.” (ILLU, 188) On the other hand, photography affords the appearance of aura when the photograph is looked at, as the looking at belatedly fulfils the sitter’s expectation of the return of the gaze and invests the photo with the expectation itself again. Benjamin defines: “Experience of the aura thus rests on the transposition of a response common in human relationships to the relationship between the inanimate object or natural object and man.”

In its pivoting on Benjamin’s “gaze of the myopic” (USS, 109) and its intricate play with historical versus spatial distance, Sontag’s photographic opening reads like displaying an auratic “experience” of the interactive kind she encounters in Illuminations and which Arendt also builds on. But Sontag is methodologically even closer to Benjamin than Arendt. Her portrait taps into how Benjamin himself linked melancholy, photography, and interactive aura in Little History of Photography (1931), and later in Berlin Childhood around 1900 (1938). Probably, Sontag did not even know how closely she operated to Benjamin because the respective texts were partly still untranslated, as she notes herself. (USS, 111)

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864 Ibid., ILLU, 186ff.
Even before he used it in his Kafka essay, Benjamin discusses the Kafka photograph in the *Little History* essay in order to show the experience of alienation in the age of technological reproduction. He reuses it – without explicating the repeated citation – in *Berlin Childhood* to create an image of himself as alienated. The repeated covert citation creates a reappearance of the same, yet slightly different figure across different texts, indicating Benjamin’s concern with identity. As Benjamin writes in the respective passage of *Berlin Childhood*: He acted upon a “compulsion to become similar“ but struggled to identify with himself: “Never to my own image, though. And that explains why I was at such a loss when someone demanded of me similarity to myself.” By appropriating the Kafka photograph, the melancholic encounter with the child’s “immensely sad eyes” becomes literarily productive. The singularity of the individual is auratically mourned in the context of an alienated, reified world but at the same time this mourning is (post-auratically) turned into a transformative force through which isolated individuals connect.

For Sontag’s portrait, melancholy plays a very similar role of facilitating a connection post-auratically; she is caught by and returns what she considers the gaze of “*un triste.*” (USS, 110) Sontag’s Benjamin portrait is not marked as an autobiographical text but it takes the post-auratic aesthetic potential to represent the self as other – or the other as oneself – to the next post-autobiographical level. Focused on “writing itself” rather than herself (or even Benjamin’s self, for that matter), Sontag’s Benjaminian ekphrasis might be informed by Barthes’ concept of “punctum,” showing the Barthian undercurrent of her portrait which I noted before. As her

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870 Ibid., 85f.
interpretive principle shows – “One cannot use the life to interpret the work. But one can use the work to interpret the life” (USS, 111) – Sontag moves from her personal, historical “I” perspective to the transhistorical, third person neutral voice of “One.” Sontag’s portrait is neither about her authentic self, nor about the original, historical Benjamin but about the aesthetic principle of literary transformation propelled by melancholy.

Remaining ambiguous, the term invites what Benjamin calls the “play of the imagination” in his discussion of Baudelaire’s aural reaction to photography: Imagination is triggered by a singular appearance whose perception lingers because it is not “exhaustible” by anything. Melancholy in Sontag’s portrait is exactly a term that remains unexhausted. It is difficult for a reader to “dispose of it,” as Sontag explores it as a literary motor rather than determining its meaning. Thus, the portrait re-introduces something mysterious at the sight of Benjamin – maybe the mystery Sontag missed when she encountered the de-mystifying autobiographical writings in Reflections in 1978: “Reading Benjamin – the new volume – and finding him less extraordinary, less mysterious. I wish he hadn’t written the autobiographical works.” With melancholy, Sontag complicates a unidirectional understanding of autobiography as writing that represents a life. Rather than an epiphenomenon of the life, writing becomes the condition sine qua non of the melancholic’s life. The text determines rather than is determined by the life.

Sontag’s aesthetic approximation of Benjamin’s work, and her reduction of historical distance to a minimum, confirms my thesis that Sontag develops a non-suspicious mode of criticism with her portrait. That this portrait is “against interpretation,” or at least defers interpretation to a certain degree, is suggested in the last sentence of her portrait. Relegating final

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871 Cf. Figure 5.92.
judgment about what Benjamin was to a numinous future, Sontag emphasizes that such judgment misses the point because Benjamin “placed himself at the crossroads:”

At the Last Judgement, the Last Intellectual – the Saturnine hero of modern culture, with his ruins, his defiant visions, his reveries, his unquenchable gloom, his downcast eyes – will explain that he took many ‘positions’ and defended the life of the mind to the end, as righteously and inhumanly as he could. (USS, 133)

The pathos in this concluding sentence shows that Sontag’s intense engagement with the Benjamin debate translates into her portrait implicitly where she shifts the emphasis from determining the “correct” interpretation to recreating the defining aesthetic experience in Benjamin’s work. While Sontag does not explicate the comprehensive knowledge about the debate she must have had, given her reading and drafting traces, the hermeneutic drive of infinite “better understanding” transpiring in the archive shows in her portrait’s open-endedness and relegation of judgment to an infinite future.

6.1.3 With Arendt in the Benjamin Debate

Like Arendt, Sontag places the interpretive question driving the Benjamin debate at the center of her portrait with her interpretive principle “One cannot use the life […].” (USS, 110) Like Arendt, Sontag suggests that the interaction with the object contains the answer to how to understand Benjamin correctly. Thus, presenting the object (through citations and ekphrasis) becomes central to her interpretive approach which prioritizes the aesthetic encounter over historical distancing – one could say, surface over depth, text over context.

In drawing on ekphrasis, Sontag methodologically approximates Benjamin – she uses a photographic method similar to his in his Kafka essay. Moreover, and maybe even more importantly, it has methodological affinities to Arendt’s portrait. Arendt appears both editorially and methodologically as a critical mediator for the genealogy of Sontag’s portrait: The imaginative
potential Sontag inscribes into her use of “melancholy” per auratic photographic ekphrasis is likely based on her reading of the Kafka and Baudelaire essays, which are, of all editions Sontag owned, only included in *Illuminations*. This substantiates the importance of Arendt’s editorial work for the genealogy of Sontag’s portrait. Without Arendt, Sontag would not have had access to Benjamin’s Kafka and Baudelaire essays which are significant intertexts for the development of her portrait.

Moreover, Arendt’s portrait also has methodological relevance for Sontag’s methodological approximation of Benjamin, especially in terms of the aforementioned drawing on interactive aura. Stylistically, Sontag facilitates this interaction in a similar way as Arendt does with her performative citation, which itself is a methodological approximation of Benjamin for whose work quotation is key. In a similar way as Arendt, Sontag cites Benjamin comprehensively in keywords and full sentences all throughout her portrait. But most importantly, she considers her method of photographic ekphrasis also a mode of citation. Drawing on Geulen’s characterization of Arendt’s style as mimicry, Sontag’s style could be considered a double mimicry: imitating Arendt’s citational approximation as well as Benjamin’s photographic ekphrasis.

Sontag provides an argument for how photography and quotation relate: In the *On Photography* essay “Melancholic Objects,” in which Sontag cites Arendt on Benjamin’s quotational method, Sontag argues that photographs are like quotes in the way they invoke reality in texts: “A photograph could also be described as a quotation” and like quotes, photos “seem,

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872 Pfeifer, *To the Collector*, 83-118.
873 Cf. “USS”, 115ff.: full sentence citations: “There is no chronological ordering of his reminiscences, for which he disavows the name of autobiography because time is irrelevant. (‘Autobiography has to do with time, with sequence and what makes up the continuous flow of life,’ he writes in *Berlin Chronicle.*”) versus keyword citations: “Awash in melancholic awareness of the ‘disconsolate chronicles of world history,’ a process of incessant delay, the baroque dramatists seek to escape from history and restore the ‘timelessness’ of paradise. The seventeenth-century baroque sensibility had a ‘panoramic’ conception of history.”
because they are taken to be pieces of reality, more authentic than extended literary narratives.” (OP, 76, 80) Noting that photos only invoke the impression of being real (they “seem” so) Sontag argues that photos – and, by inference, quotes – are always already more than real; surreal, as she argues in “Melancholy Objects.” The surrealism of photos – reminiscent of Benjamin’s notion of “aura” – consists in their simultaneity of presence and absence, showing “people being so irrefutably there” but also necessarily not present as photographs document a past moment. (OP, 75f.)

Sontag’s consideration of photography as “quotation” suggests that she creates the impression of the “real” Benjamin through citation like Arendt. Where Arendt uses a block citation, Sontag uses photographic ekphrasis to create the post-auratic encounter with Benjamin. As her linking of citation and photography shows, she acknowledges that both can only approximate the authentic Benjamin.

Methodologically, a significant difference is that for Sontag, approximating Benjamin required substantially more hermeneutic effort than for Arendt who was Benjamin’s contemporary. If hermeneutics emerged from the need to bridge the “the linguistic gap” between a reader and an “aging […] texts,” as Szondi argues, Sontag’s gap was two decades larger than Arendt’s – plus the significant difference that Sontag never met the person Walter Benjamin.\footnote{Szondi, \textit{Introduction}, 5, 8.} Indeed, as Arendt’s initial hesitance about writing an introduction shows (based on her lack of personal distance from Benjamin), Arendt needed increased temporal distance to write her portrait. This desire for distance shows in her distancing from Benjamin through historical narrative contextualization. Analogously, Sontag desired familiarity with Benjamin and the group of European refugees associated with him, as her diaries and drafts show. This desire for proximity
shows in her (relative) collapse of historical distance. Sontag and Arendt meet in the middle, where both facilitate a post-auratic encounter with Benjamin citationally.

Thus, Sontag differs like Arendt methodologically from Adorno and Scholem who do not facilitate the encounter with Benjamin in a similar citational way. Unlike Scholem, Sontag reduces historical narrative to a minimum. In comparison to Adorno, who like Sontag is interested in the enigmatic Benjamin, Sontag’s mystery emerges from photographic evidence, while Adorno’s “magician” is a metaphor. However, Sontag draws on Adorno and Scholem argumentatively explicitly, whereas her methodological reference to Arendt is implicit. Not only the claim that Benjamin was a melancholic is central to both Scholem’s and Adorno’s characterizations of Benjamin, as I argued before, they also claim Benjamin’s preference for collection, miniatures and his enigmatic quality. Sontag invokes both as authorities and adopts some of their arguments emphatically and sometimes even in hidden citations, like in a paraphrase of Adorno’s claim that Benjamin’s aphorisms are actually dialectical images.\footnote{USS, 128: cf. footnote 831.}

In citing these qualities as well as Adorno and Scholem as historical reference points, Sontag creates an explicit lineage between her portrait and theirs. Thus, she references the same authorities as Arendt while skipping Arendt herself. Because of this Arendt-gap, Sontag seems to link her Benjamin figure primarily to Adorno’s and Scholem’s philosophical and theological readings which would fit well with her focus on philosophy and the history of religion in her academic training.\footnote{Rollyson, \textit{Understanding Sontag}, 91; Moser, \textit{Sontag}, 110.} How does the absence of reference to Arendt affect this lineage? What does it imply about how Sontag stages herself as a participant in the Benjamin debate: Does the gap corroborate Sina’s claim of over-identification? Did Sontag’s intense readerly engagement with Arendt result in a lack of critical distance and an adoption of Arendt’s perspective to the degree
that she forgot to cite her? Or did Sontag willingly skip Arendt out of envy for the role model and competition for being considered a similar expert on Benjamin and an equal public intellectual more generally?

Sontag’s erasure of Arendt as an important interlocutor is specifically striking from a feminist standpoint which she embraces implicitly in a different case: The first of the three surviving footnotes in the book version of her portrait in *Under the Sign of Saturn* references Asja Lacis as a significant, yet neglected figure in Benjamin’s life and work. (USS 114, 205) Given the radical cutting of footnotes, Lacis was apparently a more important reference to Sontag than Arendt. By emphasizing her significance for Benjamin, Sontag’s portrait strangely overlaps – although she probably had not read it – with the second *alternative* double issue (of spring 1968) in which Lacis was featured twice.877 In the next chapter, I further discuss whether and to what effect Sontag considered Arendt – in contrast to Lacis – too prominent an authority on Benjamin to even bother referencing.

The three surviving footnotes all add historical contextualization that is missing in the main text: commenting on the surrealist influences in Benjamin’s work which Scholem overlooks, as Sontag suggests, and that Benjamin was financially supported through the Institute for Social Research. Thus, these footnotes are traces of Sontag’s comprehensive historical, contextual knowledge informing her portrait. However, Sontag does not bother to explicitly comment on how “Everyone claims him [Benjamin],” as she notes in her drafts. Instead, with her focus on melancholy, Sontag herself claims Benjamin for an aesthetic reading.

