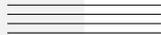


C O R R E S P O N D E N C E S
A N D A F F I N I T I E S



M A R Y M A X W E L L

The figure of Walter Benjamin has haunted the American imagination ever since his translated works arrived on U.S. shores some fifty years ago. In addition to Benjamin studies in diverse scholarly fields, his life and death have inspired creative works as wide-ranging as operas, novels, and documentary films. The influential Benjamin has even invaded the more bookish precincts of popular culture, such as in the title of a collection of essays by Larry McMurtry, *Walter Benjamin at the Dairy Queen*. Benjamin as “culture hero” is the starting point for a chapter of Leonard Bar-kan’s travelogue, *Berlin for Jews*. Published in 2015 was David Kishik’s *The Manhattan Project*, a volume which presents itself as the commentary to a text that Benjamin, after faking his suicide at the Spanish border in the midst of World War II, might have written had he moved to New York City, “assuming the position of a kind of specter living an afterlife.”

But the ghost of Walter Benjamin has also been a presence in my own writing life. It is a little-known detail of his biography that as a young man Benjamin was the author of a set of seventy-three sonnets, poems that were found among a cache of papers vouchsafed to Georges Bataille and kept in Paris during the war.

After I came across German versions of these in a Heidelberg bookstore soon after their publication, Benjamin's sonnets became something of an obsession. I was particularly taken with a central section composed of nine enigmatic poems.

This past fall, in preparation for a conference talk about poetry and translation, I found myself back at them again. It was when he was writing his sonnets, I newly realized, that Benjamin was also translating Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal* into German; the dates of the two sets of poetic texts overlap almost exactly. Given that the introduction to this privately printed 1923 translation, titled *Tableaux parisiens*, is the now-canonical essay "The Task of the Translator," there is considerable irony to the fact that the slim volume of Baudelaire translations attracted no contemporary interest whatsoever. Yet despite his personal disappointment at the book's reception, Benjamin hardly dropped the subject. Not only would the great French poet inspire a number of important essays begun in the thirties, Baudelaire would also form the core of Benjamin's monumental *Arcades Project*. As late as 1939, the year before his death, Benjamin would write of *Les Fleurs du mal*, "My thoughts are now focused on this text day and night."

And as soon as I finished Kishik's elaborate intellectual fantasy, an alternate specter came into view. Benjamin would not, as Kishik imagines, have lived as an anonymous figure hanging out at the 42nd Street library, eschewing contact with friends and émigré colleagues such as the Adornos, Max Horkheimer, and Brecht. And no, if Benjamin had "escaped" to New York, he would not have written an additional theoretical work about Manhattan along the lines of his unfinished Parisian masterwork. Instead, the middle-aged Benjamin would have continued to write about Baudelaire. There are even indications (his correspondence to Gretel Adorno, as well as the nature of the materials he left with Bataille in Paris, to name but two) that this was Benjamin's actual intention. As Michael W. Jennings poignantly notes about "Central Park," a collection of preparatory passages for the *Arcades Project*, "Benjamin's title points to the central importance he ascribed to these fragments in the context of his work on Baudelaire, as well as to his hopes for resettling in America, where his friends spoke of finding an apartment for him in proximity to Central Park in New York."

In my own imaginative projection the American Benjamin would most often be found, via the A train, in Greenwich Village's postwar cafés. There he would take his coffee or brandy seated alongside New School academics and the young creatives of the city's downtown. Having survived the Red-hunting fifties, he would come into his influential own the following decade. At this historical moment Benjamin's actual and fantastic chronology would overlap, for it was in the late sixties that American readers were introduced to Benjamin's "early" writings in the pages of *The New Yorker*, brought to their attention by his friend Hannah Arendt. Most important, after the travel visa difficulties of the McCarthy era had been resolved, Benjamin would be able to make regular visits to and from his beloved Paris. Both there and in New York the now elderly émigré would serve as intellectual mentor to a small circle of like-minded enthusiasts, one of whom would include the poet and translator Richard Howard.