Adorno and Scholem, in other words, provide historical context and argumentative material for Sontag but her interpretation itself advances Benjamin as a literary figure rather than as a

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877 Brenner, *alternative* 1968, 44.
philosopher or metaphysician. The most important explicit reference in this sense – apart from the inexplicit reference to Arendt – is Sontag’s enthusiastic citation of Szondi’s “Hope in the Past” essay of 1961, which she read in translation in 1978. With its comparative focus on Benjamin’s relationship to Proust, this essay not only emphasizes Benjamin’s preference for French literature in a similar way as Sontag. Also, Sontag specifically appreciated how Szondi discussed Benjamin’s “reading of the past for omens of the future,” as she mentions in her footnote, referencing Szondi’s “excellent essay.” Indeed, this reading of Szondi’s essay seems central to how she conceives of Benjamin’s melancholic temperament as an autobiographical relating to the past: “Benjamin regards everything he chooses to recall in his past as prophetic of the future, because the work of memory […] collapses time.” (USS, 114)

With Szondi, Sontag references a position in the Merkur debate that has argumentative overlaps and strong methodological affinities to Arendt but is not credited by her; Arendt does not cite Szondi and generally did not have much contact with his life and work. Thus, Sontag demonstrates how she independently inscribes herself into the debate and consults material beyond Arendt. And yet, methodologically, her portrait has most affinities with Arendt’s in the way it approximates Benjamin post-auratically.

Like Arendt, Sontag shows rather than merely argues that Benjamin’s affiliations are literary rather than philosophical or theological. Situated at the “crossroads,” Sontag’s Benjamin is, like Arendt’s, characterized by many different relationships and belongings. Moving beyond Arendt (who also marks Benjamin’s Francophilia), Sontag situates Benjamin in a transnational, German and French literary context with a postmodern twist through which Benjamin becomes a

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879 Ibid.
880 HAP. Eichmann. GSA 23 talk.
textual cipher. That she builds on but expands Arendt’s lineage transpires in her marking of the most canonical German reference Arendt emphasizes as French: Benjamin “even found the Saturnine element in Goethe,” Sontag writes in the beginning of her essay. (USS, 111) Where her photographic method of approximation emerges from her reading of the Baudelaire essay included in Illuminations, she draws exactly on a quality of Benjamin’s criticism of which specifically Adorno was skeptical – namely his reading of Baudelaire.

The condition of Sontag’s Benjamin portrait is, as she claims with Barthes, that “literature is already a posthumous affair.”881 In contrast to Adorno, this posthumous condition does not obliterate the aesthetic encounter itself but renders it all the more significant. In contrast to Arendt, this encounter with the aesthetic object is all that Sontag aims for, rather than re-illuminating the person Walter Benjamin in his historical setting.

6.2 Criticism in Sontag’s Melancholic Benjamin and Beyond

While her Benjamin portrait seems to relinquish historical contextualization, Sontag was aware of its importance, as adjacent works show. In “Melancholy Objects,” she argues that photographs, “which turn the past into a consumable object, are a short cut.” (OP, 72) Sontag’s photographic opening, leaping over historical distance for the sake of an immediate aesthetic encounter, seems to be such “short cut.” Herein, Sontag seems to contrast significantly with Arendt’s argument for the urgency of historicization, specifically after the Holocaust, which she encountered in Origins of Totalitarianism and Life of a Jewess. Indeed, Sontag’s aesthetic perspective on Benjamin could be charged with the same aestheticism Arendt problematizes in Rahel’s view of her life as a work of art and agnosticism with respect to reality. Specifically in

881 Sontag, Stress, Loc. 1050; Barthes, Barthes Reader, viii.
contrast with one of Sontag’s own most political essays on art, “Fascinating Fascism,” which directly precedes the Benjamin portrait in Under the Sign of Saturn, the lack of historicization in the latter is striking. In its ahistorical, aestheticizing tendency, her Benjamin portrait risks falling prey to the same charge that Sontag presents to ahistorical approaches to Leni Riefenstahl’s photography in “Fascinating Fascism.”

In this 1975 NYRB essay, Sontag discusses Riefenstahl’s most recent book The Last of the Nuba as “a portrait” of the indigenous Sudanian people of the Nuba as exposing the photographer’s and cinematographer’s lingering fascist aesthetics. Observing a “rehabilitation” of Riefenstahl, whose past as a Nazi propagandist Sontag considers a known but deliberately ignored fact, Sontag problematizes that Riefenstahl’s fascism is relegated to the “turn of the cultural wheel and the “cycles of taste” and disregarded in service of a trending “romantic ideal.” Countering such historical revisionism, Sontag calls for the need of a “historical perspective” to be able to realize that “what may be acceptable in elite culture may not be acceptable in mass culture” as “tastes” that are relatively harmless if they are only elite trends “become corrupting” when adopted by masses. (AI, 95) Reversing her Against Interpretation (1966) position, Sontag now (ten years later, 1975) claims that “[t]aste is context, and the context has changed.” (USS, 97) Accordingly, Sontag adopts formal features of her writing: While “Fascinating Fascism” also opens with a description of photographs and while Sontag acknowledges their compelling aesthetics, Sontag’s critical voice presents them from a marked distance, synthesizing their depictions in a sweeping, summarizing survey. There is no “I” lingering with details of the pictures but only a delivery of condensed content and contextual information: “Here is a book of 12 splendid photographs by Leni Riefenstahl [...]” (USS, 73) The beauty of the Nuba tribe is paralleled with the photographer’s

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882 USS, 86, 88, 89.
883 Ibid., 83, 85, 90, 95, 96.
own “imperishable beauty” which is similarly compactly described in the “twelve black-and-white photographs [...] on the back cover” of the book. (OP, 73) In contrast to the photographic opening of the Benjamin essay, Sontag does not expose her “I” to meet Reifenstahl in her work or person, maintaining a safe distance from the photographs’ affective potential through historicization and a summative rather than imaginative encounter. In other words, Sontag does not approach Riefenstahl auratically but rather historically.

The absence of historicization in her Benjamin essay suggests that Sontag to a certain degree adopts her critical method case by case. The implication seems to be that Benjamin’s aesthetic can be espoused a-historically, auratically exactly because it is not fascist, or even anti-fascist; as if she claims aestheticization as a privilege of anti-fascist work. Still, it is striking that Sontag commits to such aestheticization given her own problematization of the politics of Benjamin’s work, specifically with respect to photography and surrealism: In “Melancholy Objects,” Sontag takes issue with Benjamin’s surrealist “irony” which undermined his “Marxist/Brechtian principles.” (OP, 82, 89) Like Arendt, Sontag does not read Benjamin as a serious Marxist and she argues in a similar direction as Arendt’s claim that Benjamin used Marxism heuristically for aesthetic purposes rather than politically.884 Due to the ironic collapse of historical difference, Sontag argues, photographic surrealism is a sensibility that invites “sentimental tenderness” and a “condescending relation to reality.” (OP, 85) Taking “an entirely impartial, non-empathetic look at its subjects,” photographs, according to Sontag, run the risk of forgetting their own perspectivity, forfeiting the idea of taking a standpoint per se. (OP, 77)

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884 Sontag’s ambivalence about Benjamin’s Marxism shines through in Against Interpretation where Benjamin first serves as a counter-example to Freudian and Marxist models of interpretation and then as a paradigmatic “neo-Marxist”. (AI, 6f., 88).
That Sontag considered taking a political stance important for criticism is suggested by her marks of Benjamin’s own explicitly political coda in his Kunstwerk essay where he problematizes aura as a bourgeois, outdated and apolitical concept. Benjamin warns about the transition of aura from the aesthetic into the political realm in times of its destruction in the former (because of changed conditions of mechanical reproduction). Where aura disappears through technologies of mass reproduction, holding on to it amounts to a politically fatal failure to recognize how art changes along with technology, and ultimately to a fascist aestheticization of politics, against which Benjamin demands the politicization of art.\(^{885}\) Given his problematization of aura in “postauratic” times as fascist, Benjamin’s own drawing on the “post-auratic” aura of the Kafka childhood photograph raises the question if and why he is himself holding on to aura in the time of its disappearance. Indeed, this charge is part of Arendt’s argument, according to Geulen.

Duttlinger argues that Benjamin’s auratic appropriation of Kafka’s photo is not politically problematic in Benjamin’s sense of “aura” as holding fascist potential because of biographical and experiential overlaps between Kafka and Benjamin in times of an increasing control of social norms.\(^{886}\) Through melancholic encounter and photographic ekphrasis, Duttlinger argues, Benjamin’s appropriation counters the political instrumentalization of photography as a for bureaucratic control that objectifies individuals and becomes specifically dangerous in times of totalitarian government.\(^{887}\) Contrasting the Kafka childhood portrait with an actual similar one of Benjamin corroborates Duttlinger’s argument of historical overlap in Kafka’s and Benjamin’s images of alienated selves. Caught in tight uniform dresses, both boys encounter the camera with a sad gaze, apathetically holding on to their props, rather baffled and displaced overall.

\(^{885}\) Walter Benjamin, Selected Writings, vol. 3, 101-134, here 122; ibid., vol. 4, 251-284, here 270.
\(^{886}\) Duttlinger. “Imaginary Encounters,” 93f.
\(^{887}\) Ibid., 97.
Sontag’s approximation of Benjamin cannot build on such historical proximity but rather leaps over a significant historical rift – the abyss of World War Two and the Holocaust. Moreover, she is not by far in the same position of political persecution as Benjamin was. Hence, her “short cut” approximation cannot be legitimized by the same historical and political urgency. And yet, despite being aware of the risks of aestheticization, Sontag prioritizes aesthetic approximation over historical distancing. Indeed, she seems to relinquish the standpoint of her “I” in her Benjamin portrait. Thus, Sontag seems to return to the general suspicion towards any kind contextual approach to literature she displays in *Against Interpretation*.

In this collection’s essay “The literary criticism of Georg Lukács” (1964), Sontag is frustrated with the “neo-Marxist” position as a morally and historically dogmatic approach to literature. On the one hand, Sontag considers Benjamin the only one of those “neo-Marxist critics,” amongst whom she also counts “Adorno and [...] Marcuse,” whose position was relevant to

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888 Screenshots of photos reprinted in Duttlinger, “Imaginary Encounters,” 89 and in Lindner et al., *Benjamin-Handbuch*, 689.
contemporary American literature. (AI, 88f.) On the other hand, Sontag dismisses Marxism per se as an ideologically outdated framework that fails to account for the aesthetic distinction of postmodern America:

There is no question in the writings of the critics I have cited (the early Lukács, Benjamin, Adorno, etc.) of a narrow forcing of art per se into the service of a particular moral or historical tendency. But none of these critics, even at their best, are free of certain notions which in the end serve to perpetuate an ideology that, for all its attractiveness when considered as a catalogue of ethical duties, has failed to comprehend in other than a dogmatic and disapproving way the texture and qualities, the peculiar vantage point, of contemporary society. I mean ‘humanism.’ Despite their commitment to the notion of historical progress, the neo-Marxist critics have shown themselves to be singularly insensitive to most of the interesting and creative features of contemporary culture in non-socialist countries. In their general lack of interest in avant-garde art, in their blanket indictment of contemporary styles of art and life of very different quality and import (as “alienated,” “dehumanized,” “mechanized”), they reveal themselves as little different in spirit from the great conservative critics of modernity who wrote in the 19th century such as Arnold, Ruskin, and Burckhardt. It is odd, and disquieting, that such strongly apolitical critics as Marshall McLuhan have got so much better grasp on the texture of contemporary reality. (AI, 90)

Limiting the value of Marxism to its ethical and historical analysis, Sontag marks its failure as a contemporary aesthetic approach. Like conservative criticism, it fails to be sensitive to “texture and qualities” of “contemporary styles of art and life” in her contemporary moment whose reality, so Sontag, is much better grasped by “such strongly apolitical critics as […] McLuhan.” Politics, Sontag thus suggests, impedes an impartial perception of art if it dogmatically serves an “ideology,” whereby Sontag seems to mean a preconceived frame into which the work of art is forced. But her concern about this observation – “It is odd, and disquieting […]” – shows that she hopes that aesthetics and politics are not mutually exclusive. On the one hand, she appears to call for a separation of disciplines, polemically relegating Marxism to a “catalogue of ethical duties.” On the other, Sontag is concerned about the politics of criticism.

Sontag’s implicit alternative is pointed to by her identification of “humanism” as the shared problem of “neo-Marxist” and conservative critics. Thus, she could be considered an early
precursor of Felski’s adoption of Latourian Actor-Network-Theory for criticism. Measuring art in terms of humanist ideals like the autonomous subject, Sontag seems to suggest, is outdated and misses the innovation inherent in art. Considering Benjamin “inhumanly” as a post-auratically animated textual cipher, Sontag gives most agency to Benjamin’s texts rather than to his contemporaries or historical circumstances. (USS, 133) While Benjamin’s writing receives such agency in Sontag’s portrait, Riefenstahl’s work is historically controlled in the respective other portrait.

Rather than espousing one position – aestheticizing versus historicizing – Sontag seems to adapt her interpretive approach in writing to the object in question. Herein, Sontag’s stance is strikingly similar to Szondi’s literary hermeneutic which demands of interpretation to gain its “Methodik aus einer Analyse des dichterischen Vorgangs [...]; sie kann wirkliche Erkenntnis nur von der Versenkung in die Werke, in ‘die Logik ihres Produziertseins’ erhoffen.”

Ultimately, what she problematizes is the relegation of art to a secondary place, where it serves to prove an ideological interpretive frame rather than being honored as the main building itself. Aesthetics rules in Sontag’s work. In this sense, one could charge Sontag’s reading of Benjamin “under the sign” of something else to be using what Best and Marcus call a “master code.” But the citational quality of Sontag’s portrait undermines such decoding where it grants agency to the object to co-define what melancholy actually is; its meaning emerges from the object rather than being imposed onto it. Thus, Sontag seeks to “serve the work of art, not usurp its place,” as she concludes in “Against Interpretation.” (AI, 12)

6.2.1 Beyond Autobiography: Melancholic Aesthetics

That Sontag is interested in melancholy as an aesthetic phenomenon beyond Benjamin shows in its reappearance across different works. From the *On Photography* essay “Melancholy Objects” to later essays of the 1980s to early 2000s, Sontag draws on melancholy as an aesthetic category. This lingering concern results in formulating a postmodern melancholy aesthetic six years after the publication of her Benjamin portrait. In her introduction to a 1986 photo book by Vera von Lehndorff and Holger Trülzsch, Sontag presents eleven “Fragments of an Aesthetic of Melancholy.” Synthesizing qualities of the photos, which she, like in the eponymous *On Photography* essay, considers to be “melancholy objects,” Sontag fleshes out her investment of melancholy with the power of (literary) transformation. Her discussion of Veruschka as “melancholy images” connects and further develops the link between photography and transformation of Benjamin’s *Little History of Photography, Berlin Childhood*, and his Kafka essay. The first section addresses some of the qualities already present in the Benjamin portrait. The photos, Sontag writes,

are a compendium of desires […]. The desire […] to be unmasked. The desire to hide, to be camouflaged. To be elsewhere. Other. The desire to impersonate someone else, but that is not other enough. The desire to escape from a merely human appearance; to be animal, not a person, an object (stone? wood? […]], not a person; to be done with personhood. […] compete with one’s own image, to become image; artifact; art; form … […] to be concealed; to disappear […].

In Sontag’s ruminating, repetitive, stubborn style, the “Fragments” describe a desire for transformation and overcoming of the limits of “personhood” and human life per se – moving beyond “age and the distress of flesh […].” As the introduction to a photo collection performing

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894 Ibid.
895 Ibid., 6.
such transformation by a transmedial “de-creation” of a super model (“‘Veruschka’”), Sontag celebrates melancholy as the motor of such transformation, even in its excessive, violent dimension, yielding at points “the most unbearable images.” While Sontag does not trace the (Early Modern) history of the term melancholy, it resonates in Veruschka. Indeed, here shines through that Sontag read Benjamin’s Origin of German Tragic Drama, in which she encountered, albeit did not mark-up intensively, Benjamin’s respective reference of Shakespeare’s Hamlet. The third part of Origin, which is concerned with melancholy, begins with Hamlet’s most famous lines: “‘What is man, / If his chief good and market of his time / Be but to sleep and feed? A beast, no more. / Sure he that made us with such large discourse, / Looking before and after, gave us not / That capability and godlike reason / To fust in us unused.’”

Sontag’s “Aesthetics of Melancholy” turns the melancholic desperation about the banal, carnal condition of human life that ridicules the humanist question “Was ist der Mensch” into an aesthetic potentiality. With a post-humanist thrust, Sontag moves from a lack of meaning to an overcoming of the search for definite meaning itself. What was a paralyzing mourning in Hamlet’s tragedy is turned into an aesthetic potentiality. In terms of Sontag’s search for a contemporary mode of interpretation, the “Fragments” suggest that aesthetic transformation of personhood is Sontag’s interpretive alternative to the “humanism” Sontag criticizes the “neo-Marxist critics” cling to. (AI, 90) Published almost twenty years after Against Interpretation, it formulates an alternative aesthetics that aims at being adequate for accounting for “the texture of contemporary reality.” (AI, 90) Trülzsch’ photography becomes an aesthetic counterpart to the temperament she captured in her Benjamin essay.

897 Ibid., 8.
In an essay on Marina Tsvetaeva of 1983, Sontag hints at how the genre of the portrait helped her articulate her post-humanist melancholic aesthetics. Discussing the relationship of poetry and prose, Sontag argues that the 20th century yielded a specific kind of prose that is “usually in the first person” and “mainly written by poets (or if not, by writers with the standard of poetry in mind.” Thematically and methodologically, this prose is concerned with “the growth of the poet’s vocation,” Sontag argues, wherefore two narrative genres are specifically key: autobiography and “the portrait of another person, either a fellow writer (often of the older generation, and a mentor) or a beloved relative (usually a parent or grandparent.)” These two genres imply each other because the poet improves her work by writing about the self as other, or the other as self:

Homage to others is the complement to accounts of oneself; the poet is saved from the vulgar egoism by the strength and purity of his or her admirations. In paying homage to the important models and evoking the decisive encounters, both in real life and in literature, the writer is enunciating the standards by which the self is to be judged.

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901 Ibid., Loc. 153.
902 Ibid., Loc. 157, 162.
Critical standards, in other words, emerge from aesthetic and “real life” encounters with other writers through the act of writing about, or based on, these encounters: Without this act of “paying homage” and “enunciating” in writing, the standards remain implicit and impotent. In turn, portraiture (of the self and others) is the key to poetic growth and transformation of the self to a transpersonal aesthetic level. For Sontag’s Benjamin portrait, this means that by writing about Benjamin, Sontag also writes about herself (in terms of “itself” rather than him or herself) with the goal of improving as a writer. Further, the link between prose and poetry shows that Sontag’s melancholic Benjamin is also a poetic Benjamin, like Arendt’s; In the respective essay on Tsvetaeva, Sontag argues that criticism and poetry are more closely linked than any other kind of prose and poetry.903

Where it rests so heavily on the transformation of personal identity, it is misleading to read Sontag’s melancholic aesthetic as autobiographical writing, as has been suggested by Carl Rollyson and others.904 Not only is autobiography generally a highly problematic term needy of specification – it is “more than just a genre – if it is a genre at all”, amplifying in terms of “author” category the core question of literature itself about the relationship between text and historical reality.905 Also, Sontag repeatedly emphasizes her “anti-autobiographical” impulse and the desire for “self-transcendence,” in the sense of her melancholy aesthetics.906 From her earliest diaries up to older age, Sontag articulates an understanding of writing that not only favors “non-autobiographical imagination” but also considers personal distance a sufficient and necessary condition for writing.907 In June 1949, Sontag documents a moment of shame after a disappointing

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903 Sontag, Where the Stress Falls, Loc. 112.
906 Cf. Sontag, Conversations, 203f.
907 Sontag, Stress, Loc. 4008.
sexual encounter with a man: “I have not been able to bring myself to write of this until I had achieved some temporal + psychic distance.”908 Indeed, part of the attractiveness of writing for Sontag as an activity is its potential to “make us feel egoless” even though “we never do lose the ego, any more than we can step over our own feet.”909

The task of the writer, Sontag suggests in her late short essay “Reading as Writing” (2000), is to overcome herself to such a degree (through editing, for instance) that the writing transcends the writer, becomes uncoupled and independent from her: “What I write about is other than me. As what I write is smarter than I am. Because I can rewrite it.”910 The title of the first volume of Sontag’s collected diaries, “Reborn”, covering the years 1947-63, edited by her son David Rieff, pins down Sontag’s idea of the result of successful writing which she jots down in May 1949 in capital letters: “I AM REBORN IN THE TIME RETOLD IN THIS NOTEBOOK.”911

Figure 6.8: Diary #21, May 7 – May 31, 1949

Writing is a tool to explode the self for Sontag. While she acknowledges the impossibility of literal self-lessness, she emphasizes the desire to become more self-less – more than her self – so much that reading her writing as autobiographical, as concerned with mainly herself, hinders rather than helps understanding her writing. The term only works for understanding Sontag if it is used to designate her strong transformative concern with the self.

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908 Sontag, Reborn, 21.
909 Sontag, Stress, Loc. 3999.
910 Ibid., Loc. 4015.
911 Sontag, Reborn, 23.
Sontag played with but did not realize the idea of writing an actual autobiography. There are only very few texts that are marked as autobiographical strictly understood – by offering the reader the “autobiographical pact” of being read autobiographically or by an explicit identification of “writer, narrator, and protagonist.” While Sontag recognizes the indelible personal rest in art works, the thrust is not to carve out one identity but to celebrate the possibility of overcoming identity through art. About Trülzsch’s photos of Lehndorff, Sontag argues: “They are a celebration of one person; as much as they are a record of (the staging of) that person’s disappearance.” Acknowledging a similar simultaneity of presence and absence of a self, Sontag concedes concerning her short story collection *I, etcetera* that it was the first book in which she “found access to” her own life as material for writing and that “one is always lending oneself – one’s fantasies, one’s observations – to the work.” But even while Sontag acknowledges the personal as material for writing, self-transcendence remains a desire: *I, etcetera* is for Sontag a “series of adventures with the first person.” Analogously, her portraits could be considered adventures with the third person. In “Fragments of an Aesthetic” transcending the self still a forceful and explicit desire: The phrase “The desire” gets repeated anaphorically twelve times throughout the first section that is only about 20 lines long, emphasizing the “desire […] to be done with personhood.” Last but not least, David Rieff suggests that her diaries are his mother’s most autobiographical work – and she never published them herself.

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915 Sontag, *Conversations*, 203.
916 Ibid., 202.
918 Cf. Sontag, *As Consciousness is Harnessed*, vii – xii.
6.2.2 Transnational Aesthetics: Europe’s Last Intellectual – America’s first Aesthete

Rather than representing herself or others, Sontag aesthetically transforms the personal through writing. This transformative power of literature Sontag is also invoked in some of her public, political publications. Politically observant and at points even active, Sontag kept politics at a distance – art and aesthetics always remained her main concern. Literature for Sontag has the power to cross boundaries in all respects, not only those of the self but also political borders. This becomes specifically clear in two examples from the turn of the 20th to the 21st century where Sontag appears as an aesthetic political actor specifically in relation to Germany, and which reference Benjamin, and Arendt respectively.

At the moment of the so-called reunification of Germany in 1990, Sontag participated in a collective art project documented in a catalogue called Die Endlichkeit der Freiheit. Berlin 1990. Ein Ausstellungsprojekt in Ost und West. Funded by the DAAD, Heiner Müller and others had initiated a collective exhibition to which Sontag contributed a short comedic play. Included as the second text in the catalogue after Müller’s opening contribution, which anticipates potential lines of conflict between East and West – “Beschleunigung im Westen, im Osten Verlangsamtung” – Sontag’s “Interlude” The very comical lament of Thyramus and Thisbe” is printed in columns in English and German across six pages. Obviously based on William Shakespeare’s Midsummer night’s dream, Sontag’s play isolates the scene in which peasants rehearse for a play to be staged before the king.

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Figure 6.9: Sontag’s *The Very Comical Lament of Pyramus and Thisbe*: Quoting Shakespeare on the wall’s exit, the play opens with representing the removal of one of the main political borders of the 20th century: “WALL: Thus have I, Wall, my part discharged so; / And being done, thus Wall away doth go. / (A Midsummer Night’s Dream, Act V, Scene 1)”

This opening quote is the only direct Shakespeare quote in the text. Hence, with the removal of the character “Wall,” Shakespeare is also removed. Where the “Wall” represents ironically per historical context in this case an actual political border between two countries of opposing political systems – the GDR’s communism versus the FDR’s capitalism – its quotational association with Shakespeare indicates the play’s main question: which cultural heritage is to be embraced, how to relate to what kind of tradition in the building of the new state? The erasure of Shakespeare suggests a critical stance towards the canonical Western literary tradition. Indeed, the play emphasizes the need to find a new future rather than hold on to the old past by doing away not only with Shakespeare but also with Goethe and even Benjamin:

Thisbe: “Cheer up, darling. The World is divided into Old and New. And we’ll always be on the good side. From now on.”
Pyramus: “Goethe said –“
Thisbe: “Oh, not Goethe”
Pyramus: “You’re right.”
Thisbe: “In Benjamin’s last –”
Pyramus: “Not Benjamin either!”
Thisbe: “Right.”