I admit this hypothetical biography is highly colored by my own personal and literary interests and experiences, but then obviously so is Kishik's. Nevertheless I would argue that much of Richard Howard's own literary project, like Benjamin's, originates in a profound love and knowledge of the arts of early modernism. In fact, as I wrote in "Art and Artifice" (*Raritan*, spring 2001), Benjamin's essay "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century" (his *Arcade Project's* alternate title) could be used to describe much of Howard's own poetic oeuvre. I'm thinking also, of course, of Howard's 1982 translations of Baudelaire's *Fleurs du mal*. But a list of Howard's other translations from French – fiction and essays, as well as poetry – would form an extensive appendix to this shared Parisian project. Howard's attempts at translating Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* is especially relevant to any consideration of the linked literary presences under discussion. Not only did Benjamin endeavor his own German version of the novelist's sentences, as he wrote, "Proust was an incomparable reader of *Les Fleurs du mal*, for he sensed that it contained kindred elements." Baudelaire, Proust, and Benjamin therefore form a trinity of literary *phares*, beacons lighting a vocational path.

After my conference presentation discussing Howard's versions of Baudelaire and proposing a close relation between Benjamin's almost unacknowledged poems and his own *Tableaux parisiens*, it

was drawn to my attention that English translations of Benjamin's complete sonnets had, in fact, been published in 2014 by the translator Carl Skoggard. When I got hold of a copy of his book, I saw that a portion of Skoggard's useful introductory material reiterates (apparently by coincidence) much of what I had written about these poems some years earlier in my "Benjamin the Poet" (*Salmagundi*, winter 2007). Originally composed sometime between 1915 and 1925, Benjamin's poems first appeared in print in 1986 as *Sonnette*, part of the complete works (*Gesammelte Schriften*) edited by Rolf Tiedemann. Since they were hard to find even in this thirty-year-old German edition, to have them newly available to an English-reading audience is cause for gratitude.

Skoggard's translations themselves, however, are disappointing. Skoggard claims that some "native German speakers" prefer his own "compromised English versions" to the originals, though I find this hard to believe. And although determination as to whether Benjamin's poems are "good" or not is naturally subject to matters of taste, I would point out that many of his lines are unforgettably lovely. Here, for example, is one of Benjamin's most elegantly baroque quatrains, the opening of his Sonnet 52:

In aller Schönheit liegt geheime Trauer
 Undeutlich nämlich bleibt sie immerdar
 Zwiefach und zwiefach unenträtselbar
 Sich selbts verhüllt und dunkel dem Beschauer.

Just to give some sense of how I hear them, here are the same four lines as rendered in a translation of mine, published some fifteen years ago (*Pequod*, winter 1993):

In every beauty lies some hidden sorrow
 As it remains fixed in obscurity
 Doubly redoubly inexplicable
 She shades both itself and the darkened viewer.

And here is Skoggard:

In all Beauty lies a secret sorrow
 For obscure she ever shall remain
 Twice times two a cipher never to be broken
 Veiled unto herself and dark to him who looks upon her.

But whatever I might think about his English renderings (which I would criticize as merely reproducing, in Benjaminian terms, “inessential content”), I am in complete agreement with Skoggard that Benjamin scholars can’t seem to “consider Benjamin as a poet, or cannot conceive of his having turned to the writing of poetry to confront crucial issues in his life.” Skoggard is as baffled as I am by the continued neglect of these fascinating poems. When, as in Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings’s *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life*, there is nominal acknowledgment of the sonnets’ existence (noted only in a footnote at the back of the 755-page book), this recognition is accompanied by an apparent dismissal of their relevance to Benjamin studies. Since my own 2007 essay, I have come across no mention of them in various biographies or discussions.