921 Anselmo et al., *Die Endlichkeit Der Freiheit*, 10.
The central opposition invoked here is that of “Old” versus “New” and it is associated with canonical cultural figures. Hence, the question of the new state’s future is posed in terms of cultural tradition and the answer remains open, albeit comically endangered by demands posed by other states. For instance, a character called “SPIRIT OF NEW YORK” enters the scene to envision Berlin as the belated “New York of Europe” and a “DUKE OF TURKEY” requests “the Pergamon Altar back from the East Germans.”

Between the political powers of the East and the West, Sontag suggests, Germany has to find her voices again – which is the burden of the newly gained freedom, to be carried after the moment of baffled silence.

How literature itself helps to bridge past and future as well as national divisions is the main point of Sontag’s second significant public appearance in Germany with a political dimension. In her “acceptance speech upon receiving the Friedenspreis Peace Prize at the Frankfurt Book Fair,” titled “Literature as Freedom,” Sontag presents herself as a champion of literature – a “writer” – who therefore understands herself as a powerful mediator between the US and Germany. Reluctantly accepting the representative role she sees attributed to herself through the prize, Sontag emphasizes: “I do not represent anything but literature, a certain idea of literature, and conscience, a certain idea of conscience or duty.”

Drawing on both countries’ literary heritage – using exclusively “literary references” – Sontag discusses what she considers a “gap” or even “conflict” between the US and Europe in terms of a “parent and child” relationship. Most convincingly (to Sontag), Alexis de Toqueville and D. H. Lawrence “both understood that America […] had

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922 Anselmo et al., *Die Endlichkeit Der Freiheit*, 14.
923 Ibid., 13.
924 Ibid., 15.
become, the antithesis of Europe.” 927 The underlying dynamics, Sontag argues with D.H. Lawrence, is that America, as the “‘new thing’” needed to break with “‘the old thing’” Europe because the “‘new thing is the death of the old.’” 928 Arguing that America has sought its identity always in relation to Europe – both in an emancipatory and embracing way – Sontag observes a clash of extreme conservative and revolutionary tendencies in the US which she considers to emerge from the question how to relate the old and the new, resulting in a simultaneity of “extolling ‘traditions’” like the bourgeois nuclear family, and undermining them. 929

Sontag considers the dichotomy of “‘new’” versus “‘old’” a fundamental condition of human experience and argues, “we must choose both. What is a life if not a series of negotiations between the old and the new?” 930 Expressing her desire for a transnational “multilateral” world, 931 Sontag ends her speech by suggesting that literature is really the only realm that allows for bridging national divisions, and hence has powers that exceed the political. 932 Sontag opens the speech by proposing that “her interests and enthusiasm purportedly bridge” the friction between the US and Europe, and ends by showing how she does so through story telling. 933 Based on autobiographical facts – linking her childhood in Tuscon to her German editor at Hanser Verlag, Fritz Arnold 934 – Sontag develops a narrative about an analogous experience of freedom from real world constraints through literature that connects her retrospectively with her German editor before she could have even thought of it. 935 But this story is only one connection between an American and a German she creates through literature. Throughout her speech, she references a variety of both American

928 Ibid., 177.
929 Ibid., 180.
930 Ibid., 182.
931 Ibid., 182.
932 Ibid., 182.
933 Ibid., 176.
934 Ibid., 184.
935 Ibid., 183ff.
and German writers whose work she honors, including Mann and Kafka aside from Lawrence and Toqueville.

In claiming that ‘we need both’, the “’new’” and the “’old,’” Sontag presents herself as American in a different way than Lawrence, as she emancipates from his claim of the necessary death of the old. Sontag envisions the revival of the old alongside the birth of the new. Her adoption of Benjamin for a melancholic aesthetics is an example of how she appropriates the “’old’” by situating the writer in a transnational (German French) lineage – to ultimately claim him as an American figure:

Sontag’s view of the US as a synthesis of old and new helps understand her appropriation of Benjamin as a genuinely American figure in the On Photography essay “Melancholy Objects.” While she does not explicitly characterize Benjamin as melancholic in this essay, she suggests that he is an American melancholic by inference, based on his surrealist character. Sontag closely links surrealism, with its melancholy character and American photography: Differentiating American and European photography, Sontag argues that American photography is distinguished by a stronger moral, interventionist impetus than more “detached,” “cool,” nihilist, pseudo-neutral, “pseudo-scientific” European photography in the tradition of August Sander, for instance, that featured dominantly “the picturesque […] the important […] and the beautiful […].” (OP, 67) American photography, Sontag argues, is genuinely melancholic. Driven by an “impatience with reality,” it seeks to intervene in and alter reality. Because everything everywhere is always already “disappearing,” American photography features its subjects as “relics,” as “fragments that could somehow, by synecdoche, be taken for the whole.” (OP, 69) Mourning the high speed of consumption of the old by the new, “the prevailing mood is sadness […] a mournful vision of loss.” (OP, 71) Invoking, but not mentioning “aura,” Sontag points out that Benjamin seeks the
“beauty in what is vanishing.” (OP, 82) Collecting quotations (amongst other things), Benjamin engenders

the cumulative de-creation of the past” and its replacement by a “fabrication of a new, parallel reality that makes the past immediate while underscoring its comic or tragic ineffectuality, that invests the specificity of the past with an unlimited irony, that transforms the present into the past and the past into pastness. (OP, 82)

Adapting photography’s principles to a literary endeavor, “Benjamin’s own ideal project reads like a sublimated version of the photographer’s activity.” This photographic character explains for Sontag how his “project was a work of literary criticism that was to consist entirely of quotations.” (OP, 82)

Sontag’s linking of American photography and Benjamin in this essay presents a challenge to the cynical narrative that Benjamin never really liked America and was hesitant to consider his options to emigrate to New York more seriously, as suggested by Horkheimer and Adorno and also reinvoked by Arendt.936 In fact, by publishing her portrait as “The Last Intellectual,” Sontag implicitly cites Arendt’s claim that Benjamin feared to be exoticized as “the ‘last European’” in America.937 But rather than exhibiting Benjamin as an dying species, Sontag’s portrait seeks to revive his aesthetics by appropriating it for America; turning Benjamin into a paradigmatically American writer. Leaving the historical tragic unmentioned, Sontag instead suggests a close systematic affinity in terms of a melancholic aesthetic. Indeed, in her cultural analysis of contemporary America as genuinely melancholic, America has strong affinities with European Baroque in Benjamin’s analysis in Ursprung des Trauerspiels. Thus, Sontag’s ahistorical, aestheticizing approach to Benjamin in her portrait allows her to appropriate Benjamin in

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936 “Benjamin II,” 211; MDT, 174.
937 “Benjamin II,” 211; MDT, 170.
transnational terms, stage him as an American figure and understand America with the aesthetic character she gains from the encounter with his work.

6.3 Conclusion: The Repeated Killing of Frau Anders

Considering the centrality of Sontag’s Benjamin portrait for her transpersonal, transnational aesthetics, and Arendt’s role as a mediator for Sontag’s Benjamin reception, how to account for the absence of credits to Arendt? Does the fact that Sontag never wrote a portrait about Arendt imply that she was no “mentor” or one not considered worthy of “homage”?938

One mischievous way to explain why Arendt rarely appeared as an explicit reference in Sontag’s work – let alone in a dedicated portrait – is that Sontag had killed her early on in her career as a writer, in a fictional context, in 1963. Her first novel, The Benefactor (1963),939 features a character called Frau Anders who hosts a salon for intellectual talk, exchange of opinion, self-fashioning and personality display which irritates but also fascinates the introvert, transgender protagonist Hippolyte. Mainly based on an affinity in names, Frau Anders has been interpreted as representing “Hannah Arendt, who had been married to the German philosopher Günther Anders.”940 The speculative nature of such roman à clef reading left aside – if the nominal affinity encodes what Sontag thinks about Arendt, what do we learn? Frau Anders does not appear the most likeable:

plump sensuous woman in her late thirties, who really presided, her husband’s presence being irregular and his authority nominal; [...] Frau Anders insisted on punctuality and deference, but was otherwise a generous hostess, attentive to her guests’ idiosyncrasies and skillful in drawing them out.941

938 Sontag, Stress, Location 76, 160.
939 Poague and Parsons, Sontag Bibliography, 3.
940 Moser, Sontag, 2693; Dieter, Sontag, 37f.
To the protagonist, Frau Anders’ least preferred characteristic is her unpoetic, talkative character and her unreliability as a thinker. Impatient and easily bored, she only seeks out writing as a last resort when she is separated from her salon through living with Hippolyte:

Away from the ingenious conversation of her guests in the capital, and discovering (and at first resisting) my own need for solitude, Frau Anders was openly bored. […] But a few days later she […] begged my leave to write. […] I had little confidence in Frau Anders’ mind, […]. I feared that the effort of assuming the identity of a writer might deprive her of the scant realism about herself which she possessed. “No poetry,” I said firmly. “Of course not,” she replied, offended at my insinuation. “It is philosophy alone which claims my interest.”

If Frau Anders is really a fictional transformation of Sontag’s image of Arendt, it is one of ridicule or persiflage. Frau Anders is a salonnière and not a serious intellectual figure, specifically in contrast to the protagonist who is seriously committed to exploring the capacities of their mind. However, there is one major quality that associates Frau Anders with Arendt in a serious way: In a sidenote late in the novel, she is identified as “a Jewess on the run from German authorities.”

This quality substantiates the speculative reading because it matches Sontag’s reference to Arendt in the peace prize speech. Here, Sontag considers the influential “brilliant Hitler refugees”, amongst whom she lists “Hannah Arendt, whom I knew after I moved to New York in my mid-twenties,” representatives of the “‘old’” and the “‘serious’.” In this sense, Frau Anders – the fictionalized Arendt – indicates how Sontag relates to the “‘old,’” and what her relationship to the “serious” is.

Reading The Benefactor with Sontag’s Freedom speech in mind, Frau Anders’ role in the novel anticipates Sontag claim that “we must choose both,” the “‘old’” and the “‘new.’” Indeed,

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942 Sontag, Benefactor, Loc. 1006.
943 Poague and Parsons, Sontag Bibliography, 9.
945 Cf. Sina, “Worin unsere Stärke besteht.”
the novel presents an alternative to Lawrence’s claim that the “new thing is the death of the old’” where Frau Anders has to die – not once, however, but several times, returning repeatedly from the obscure realm of the dead.\footnote{Sontag, “Literature as Freedom,” 177.} Re-encountering Frau Anders, Hippolyte lives through “a series of negotiations between the old and the new”.\footnote{Ibid., 182.} The novel leaves open what, ultimately, Hippolyte expects to gain from Frau Anders: “Once again I tried to think of what was beneficent in Frau Anders’ nature, to herself and to me.” (B, Loc. 1077) What the novel, as Hippolyte’s autobiographical account, gains, is a contrastive figure for the protagonist to repeatedly emancipate from and encounter again. Frau Anders, representing the talkative intellectual, provides a trigger for the protagonist to turn to writing.

The motif of talking as a contrast to writing is a prominent theme with a feminist undertone in Sontag’s diaries where it appears in the context of her young marriage to Philipp Rieff. Complaining about “diarrhea of the mouth and constipation of the typewriter,” Sontag starts a fragmented project called “Notes on Marriage” in which she painfully seeks her “voice” which she remembers to have begun finding during high school but lost in her marriage in which “leakage of talk” – this phrase reappears twice – correlates with what she calls a “flabby” will and loss of freedom.\footnote{Cf. Sontag, Reborn, 100.} Working towards self-liberation, Sontag decides to “write every bloody thing that comes into my head” in order to “find a voice. To speak. Instead of talking.”\footnote{Ibid., 104, 151.} Her diaries prove that she succeeded, anticipating her divorce from Rieff during her first long stay in Paris: “The thought of going back to my old life—it hardly even seems like a dilemma any more. I can’t, I won’t. […] now, it’s so easy—I’m already on the other side from which it’s impossible to return.” (Reborn, 178) Here, the “old” life is that of a heterosexual marriage, logorrhea and an inability to
write. The act of liberation is performed through a shift from talking to writing, through finding “a voice.”

Per analogy, Hippolyte’s emancipation from Frau Anders’ talkative intellectual culture through writing can also be read as an emancipation from the old. However, in the novel, Frau Anders’ repeated return from the realm of death suggests that the “‘old’” remains present as a productive negative force – a figure that is both an alarming antagonist and affective affair.

In one chapter, a dangerous double of Frau Anders is called “Mother Superior.” Reading Frau Anders as a fictional transformation of Arendt – and Hippolyte as one of Sontag – one could speculate that Sontag never wrote an essay about Arendt because of the aforementioned Bloomian “anxiety of influence.” Leaving aside that Sontag would have disliked such autobiographical reading, the Benefactor would in this reading suggest that while Sontag did not write about Arendt, she wrote with her – which Sontag’s extensive reading of, drafting on and reference to Arendt throughout her work also indicate.

Not only the more or less speculative fictional transformation of Arendt into Anders of The Benefactor suggests this writing with but also the repeated (dis)appearances of Arendt across Sontag’s work – the two explicit references to her Benjamin portrait in “Project for a Trip to China” and “Melancholy Objects” as well as the erasure of the footnote reference in “The last Intellectual” and the methodological affinity of Sontag’s to Arendt’s Benjamin portrait. Whether explicitly referenced as a mediating critic whose claims on Benjamin’s quotational method are specifically important to Sontag or present in terms of methodological affinity or as a fictionally transformed character, Arendt reappears all over Sontag’s work. Associated with the group of “brilliant Hitler refugees” in Literature as Freedom, Arendt figures as a representative of the “‘old,’” “serious”

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951 Sontag, Reborn, 149, 151.
952 Poague and Parsons, Sontag Bibliography, 7; Sontag, Benefactor, Loc. 1655ff.
953 Bloom, Anxiety of Influence, 5ff.
Europe for Sontag in exchange with whom she develops her own “‘new’” way of writing. As she argues in *Literature as Freedom*, the “‘new’” is impossible without the “‘old.’” Would Sontag have been possible without repeatedly (metaphorically) killing and reviving Arendt?

What does Sontag’s negotiation of old and new (with Arendt as one figure representing the former) imply for the relationship of depth and surface in her work? Is the surface the new aesthetic object that emerges from the historical depths of the engagement with the old (refugees from Europe)? And lastly, what does Sontag’s Benjamin portrait with its links to Sontag’s work overall contribute to the Benjamin debate and the current debate on criticism?

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Comparative Conclusion

“For the true critic, judgment comes last, rather than first in the critical act. Ideally, he forgets to judge.”

“The gift of perceiving similarities is, in fact, nothing but a weak remnant of the old compulsion to become similar and to behave mimetically.”

When Sontag published her Benjamin portrait on October 12, 1978, Hannah Arendt had left this world three years prior, on December 4, 1975. Sontag had attended her burial which she had experienced as awkwardly dramatic. But, based on this study, Arendt’s death must have been a drastic event for Sontag: one of her most decisive role models, whose death she had fantasized about in her debut novel twenty years earlier, had finally gone for good. Maybe her Benjamin portrait was her hidden obituary to Arendt, given its stylistic and argumentative proximity to Arendt’s portrait, which I traced archivally and through close readings in the previous chapters.

Indeed, the central hypothesis of this dissertation was that Arendt’s and Sontag’s Benjamin portraits indicate their relationship to one another which shows in a similar critical and specific citational style. Therefore, I considered their relationship relevant to the current debate about criticism, which is, as I argued, concerned with the relationship between critic and aesthetic object in terms of affective attitude (suspicion versus affirmation), analytical focus (historical-contextual depth versus aesthetic surface), and institutional orientation (academic versus public readership).

My initial observation was that despite significant differences in work and life, Arendt and Sontag were not only interested in questions of interpretation but also suspicious of a certain kind of interpretation in which the literary work becomes secondary. They were suspicious of

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956 Benjamin, Selected Writings, vol. 3, 374.
957 Meyer, Arendt, 475.
suspicious interpretation in a similar way as the critics of critique in the current debate are. Around
the same time, in the late 1960s, Sontag published her essay debut Against Interpretation, and
Arendt turned to the portrait as a genre to “talk about poets” without just talking about them. Ten
years later, Sontag discovered the same genre as a mode of interpretation “to show how it is what
it is, even that it is what it is, rather than to show what it means.” (AI, 13) Half a century before
the current debate challenged the dogma of “hermeneutics of suspicion,” Arendt and Sontag – such
was my hypothesis – explored the portrait genre as an alternative to suspicious interpretation. In
the following, I comparatively characterize wherein this alternative precisely consists, based on
the two Benjamin figures whose emergence I traced in this study and building on the terminology
I provided in my framing chapter on criticism.

I argued that Arendt’s poetically thinking critic of 1968 and Sontag’s melancholic aesthete
of 1978 are not as different as it might seem at first sight. Both, Arendt and Sontag, read Benjamin
in literary rather than philosophical or theological terms, challenging Adorno’s and Scholem’s
appropriations of him not only argumentatively but also methodically, by facilitating encounters
with Benjamin on the textual surface of their portraits through distinct citational styles. Therefore,
I suggested that both portraits are criticism rather than critique.

Indeed, with Arendt and Sontag, citational style is a key indicator to distinguish criticism
from critique. While both portraits have qualities currently associated with critique – such as
historicization – their portraits citationally promote and preserve rather than deconstruct or debunk
Benjamin’s work. They approach Benjamin affirmatively rather than suspiciously, by amplifying
the critical questions inherent in his work. Drawing on the notion of evidence circulating in
Arendt’s, Adorno’s and Szondi’s contributions to the Benjamin debate, I argued that Arendt and
Sontag provide ample evidence through citation. While Adorno appeals to evidence mainly in
terms of argumentative compellingness (as in self-evident), Arendt and Sontag offer literal quotational evidence. Yet, rather than as proof, this evidence works similar to Szondi’s notion of “Hinweise.” In contrast to Szondi, however, they read Benjamin so closely that they seem to merge with him at points. A closer comparative look is required to understand their distinct styles of what I called, with Eva Geulen, citational mimicry.

In comparison to Szondi’s academic mode of citation which maintains a clear distinction between meta- and object-language, Arendt’s and Sontag’s “Hinweise” are more aptly described by terms like Rita Felski’s “hook” or, even more fitting, Toril Moi’s “hunch.” These terms capture the more affective, intuitive component in Arendt’s and Sontag’s citational entrées such as Arendt’s performative block citation and Sontag’s photographic ekphrasis. To exhaust the wordplay: specifically, Arendt’s hunchback opening is a literal hunch of what she found most significant about Benjamin’s work. Moi describes the process triggered by a “hunch” in the following way:

There is no guarantee that everyone else will feel confused at the same spot […] as I do. But by making my own response exemplary (not representative) – by trying to convey them to you – I invite you to respond. You may react with surprised delight, or with cold disdain. You may not respond at all. To ask “Why this?” is to take a risk, to stick to one’s judgment that this particular feature of the text is worth our full attention.

Moi’s reception-focused proposal envisions the critical process as a mixture of affective, intuitive components and their justification which is, in turn, offered for intersubjective validation. As I mentioned before, “Gerechtigkeit widerfahren zu lassen” is exactly not Adorno’s goal with his Benjamin edition of 1955 – and his essays do not really offer citational material which could be

958 Cf. Guillory, Professing Criticism, 3f., 44, 74. The hunchback is a stereotype of the scholar’s “dérangement professionelle.” Insofar as Arendt reads Benjamin as a critic who was haunted by academic failure yet committed to the profession of literary criticism, she accounts for his specific kind of deformation by citing the hunchback image.

959 Moi, Revolution of the Ordinary, 193f.
read as responses to the question “why this?” In contrast, Arendt’s and Sontag’s portraits offer many citations (or photographic ekphrasis) as “this particular feature,” developing their interpretations in conversation with these elements of “this.” Indeed, Benjamin’s texts become what Felski calls “energetic coactors and vital partners” in Arendt’s and Sontag’s portraits. Like Moi, Felski considers such creation of an “equal encounter” a mode of “doing justice” to the object.

Let me recapitulate what kind of “coactor” Benjamin becomes in the portraits: Arendt and Sontag both select literary critical work by Benjamin as the key intertexts on which they base their readings of him. Both discuss how Benjamin relates to the past in these intertexts. However, Arendt focuses on how Benjamin approaches history poetically, and metaphorically in his Goethe essay while Sontag emphasizes how Benjamin draws on melancholy and allegory for a transformative autobiographical relating to the past in his Baroque book and his Kafka essay. Accordingly, the pivotal concept for Arendt is the “Urphänomen” through which Benjamin seeks to discover the original phenomenon of history. For Sontag, in turn, Benjamin’s photographic ekphrasis and the post-auratic investment of the dead image with the ability to return the gaze becomes the key access point to his work, an example of which she encounters in the Kafka essay.

Hence, Arendt’s and Sontag’s Benjamin figures seem to differ in terms of metaphor versus allegory, which Arendt vehemently distinguishes in her portrait: According to her definition, metaphor “establishes a connection which is sensually perceived in its immediacy” and facilitates “correspondances between physically most remote things […]” Metaphor “requires no interpretation” in contrast to allegory, which “always precedes from an abstract notion and then

960 Benjamin, Schriften, IX.
961 Felski, Limits, 184-185.
962 Ibid., 153.
invents something palpable to represent it almost at will.”\(^{963}\) Arendt’s preference for metaphor as more aesthetically immediate and independent of forced interpretation invokes the current debate’s suspicion against critique as a critical approach in which the aesthetic object is secondary to the interpretive framework. If Sontag and Arendt differ in these terms, they could be considered examples of critique (Sontag) and criticism (Arendt). As Sontag shares her focus on allegory and even melancholy with Adorno and Scholem, her affiliation with them, as representatives of critique, would then be stronger than her affinity to Arendt.

However, allegory and metaphor are insufficient to capture what the portraits do. They consider Benjamin to have preferred metaphor (Arendt), or allegory respectively (Sontag) but their portraits move beyond both: They each invite more or less “laborious interpretation” (as Arendt calls it for allegory) yet also establish “correspondances” but without creating a metaphorical “oneness of the world poetically.” (MDT, 166) This oscillating position between allegory and metaphor emerges from their citational mimicry.

Arendt, I argued, features Benjamin on the surface of her portrait through ample citation which at points is so smoothly integrated that it becomes indistinguishable from her own voice. However, she establishes critical distance from Benjamin through historical contextualization and reception-focused communication which gives her citational style a performative quality. As a result of my close reading, specifically based on my transatlantic perspective and the US version of Arendt’s portrait, I would nuance Geulen’s characterization and argue that Arendt’s style is performative mimicry – her approximation of Benjamin’s voice is not happenstance but an exhibited mode of reading that itself invites imitation of her mimicry reading mode.

\(^{963}\) MDT, 166; “Benjamin I,” 62.
Sontag’s Benjamin portrait proves that Arendt did so successfully. As I argued, Sontag’s portrait could be considered a double mimicry: She not only approximates Benjamin’s critical method of photographic ekphrasis but uses it in her portrait in a similar way as Arendt uses her block citation to come close to Benjamin and create the impression of the “real” Benjamin, whose reality, however, is largely untied from historical reality and tantamount to her text. While Arendt upholds the historical person Benjamin as her portrait’s ultimate object, Sontag’s portrait collapses historical distance, moving beyond the historical person Benjamin and seeking instead an aesthetic encounter on a transpersonal, transtemporal, and -spatial level. With Benjamin, Sontag explores melancholy as an aesthetic temperament that transforms the self through writing. Therefore, her citational style could be called transformative mimicry.

I argued that both portraits’ citational mimicry of Benjamin can be understood in terms of his “post-auratic,” interactive variation of aura. Arendt’s portrait facilitates an aesthetic encounter with Benjamin through performative citation through which she moves beyond the idea of authenticity for reasons of accessibility: as I argued, the specific singularity she ascribes to Benjamin is not meant in an essentializing, exclusionary way but rather integrative and pluralistic, inviting the reader’s interpretation of what Benjamin’s remarkability consists in. Sontag, in turn, approximates Benjamin’s conception and use of aura in “post-auratic” times, as she links photographic ekphrasis, melancholy and the transformation of the self through writing: She invests Benjamin’s gaze with a melancholic quality, through which she collapses the historical distance marked by the photographs in the beginning into an aesthetic encounter on a transpersonal level.