For those aware of his sonnets’ existence, it seems to have been a matter of pure coincidence that Benjamin’s “secret obsession” survived alongside the remnants of his Baudelaire-infused *Arcades Project*. Biographers Eiland and Jennings write that “mainly” the *Arcades* materials, along with the sonnets, were sent to Theodor Adorno in New York by personal emissary after the war. Other materials stayed at the Bibliothèque nationale: “The remaining papers, which also included the most advanced drafts and notes for the partially completed *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Age of High Capitalism*, seemed for many years to be lost. In 1981 Benjamin’s Italian editor, the philosopher Giorgio Agamben, discovered a body of material in Benjamin’s hand in the Bataille archive.” Skoggard proposes that the sonnets were first discovered by Agamben, but Eiland and Jennings are evidently correct that the sonnets were included in the packet sent to the Adornos. Among the reproductions contained in *Walter Benjamin’s Archive* (published in 2007 to accompany an exhibition in Berlin) we can see one of these poems (no. 58) written in Benjamin’s own tiny handwriting and stamped by the Adorno archive.

For me as a poet, coming back to the subject once again, the nagging question remains: Why would the modernist Benjamin employ the sonnet form’s end rhymes? In his “Technical Considerations,” Skoggard refers to “Benjamin’s way with enjambment and syntactic displacement,” and notes that this and his “elevated diction recall Hölderlin, the late odes and hymns in particular.” Skog-

gard also refers to “similar” German works of Stefan George, Rilke, and Goethe, among others, though he doesn’t make particular note of the more immediate model, the French poet whose rhymed works Benjamin was concomitantly in the process of translating. But others have also missed the connection. In the introduction to his edition of Benjamin’s essays, *The Writer of Modern Life: Essays on Charles Baudelaire*, Michael W. Jennings gives an excellent history of Benjamin’s translations but makes no mention of the writer’s own poems. Yet according to the reminiscences of Benjamin’s dear friend Gershom Scholem, early on in their friendship Benjamin privately read aloud to him Stefan George’s Baudelaire translations, some of his own versions, and lyrics from the sonnet cycle in question. And so the inclusion of these early sonnets’ in the packet given to Bataille may be no coincidence after all. In Benjamin’s mind, I would argue, these poems had some relation to the central section of his *Arcades Project*, whose title was “The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire.” Certainly what could be said about Benjamin’s own sonnets was exactly what he himself had said: “Baudelaire’s genius . . . drew its nourishment from melancholy.”

This unanswered question about Benjamin’s choice of poetic form in his translations of French to German has become something of a notorious translation “problematic.” In his “Task of the Translator,” Benjamin forcefully argued that fidelity to received poetic structures was not only unnecessary but counterproductive: “It is self-evident how greatly reproducing the form impedes the rendering of sense.” Yet in his own German versions Benjamin retained the original’s end rhymes, thereby contradicting his stated precepts. One way to investigate the apparent contradiction between Benjamin’s translations and his essay’s theoretical formulations is to consider the meaning of end rhyme in his own little-known poetry. In other words, what if we read Benjamin’s essay as the work of a poet? Though he is most often described as a philosophically and politically informed literary critic, some of the more theological aspects of his thinking might also be read as a kind of poetics. As Arendt observed, Benjamin had “the gift of *thinking poetically*.” And certainly, approaching the issue less abstractly, both his *Tableaux parisiens* translations and the *Sonnette*

of his early years indicate that he personally tried to work through some of the implications of poetic form.

To state the obvious, for the poet-translator (as distinct from the academic one) there is an initial “problem” of interpretation of any source text’s use of form, a choice which is separate from, though interwoven with, the matter of literary style and tone. Two questions to be addressed by a poetry translator include consideration of the “function” of a poem’s prosody, as well as what the literary associations of its use might be. For example, does the original employ a received form which alludes to poetic predecessors? What are the possible meanings of this kind of reference? Such an active reading of the original results in an individual solution to the challenge of the form’s translation into another language. This solution may or may not be an attempt to reproduce the prosodic methods of the source poem, but it should “faithfully” take into account some essential aspect of the original’s formal mode of expression. The concept of formal “fidelity,” however, is subject to notoriously diverse interpretations.