Based on these similar citational styles, the main difference between Arendt’s and Sontag’s portraits is the ultimate unit of analysis: Arendt aims at approximating the historical person

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Benjamin while Sontag moves beyond the human. As I argued, Sontag sought a post-humanist critical approach that would account for the self-transcendence and “de-creation” of “personhood” which writing, in her opinion, facilitates. Sontag’s desire for a post-humanist perspective seems to have been closely linked to her ambitions as a writer, as she wanted to constantly outdo and overcome her (felt) limits. Therefore, the emphasis needs to be on the desire for post-humanism; in fact, her embrace of the portrait as a genre concerned with a human being and her focus on notions like desire, experience, and sensibility suggests that she anticipated but does not realize a Donna Haraway kind of post-humanist critique.\textsuperscript{965} Yet, Sontag’s aesthetic project differs significantly from Arendt’s politically motivated embrace of the Enlightenment ideal of humanism. As I argued, the person – the public appearance of people – is at the core of Arendt’s notion of the political realm; literature, and works of art per se, only ever imperfectly approximate the “who” as which persons appear in public and which cannot really be represented. To be more precise, personality can be represented biographically or dramatically, in Arendt’s sense, but representation remains secondary to real presence. Sontag’s portrait, in contrast, takes an aesthetic “short cut” to Benjamin, as she calls it, rendering her presentation of him the primary reality.

The post-humanist versus humanist standpoints correlate with different notions of the posthumous. While contributing to Benjamin’s “posthumous fame” by approximating Benjamin’s personality, the way he was alive, is Arendt’s main goal, literature is per se always already a “posthumous affair” in Sontag’s sense. The difference is small but significant: for Arendt, the life from which the literature sprang has the highest priority; “posthumous fame” is therefore “odd”

\textsuperscript{965} Haraway’s work is characterized as critique, which confirms my claim that criticism describes Sontag more aptly. Cf. John Lechte, \textit{Fifty Key Contemporary Thinkers: From Structuralism to Post-Humanism} (London ; New York: Routledge, 2008), 333-363, 337; cf. also Donna Jeanne Haraway, \textit{The Haraway Reader} (New York: Routledge, 2004).
and proof of society’s failure to acknowledge a genius’ greatness. For Sontag, in turn, the literary work – even if, or precisely because it is always already dead – is real life.

Despite these differences in their notion of literature – their object of “doing justice to” – the way they do justice is similar. In fact, Arendt and Sontag move beyond doing justice and embrace judgment, which distinguishes their critical position from three relatives: first, from academic criticism – which tends to avoid open, explicit judgment; second, from standpointless essayistic critique as defined by Adorno and Lukács; and third, from similarly standpointless ironical surrealism, as characterized by Sontag.966

Both portraits display and examine their “hunches” but also embrace provocative, seemingly universalizing judgment which stimulates the reader to judge for themselves. This universal gesture shows, for instance, in claims such as: “everything Benjamin wrote was […] always” or that “Benjamin projected himself […] into all his major subjects.”967 In Moi’s words, this mode of judgment is an offer of an exemplary reading with an “invitation to respond.” Arendt’s theoretical exploration of judgment in Between Past and Future and her Kant lectures helps to understand this mode better:

In her Kant lectures, Arendt elaborates how judgment connects the particular and the universal.968 With Kant, she differentiates two distinct kinds of judgment: “Bestimmung” and “Reflexion.” While the former deductively categorizes a particular based on an existing general abstract law or concept, the latter inductively formulates a general rule based on the particular.

966 Lukács, Seele und Formen, 17; Adorno, “Essay als Form,” 21; As Felski argues, “avoidance of judgement” is a distinctive pose of academic criticism in contrast to amateur readers who embrace judgment. But she acknowledges that actually, scholars constantly operate based on “questions of value.” “Every syllabus, in a certain sense, constitutes a judgement.” Hooked, 134; Geulen, in turn, defines academic criticism as a “strittigen und streitbaren Vollzug der Lektüre,” suggesting that judgment plays a role. Cf. Geulen, “Altes und Neues.”
967 MDT, 155; USS, 110ff.
According to Arendt, the defining kind of judgment – “das ordnende Subsumieren des Einzelnen und Partikularen unter etwas Allgemeines und Universales, das regelnde Messen mit Maßstäben, an denen sich das Konkrete auszuweisen hat“ – involves a “Vor-Urteil“ because the standards applied to the object of judgment are not themselves under scrutiny (anymore): “beurteilt wird nur das Einzelne, aber weder der Maßstab selbst noch das zu Messende.“ The second kind of judgment which operates without a pre-existing standard, “maßstablos,” is reflective because it is thrown back on “die Evidenz des Geurteilten selbst,” and requires the human skill of differentiation rather than “zu ordnen und zu subsumieren.” As examples for this second kind of measureless judgment, Arendt enlists aesthetic judgment and unknown everyday situations.\(^{969}\) Arendt’s Benjamin portrait draws on reflective judgment through its performative citational style which provides Benjamin’s words themselves as correctives of her judgment. Not only does Arendt retrieve her criteria for considering Benjamin as a critic from his own work – from the hunchback figure to the “Urphänomen” – but also does she question the meaning of these criteria. In Arendt’s framing of the block citation, it becomes specifically clear how the suggested standard on which her judgment is based – namely the task of criticism – itself comes under scrutiny. She explicitly invokes stereotypes associated with the critic – and challenges them with Benjamin – by gesturing to what “we usually have in mind when we classify a writer as a literary critic.” (MDT, 157) Arendt not only suggests that Benjamin was a critic but also questions with Benjamin what a critic is in the first place.

Sontag similarly offers *melancholy* as the key measure of Benjamin’s work, which she gains from his own work, as her first Benjamin quotes show. Also, her citational style constantly puts her claims to the readers’ test, like in Arendt’s portrait. Both, Arendt and Sontag, consider

\(^{969}\) Arendt, *Das Urteilen*, 20f. For all preceding quotes.
Benjamin’s work to “generate criteria as well as be objects of criteria,” as Felski puts it. In this sense of reflective judgment, the aesthetic object (Benjamin) co-constitutes Arendt’s and Sontag’s readings rather than being subjected to external categories.

The reflective mode of judgment is genuinely activating – not only of Benjamin’s work but also of the reader. In her political reading of Kant’s aesthetic judgment of the first part of the Critique of Judgment, Arendt considers taste an “active relationship” to the aesthetic object and the judgment emerging from it a “political rather than theoretical activity” because it “derives its specific validity” from ”a potential agreement with others.” (BPF, 219) In other words, to have any validity, critical judgment “depends on the presence of others. […] judgement is endowed with a certain specific validity but is never universally valid.”

Arendt’s portrait specifically exemplifies this kind of critical judgment. As I demonstrated for the block citation, she offers her reading of Benjamin as a critic “in an anticipated communication with others.” The attitude required for such judgment is, Arendt argues with Kant, an “‘enlarged mentality’ (eine erweiterte Denkungsart).” (BPF, 220f.) While not as explicitly exhortatory and encouraging of her readers as Arendt, Sontag likewise offers her judgment of Benjamin as a melancholic “in an anticipated communication with others” which her ambitiously polemic claim that Benjamin “cannot be fully understood unless” indicates: it provokes the reader to (dis)agree. (Let alone that she relativizes this universalizing gesture at the end of her portrait by relegating its validation to the “Last Judgment.”) Considering the Benjamin debate context, to which Sontag belatedly contributed, her portrait also offers judgment in imagined, retrospective “communication with others.” In contrast, Arendt’s portrait was drafted with very real “anticipated communication.” Both portraits arguably target a broader readership than just academic experts.

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970 Felski, Limits, 167.
971 BPF, 221; cf. also Arendt, Denktagebuch, 582f.
on Benjamin (and those of the Benjamin debate), especially with their magazine publications. Therefore, they enlarge Benjamin’s audience by bridging the academic and public realm very much in the sense of Benjamin’s late concept of criticism.

Their communicative attitude towards critical judgment leads me to a significant insight my study affords on the question of method. As I argued previously, method is a contested term in literary studies because of its scientific baggage: The scientific criteria of replicability and systematicity collide with the idea that, as Moi puts it in a way similar to Szondi, humanists are concerned with the irreproducerable “unique, the individual, the original.”

Moi suggests that a different description is needed to distinguish how criticism proceeds. With Arendt and Sontag, an alternative comes into sight: through citational mimicry, they mediate but also underline Benjamin’s singularity. This is the twist of mimicry: through imitation, the impression of identity and sameness is evoked but also undermined because without difference and distance, mimicry would not even be possible. Derek Attridge argues that imitation is a receptive process through which singularity appears: “singularizing […] takes place in reception […]. Singularity […] is eminently imitable, and may give rise to a host of imitations.”

Arendt’s portrait explicitly introduces Benjamin as “absolutely incomparable.” (MDT, 155) But her notion of incomparability invites an interaction and establishes a connection between the reader and Benjamin’s work. Indeed, the block citation shows how she attends to Benjamin’s “sui generis” character by provocingly remarking his strangeness, yet also mediating it in the same stroke as her polemic rhetoric of “it hardly corresponds to” exactly creates the correspondence it questions. The remarkability Arendt ascribes to Benjamin matches Attridge’s notion of

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972 Moi, Revolution of the Ordinary, 192f., 178, 194; Cf. also Attridge, Singularity, 5f.
973 Attridge, Singularity, 90-111.
“singularity” as “being inventive in its difference.” Sontag’s Benjamin is characterized by a similar inventiveness, and therefore by a singularity, where she turns him into a textual cipher. While Arendt provides more historical context of what Attridge calls the “peculiar nexus within the culture” in which Benjamin was perceived as different “from all other” writers, Sontag leans into the transformative potential of singularity more, so much so that Benjamin becomes the code for a transhistorical, infinitely inventive “writing itself.”

Where imitation transpires in the portraits as an alternative to replicability, the methodological centrality of citational style in the humanities is underlined because it is the tool to negotiate the relationship between meta- and object-language. Method in the humanities is therefore often identified with the act of turning an interpretation into writing: as Felski points out, “interpretation,” or the phrase “‘doing a reading’” (be it close or distant reading), usually refers to “a tightly scripted form of academic writing.” Through citational style, the specific relationship between critic and object – its specific mode of imitation – becomes apparently clearly visible and easily assessable. Accordingly, Geulen argues that the quality of an academic “reading” shows in “ob gelesen wurde – oder eben nicht.” Here, the literal act of reading precedes the reading-as-writing, which is considered tantamount to the interpretation.

My archival study of Arendt’s and Sontag’s Benjamin portraits suggests that reading is more than turning an interpretation into writing. The latter is the act of stylizing the interpretation but interpreting happens through many other activities. If critical judgment (which is also one meaning of stylus) involves the “enlarged mentality” of “anticipated communication,” such judgment does not merely happen in writing – imaginatively or through stylistic tools like citation

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975 Geulen and Haas, “Der Stil der Literaturwissenschaft,” 2.
977 Geulen, “Altes und Neues.”
– but also in literal communication with editors, publishers, intertexts, and in notes and drafts. As I demonstrated, Arendt developed main features of her arguments through her correspondence with her editors Paeschke and Shawn. Sontag, in turn, could not draw on communication with other protagonists in the Benjamin debate as much as Arendt because she came ten years “late to the game.” (Therefore, my archival chapters have different foci.) As Arendt and Adorno had already died when Sontag wrote her portrait, books were much more important interlocutors for Sontag than for Arendt. In fact, Sontag noted the general significance of reading for her work in her 2000 essay “Reading as Writing,”:

Reading usually precedes writing. And the impulse to write is almost always fired by reading. Reading, the love of reading, is what makes you dream of becoming a writer. And, long after you’ve become a writer, reading books others write—and rereading the beloved books of the past—constitutes an irresistible distraction from writing. Distraction. Consolation. Torment. And, yes, inspiration.\footnote{Sontag, \textit{Stress}, Loc. 3992.}

Some results of my archival study would not have been accessible just based on close readings of the portraits’ surfaces: For instance, Arendt and Sontag each read and wrote with a critical, editorial, and stylistic eye: their portraits are related to the journalistic form of the book review but significantly move beyond merely arguing for or against the literary value of Benjamin’s works while targeting a broad, general educated public. As I demonstrated, both published their portrait three times, as independent magazine articles, as paratexts to their Benjamin editions, and in their portrait collections. Arendt’s editorial agenda of making Jewish European writers “significant” for a global English-speaking audience motivates her performative mimicry as an attempt to promote and preserve Benjamin transatlantically. Her anger at what she considered negligent editorial procedure on the part of Adorno shows her high awareness of the stakes involved in securing
Benjamin’s works, which, as she knew, had been an important issue for himself. In Sina and Spoerhaase’s terminology, Arendt had a strong “Nachlassbewusstsein” – specifically for Benjamin whose estate was in such an unprecedentedly dispersed, incomplete, and untransparent status that the German historical-critical edition of his works is still in the making today (like Arendt’s own, for that matter). Sontag also demonstrates editorial awareness when noting which Benjamin essays are still untranslated. Less biographically involved in the fights over Benjamin’s estate, Sontag shows her “Nachlassbewusstsein” through an emphatic embrace of Benjamin’s idea that “afterlife […] could not be called that if it were not a transformation and a renewal of something living” which implies that “the original undergoes a change.” Likewise, Arendt illuminates Benjamin’s posthumous fame to preserve and promote his work in terms of his notion of “Nachleben,” and the idea that works change through reception. With Benjamin, both portraits move beyond the ideas of authenticity and completeness, which guided the emerging infrastructure for literary archives in a Goethean tradition in the late 19th century – and which had become impossible for politically persecuted writers like Benjamin. Both portraits draw attention to how the Benjamin debate shows that interpretive methods are linked to editorial practices, which, in turn, are conditioned by the status of the estate in question.

More clearly than Arendt’s pretty perfect typescripts, Sontag’s notes and drafts show how laboriously she practiced, exercised, trained and improved her writing by iterative and constant laboriousness.

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979 Detlev Schöttker suggests that Benjamin consciously managed the distribution of his work to increase their chance of survival beginning in Paris exile: “Nicht Zufall, sondern Kalkül ist […] Grundlage der posthumen Rezeption Benjamins.” Indeed, his entrusting of George Bataille, at that point librarian at the Paris National library, with his Arcades project before his escape from Paris suggests that Benjamin was highly aware of the threat of loss and destruction. Schöttker, Konstruktiver Fragmentarismus, 102-109; Witte, Benjamin, 185-189.


981 Benjamin, Selected Writings, vol. 1, 253-264, 256.

982 Schöttker, Konstruktiver Fragmentarismus, 92, 97ff., 102-109.

983 Sina and Spoerhase, Nachlassbewusstsein, 10-14.
copying, paraphrasing, and editing. Tracing Sontag’s readerly engagement with the Benjamin debate elucidates her portrait in significant ways: Sontag grew and finetuned her interpretation mainly through her reading of Arendt’s work, her notes and drafts as well as in adjacent work. For instance, in her reading of Arendt’s book on Rahel Varnhagen, Sontag engages with Arendt’s historical method of portraiture and her criticism of Varnhagen’s aestheticist world view in terms of Jewish assimilation. With this background, Sontag’s desire for self-transformation becomes readable as an attempt to escape the stigmatizing dynamics of the social realm very much in the way that Arendt criticized in Varnhagen’s case. Sontag’s affinity with Varnhagen (in Arendt’s depiction) and the implicit transatlantic lineage between the three women emerges as a desideratum for future research.

Overall, attending to the Logik des Produziert-Werdens illuminates the intense dialogic and existential factors in Arendt’s and Sontag’s stylized readings. Their portraits are examples of how historical and contextual depth coexists with careful attention to aesthetic surfaces. The intricate hermeneutic quality of their criticism therefore becomes only visible when attending to the critical methods before, beyond and behind the “Logik des Produziert-Seins.” Accounting for the variety of factors and voices that contribute to how an interpretation evolves is specifically important where significant interlocutors disappear from the eventual stylized version of the interpretation – like Arendt in Sontag’s portrait. How a critic negotiates her relationship with her object can sometimes be obscured rather than revealed in writing, for instance through citation. While the relationship of Arendt’s and Sontag’s portraits only surfaces through an odd-sounding echo whose origin remains in the dark unless one digs deeper, it is very clear that this relationship is there, albeit hidden in the archive.
While a degree of suspicion informs my method in this study after all, I embrace the comprehensive perspective on reading as more inclusive than just reading-as-writing as a matter of taking care. As I argued before, care-taking is central to Arendt’s concept of the critic – in a public, political sense that transcends the limits of the classroom and academic walls. She considers one part of the critic’s task to be cultivation in the sense of “tak[ing] care of a world of appearances.” (BPF, 211) This understanding is more topical than ever, as Kramnick’s recent argument for the anthropological significance of the critic as a care-taker shows: “Nothing in what we do survives without care.” With their editorial and critical work for Benjamin, Arendt and Sontag certainly take care of Benjamin. Arendt’s care-taking is embedded in her understanding of the problem of Jewish assimilation as articulated in “We Refugees.” By performatively citing Benjamin in her portrait, she contributes to cultural self-affirmation, to a getting to “know who they are.” Sontag takes care of Benjamin in a more appropriative, maybe even assimilative way, by turning him into an American figure. Both portraits are therefore based on a genuinely affirmative attitude towards him; in Benjamin’s romantic sense of criticism, their portraits speak of the quality of their object independent of their judgment. However, their affirmation is not “flat praise” as Hardwick calls it for the contemporary criticism she finds fault with. In contrast, both portraits are characterized by exactly the qualities Hardwick enlists for her ideal of criticism, for instance by “involvement” in the Benjamin debate and the legacy of his work, by “eccentricity” in style (specifically Sontag, as Arendt notes) and “literary tone itself.” Both portraits assume a strong stance – they offer their “position” on Benjamin to the debate and their broader audience.

985 Arendt, “We Refugees,” 273.
986 Hardwick, “The Decline,” 138-142. For all preceding quotes.

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While they clearly take care of Benjamin, the care they take of one another is more ambivalent: eccentric in Sontag’s case (killing the other one fictionally) and administrative and indifferent in Arendt’s (writing letters of recommendation). Here, my study exposed a consequential lack of care: Sontag’s neglect of crediting Arendt as an important interlocutor for the development of her portrait and her critical stance more generally. As I demonstrated, Sontag does not reference Arendt’s portrait in her main text and cuts the one single footnote in the book version. In contrast to Adorno and Scholem, Arendt falls through the citational net which Sontag ties for Benjamin. Sontag inscribes herself into almost the exact same male-dominated Benjamin debate as Arendt, referencing the same patriarchal literary canon, complemented by the French lineage. Except for the reference to Asja Lacis, Sontag’s portrait does not reflect on gender hierarchies in the debate whatsoever but rather reifies the imbalance through her neglect of Arendt’s role in the debate. Precisely because of her reference to Lacis, which suggests that Sontag was aware of and even wanted to challenge the patriarchal power dynamic of the debate, the Arendt-gap is all the more striking: Why did she not credit Arendt as a woman intellectual who challenged Scholem’s and Adorno’s appropriations of Benjamin and whose work she significantly drew on to develop her own criticism? Her charge against Arendt, Scholem and Adorno together concerning their neglect of Benjamin’s Frenchness (his “models were French rather than German”987) suggests that she considered Arendt a member of the same “Weimar” clique as Adorno and Scholem. Even so, her neglect of Arendt relative to Adorno and Scholem raises questions. Does this neglect corroborate Sina’s claim of over-identification? Did Sontag willingly skip Arendt out of envy for the role model and competition for being considered a similar expert on Benjamin and an equal public intellectual more generally?

987 Cf. Figure 5.125.
More interesting than blaming or shaming Sontag for this citational neglect is the fact that Arendt similarly did not bother to attend to the role of women in Benjamin’s life or the Benjamin debate more generally.\textsuperscript{988} As I noted before, Arendt had a similarly conflicted relationship to feminist politics like Sontag who published some feminist essays but always kept a safe distance from political slogans and feminist activism – very much to the annoyance of feminist critics like Adrienne Rich.\textsuperscript{989} Where Arendt considered herself emancipated within gendered boundaries, which she was happy to accept without rebellion, she did not show much solidarity with the second-wave feminism that happened in her immediate environment in New York.\textsuperscript{990} Despite the letters of recommendation that Arendt wrote for Sontag, she apparently noted, according to Thomas Meyer’s recent Arendt biography, that Arendt did not have a sense for the lingering structural discrimination against women in the literary field, and did not help to fight them.\textsuperscript{991}

A historical explanation of Arendt’s and Sontag’s lack of feminist sensibility, or investment in gender politics more generally, is that as members of the New York Intellectuals, Arendt and Sontag belonged to a generation for whom the social justice struggles of the 1960s were relatively foreign – for different reasons and to different degrees.\textsuperscript{992} In fact, Sontag’s recurring concern with Asja Lacis overlaps with the alternative’s featuring of Lacis as a marginalized figure in the Benjamin reception – but beyond such loose association, Sontag did not actively affiliate herself with the German New Left more than with the American New Left.

\textsuperscript{988} Except for noting that she knew and relied on information about the Frankfurt School on Alice Meier in Paris, Arendt does not reference any other woman relevant to the Benjamin debate. Apart from Asja Lacis, one could think of Gretel Adorno’s editorial role, for instance, or even the alternative editor Hildegard Brenner who even tried to win Arendt for her magazine’s stance, asking for reprint permission for Arendt’s portrait in spring 1968. Cf. [Letter Arendt to Paeschke, 26 June 1968], HAP: Correspondence, Publishers, 1944 to 1975, Merkur, 1967 to 1968, Manuscript/Mixed Material, https://www.loc.gov/item/mss1105600524/.

\textsuperscript{989} Sontag, On Women, 141-153.

\textsuperscript{990} Meyer, Arendt, 466f.; Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Still Mad: American Women Writers and the Feminist Imagination (W. W. Norton & Company, 2021), 110-119, 146-152

\textsuperscript{991} Meyer, Arendt, 466f.

\textsuperscript{992} Jumonville, New York Intellectuals, 8, 10.
Psycho-analytically, Sontag’s neglect to credit Arendt could be read, loosely drawing on Harald Bloom’s “anxiety of influence,” as a strategy to cope with an overdetermining role model.\textsuperscript{993} Arendt was generally perceived as an authority amongst the New York Intellectuals, whom to write about even Kazin had difficulties because of “Bewunderung” and “Begehren,” which caused a “Halbdistanz” and “eine fortwährende Abhängigkeit, die nicht zur Analyse werden konnte,” as Meyer argues.\textsuperscript{994} Sontag’s identificatory, even transgressive reading traces (correcting her English mistakes) suggest that she might have adopted Arendt’s perspective to the degree that she identified with her – and simply forgot to cite her because it would have amounted to citing herself, basically. In Bloom’s vocabulary, maybe Sontag’s transformation of Arendt into Frau Anders in \textit{The Benefactor} is a case of “misreading […] to clear imaginative space” for herself. Frau Anders ghostly presence, her uncanny repeated return from death invokes the “anxiety of indebtedness” which Sontag might have subconsciously been aware of in her efforts of “self-appropriation.”\textsuperscript{995} Maybe Sontag considered literature a “posthumous affair” in order to avoid having to actually confront her living role models.

In terms of the power play within the literary field, one could maliciously argue that Sontag credits Arendt exactly through her uncrediting Arendt (or through killing Frau Anders), as if she were imitating Arendt’s strategy to gain clout by inscribing herself into a patriarchal canon. Like Arendt, Sontag claims what Susan Lanser calls “discursive authority” citationally – driven by the desire “to be heard, respected, and believed, a hope of influence.”\textsuperscript{996} The citational mimicry in both portraits is in this sense a matter of finding a voice and a way into the Benjamin debate by

\textsuperscript{993} The link to Bloom is weirdly apropos because of his consideration of the “anxiety of influence” as melancholic. Cf. Bloom, \textit{Anxiety of Influence}, 7.
\textsuperscript{994} Meyer, \textit{Arendt}, 453.
\textsuperscript{995} Bloom, \textit{Anxiety of Influence}, 5.
approximating the aesthetic object itself.\textsuperscript{997} Imitating Benjamin, both draw on him as the highest authority in the debate to gain authority themselves – mimicry as a tool for \textit{passing as} Benjamin himself. Sontag’s reading of Benjamin in terms of Barthes’ “writing itself” receives a different urgency here: More than Arendt, Sontag is thrown back on “self-authorization” where she was not historically connected to Benjamin, not authorized by crossings of their lives, as Arendt was, or Adorno and Scholem, for that matter.\textsuperscript{998} In contrast to Adorno, Sontag has to prove her “Sachkenntnis” citationally because she was not equipped with it by life-long interactions with Benjamin himself. Citing the most powerful male authorities in the debate, and approximating Benjamin himself, is a way for her to gain clout.\textsuperscript{999}

Ironically, this affiliates her implicitly even more strongly with Arendt who, as Karen Feldman argues, “invents a specifically literary authoritativenss” through citation, creating an authoritative “literary provenance” for her own writing.\textsuperscript{1000} In this sense, the canonical literary traditions in which both portraits situate Benjamin – Arendt in the national German one, based on a Goethean paradigm (Shakespeare and Homer are appropriated for the German tradition), and Sontag in a transnational German-French-American one respectively – appear in new light: In Felski’s terminology of “attachment,” the portraits are “tie-making rather than tie-breaking.”\textsuperscript{1001} Felski considers this creation of literary and social connectivity a core quality of art, yet neglected by New Critical or also Adornian emphasis on the “functionlessness of art,” and the idea that art is “sovereign, self-contained,” and defined by “separateness and singularity.”\textsuperscript{1002} Felski suggests that the “critical function” of art precisely consists in how and between what it creates attachments.

\textsuperscript{997} Lanser, \textit{Fictions}, 3. Lanser quotes Luce Irigaray: “to find a voice (voix) is to find a way (voie).”
\textsuperscript{998} Lanser, \textit{Fictions}, 7.
\textsuperscript{999} Cf. Adorno, \textit{Interminsbescheid}.
\textsuperscript{1000} Feldman, forthcoming with \textit{Germanica Colloquia}, ed. Christopher Hoffman and Cosima Mattner.
\textsuperscript{1001} Felski, \textit{Hooked}, ix.
\textsuperscript{1002} Ibid., ixf.
She demands that “we need better ways of thinking about relations.” Arendts’ and Sontag’s Benjamin portraits show how rethinking the “tie-making” quality of literature needs to involve considering what authorities are invoked, and how discursive power hierarchies are (re-)created thereby. In other words, while accounting for the affective hooks through which critics create attachments and relations is key (even for my procedure in this study), also examining which relationships are unhooked and untied is specifically relevant to counter the socio-political power dynamics that render certain hooks more attractive than others.

Sontag was driven by “insatiable” ambition to overcome her own self-image of not being “a genius […] not mad enough, not obsessed enough,” as she notes in her diary in 1966. While she considered herself inferior to “Schopenhauer or Nietzsche or Wittgenstein,” she “aimed to be in their company, as a disciple; to work on their level.” Her strategy was “pushing my sensibility further + further, honing my mind. Becoming more unique, eccentric.”

What was Arendt’s role on her way to this goal? The young Sontag, it seems, had to fictionally kill and resurrect Arendt to be able to embrace her eccentricity. Arendt’s blurb for The Benefactor precisely politely acknowledged (but might have meant the contrary) the “remarkable control of what might easily have become mere eccentricity.”

Arendt – the “Muster der Ernsthaftigkeit,” as Sontag called her in her Peace Prize Speech – seems to have been an obstacle for Sontag in fleshing out her actual desires – but a productive obstacle, considering that The Benefactor features a fictional transformation of Arendt. Indeed, as Sontag’s “Afterword” in the thirtieth anniversary of Against Interpretation shows, the “seriousness” Arendt embodies for her remained significant to her throughout her writing career. While she had embraced “a seriousness that fails” with the

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1003 Sontag, As Consciousness is Harnessed, 168.
1004 Cf. my introduction.
“camp” sensibility as a young writer in the 1960s, she invokes “standards of seriousness” again, where she sees them undermined and “losing credibility” as an established writer in the 1990s. (AI, 283, 312)

Given that Arendt was such a crucial interlocutor for Arendt’s aesthetic and critical stance from the beginning to the end of her career, it is all the more regrettable that she did not credit Arendt in her Benjamin portrait, let alone publish her own dedicated portrait on her. From a critical feminist citational perspective, Sontag’s citational neglect is politically significant.1006 Analogous to Judith Butler’s famous definition of identity as a “stylized repetition of acts,” citation is a stylistic device to performatively recreate tradition.1007 In Living a Feminist Life, Sarah Ahmed discusses how “citational chain[s]” define how intellectual history is written and who is in- or excluded from traditions of thought.1008 Citation is a tool not only in place of tradition per se, as Benjamin would have it, but for rewriting tradition by re-ascribing the authority through which the past is transmitted, to channel Arendt’s conception of tradition. (MDT, 190-196) With Felski’s words, if Sontag had credited Arendt and weakened, rather than reified the ties (to Adorno and Scholem) which had defined his public reception before Arendt published her portrait and edition, her portrait could have become a feminist intervention. While a radical feminist position as Ahmed’s was not available, nor desirable for her – in Living a Feminist Life, Ahmed follows “a strict citation policy: I do not cite white men”1009 – Sontag’s citational practice suggests that she was aware of the significance of intellectual integrity. Indeed, she considered crediting intellectual contributions important: There is an anecdote circulating amongst the editors of New German

1009 Ahmed, Living a Feminist Life, 15.
Critique about how Sontag was enraged when her Benjamin portrait was not credited in the bibliography of the 1979 special issue on Walter Benjamin. But did she consider that, as Ahmed writes, “Citation is feminist memory […] Citation is how we acknowledge our debt to those who came before; those who helped us find our way when the way was obscured”? Given that writing was a crucial tool for her emancipation from her marriage – in which she experienced talking as an impotent, silencing medium, which robbed her of her voice – it is striking that exactly stylistically, in writing, she does not exhaust the feminist potential planted in her Benjamin portrait and its indebtedness to Arendt.

Discovering this feminist potential was the main motivation behind this study. To use Arendt’s term, I endeavored to trace a “hidden tradition” of a transatlantic kind of criticism in Arendt’s and Sontag’s Benjamin portraits. Because it is “tacit and latent,” I complemented my close readings by archival research, attending to both the “Logik des Produziert-Seins” and the “Logik des Produziert-Werdens.” The specific pariahdom implicit in this “hidden tradition” is, as I came to realize, connected not primarily to being Jewish but to being a woman, and moreover to being institutionally independent. As Jewish women, Arendt and Sontag both seem to have been trying to citationally “pass as male” in a patriarchal debate over Benjamin’s heritage. What connects them is a style of portraiture defined by citational mimicry through which they gain clout by reconnecting directly back to the aesthetic object in question: Walter Benjamin. Through this style of mimicry, their portraits receive a genuine critical character as their standpoint on Benjamin is simultaneously provocatively clear but also offered for validation by the reader.

1011 Ahmed, Living a Feminist Life, 15f.
While Arendt’s and Sontag’s Benjamin portraits at first sight seem to be independent, stand-alone contributions to the Benjamin debate, they actually both present Benjamin as a literary critic in very similar ways. Sontag affiliates herself stylistically, through citational mimicry, with Arendt, defying what Goethe’s narrator in *Elective Affinities* argues in an essentializing way about women:

> Man betrachte ein Frauenzimmer als Liebende, als Braut, als Frau, Hausfrau und Mutter, immer steht sie isoliert, immer ist sie allein und will allein sein. [...] Jede Frau schließt die andre aus, ihrer Natur nach; denn von jeder wird alles gefordert, was dem ganzen Geschlechte zu leisten obliegt.¹⁰¹³

As I aimed to demonstrate in this study, Arendt and Sontag were both many things, maybe even lovers and wives, but most importantly, they were virtuous, astute critics whose contributions to debates on interpretive and editorial methods like the Benjamin debate or the current debate on critical methods have strong affinities despite significant differences. Where these contributions have still not been acknowledged to the degree they should be, taking care of their critical achievements and the relationship between them inherent in their work is a matter of rewriting what was a patriarchal tradition.¹⁰¹⁴

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Hannah Arendt


**Susan Sontag**


**Walter Benjamin**


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Appendix Arendt

Figure 3.2: “Kraus […] did not understand a word of it.” In Arendt’s copy of Scholem’s Benjamin lecture

Figure 3.9: “Hofmansthal Brief,” in Arendt’s 1955 copy of Benjamin’s *Briefe*, vol. 1

Figure 3.10: Index vol. 2, in Arendt’s 1955 copy of Benjamin’s *Briefe*, vol. 2
Figure 3.12: “Haben alle [nur?] Marx gelesen,” Arendt’s 1955 copy of Benjamin’s *Briefe*, vol. 2

Figure 3.15: marks in Editorial, Arendt’s copy of *alternative* 1967

Figure 3.16: question marks on missing evidence, Arendt’s copy of *alternative* 1967
Figures 3.18-19: “Kunstwerk-Aufsatz” and “Urophänomen.“ Arendt’s copy of alternative 1967
Figure 5.3: “the task of the literary critic” in Sontag’s 1968 copy of *Illuminations*

Figure 5.4: that the *critic* did not exist in Germany, Sontag’s 1968 copy of *Illuminations*
Figure 5.5: “the 'last European.’” Sontag’s 1968 copy of *Illuminations*

Figure 5.6: “friendship with Brecht.” Sontag’s 1968 copy of *Illuminations*

Figure 5.7: “the wonder of appearance.” Sontag’s 1968 copy of *Illuminations*

Figure 5.8: figure of the flaneur, Sontag’s 1968 copy of *Illuminations*

Figure 5.9: baroque aesthetic, Sontag’s 1968 copy of *Illuminations*
Figure 5.10: “truth as an exclusively acoustic phenomenon,” Sontag’s 1968 copy of *Illuminations*

Figure 5.11: collection of books and “quotations,” Sontag’s 1968 copy of *Illuminations*

Figure 5.12: “revolutionary,” Sontag’s 1968 copy of *Illuminations*
Figure 5.13: “quotations are at the center” and “surrealistic montage,” Sontag’s 1968 copy of *Illuminations*

Figure 5.16: Adorno’s and Scholem’s skepticism about Brecht, in Sontag’s 1968 copy of *Illuminations*
Figure 5.19: Adorno, Prisms, “Buber,” note

Figure 5.20: Adorno, Prisms, allegory underlines
Figure 5.21: Adorno, *Prisms*, “melancholic complacency”


Figure 5.26: “cf. Elective Affinities” in Sontag’s 1974 copy of *Minima Moralia*
Figures 5.28-33: institutional history and “women” in Sontag’s 1972 copy of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*

Figures 5.34-35: exemplary marks in Sontag’s 1951 copy of *Origins of Totalitarianism*
Figure 5.38: “cf. Benjamin essay,” in Sontag’s 1958 copy of Rahel

Figures 5.39-41: Arendt’s editorial notes in Sontag’s 1958 copy of Rahel
Figure 5.44: Arendt’s methodical notes on criticism in Sontag’s 1958 copy of Rahel

Figures 5.45-47: “Beauty” in Sontag’s 1958 copy of Rahel
Figures 5.50-52: “animal dream,” in Sontag’s 1958 copy of Rahel

Figure 5.53: the “woman problem,” in Sontag’s 1958 copy of Rahel
Figures 5.54-59: editorial reading of *Reflections*, in Sontag’s 1978 copy

Figures 5.60: “?” in Sontag’s 19 copy of *Origin of German Tragic Drama*
Figures 5.66-67: “Childhood photograph” in Benjamin’s “Kafka” and “camera” in Baudelaire Essay, Sontag’s copy of *Illuminations*

Figures 5.68-71: tracing “experience” across *Illumination* texts, in Sontag’s 1968 copy
Figures 5.72-73: “Editor’s Note” in Sontag’s 1968 copy of Illuminations

Figures 5.74-77: noting Benjamin’s social network in Demetz’ Reflections

Figures 5.80-82: “critic” and “photography” in Sontag’s 1973 copy of Understanding Brecht
At that time Walter Benjamin was no longer in Berlin; he had left the city early in April after his marriage, and did not return for more than three years. Thus I did not have the opportunity—as much as it would have meant to me—to introduce him to Rubashov and Agnon, those two *Ostjuden* whom I esteemed so highly. They represented, almost symbolically, two opposite types of the East European Jew.

Figures 5.89-91: “WB” in Sontag’s 1980 copy of Scholem’s *From Berlin to Jerusalem*

Figures 5.97-98: Italian Calendar Notes

“[…]to “think about Klee’s ‘Angelus Novus’ – meaning for B.”, a reminder to “reread B’s Kafka essays”, and to “read hashish book compare with *Steppenwolf* what kind of ecstasy, change of consciousness […] B. allow himself / refusal of ecstasy”

Figures 5.101-102: Sontag’s “queries, etc”
Figures 5.104-109: Scrap Paper notes on topics related to Benjamin such as "Narrator," "meaning," or the "Tableaux."
Figures 5.110-112: draft development, aggressive cutting and rearranging
“essence of melancholy,” “melancholy secret positions,” “Allegory […],” “Saturn,” “most European of all […],” “A temperament […]”

Figures 5.118-124: handwritten editing of typoscript drafts