In any case, Benjamin seriously and self-consciously engages with the matter of a poem’s formal meanings in his central set of nine poems (nos. 51–59). Stylistically distinct from the first fifty (Skoggard himself describes them as distinctly “smoother”), they were, I suspect, written at a slightly later date and inspired by a different personal relationship than were the initial fifty. (These, as Skoggard rightly explains, are clearly in response to the suicide of Benjamin’s friend Fritz Heinle.) And it is in this central sequence that I particularly detect the influence of the French poet. There, to begin with, is Benjamin’s curiously atypical use of classical mythological figures, a Baudelairean procedure formulated by Benjamin as modernism’s “interpenetration with antiquity.” While classical figures may be found in the fifty-poem Heinle cycle only a handful of times, Hades, Pluto, and Mercury, as well as Orpheus, Eurydice, Helen, Eurykleia, and Penelope, appear in these nine sonnets. As Benjamin writes in “Central Park”: “What proved so fascinating to Baudelaire in Latin literature . . . may have been, in part, the way in which the late Latin literature used the names of gods – a usage that was less abstract than allegorical. In this he may have recognized a procedure with affinities to his own.”

Here’s an example of one of these poems – it actually opens the

central sequence in question – displaying intense sensitivity to sonnet form as well as quasi-allegorical use of classical figure. Since my translation is unrhymed, I’ve added the German line endings for no. 51, which uses a traditional rhyme structure of ABBA/ABBA; CD(C)/DCD.

How meager seems this heap of measured lament;	[Klagen]
How inexorably the sonnet fastens	[bindet]
My drifting soul onto form’s discovered course.	[findet]
With figured speech I will fashion an image.	[sagen]
The pair of stanzas that carry me below	[tragen]
Follow meandering passages through stone.	[windet]
Orpheus’ searching almost led to blindness;	[erblindet]
It finds here the daylight clearing of Hades.	[Tagen]
How he pleaded Eurydice’s return,	[erbat]
How stern Pluto cautioning gave her back.	[anheim]
On their short path urgent words lost meaning.	[Pfad]
Yet the tercets serve as hidden witnesses	[geheim]
Unseen as she who follows him behind	[tat]
Until banished by his last-glancing rhyme.	[Reim]

Poetic form is presented as a mythic process. The experience of the poem is described as a quasi-journey to the Underworld, full of “meandering passages” and ending in a “daylit clearing.” In my reading, rhyme in Benjamin’s sonnet functions something like a system of trail blazes, repeated sonic markers that indicate the direction the poet must take.

This kind of rhymed symbolic system will be familiar to readers of Baudelaire. In the French poet’s well-known “Correspondences” (where “the pillars of Nature’s temple . . . yield perplexing messages”) paired end rhymes also proceed hand in hand within the sonnet’s opening quatrains; Baudelaire also finds a kind of rhyming resolution in his use of tercets (CDC/DEE). Given the use of received form in Benjamin’s early poems, it is no longer all that surprising that Benjamin would attempt to retain Baudelaire’s rhymes in his own German versions – despite his theoretical essay formulations that might seem to contradict his practice. Benjamin is attempting to use the “re-echoing” feature of rhyme

to link his sonnets to Baudelaire's poetic project. Some sense of this continued, "received" nature of vocation may also be found in Richard Howard's Baudelaire translations. In his version of the French "Phares" (The Beacon), for example, he writes:

A thousand sentries pass the order on,
 a cry repeated by a thousand messengers;
 hunters shout it, lost in the deep woods;
 the beacon flares on a thousand citadels!

The original end-rhyming French (in this stanza, the powerfully paired *sentinelles/citadelles*) corresponds to the repeating images of blazing lights marking the path for the carrier of artistic "message."

Benjamin's self-consciousness, the process of writing itself as the poem's subject, can also be found in Baudelaire, as in lines of "Le Soleil" (quoted more than once by Benjamin in his various writings on Baudelaire):

Je vais m'exercer seul à ma fantasque escrime,
 Flairant dans tous les coins les hasards de la rime,
 Trébuchant sur les mots comme sure les pavés,
 Heurtant parfois des vers depuis longtemps rêvés.

These "prosodic experiences" (as Benjamin calls them) are slightly expanded by Howard into:

I venture out alone to drill myself
 in what must seem an eerie fencing-match,
 duelling in dark corners for a rhyme
 and stumbling over words like cobblestones . . .
 where now and then realities collide
 with lines I dreamed of writing long ago.

As I discussed in my *Salmagundi* essay, the "twinning" quality of rhyme (the sensation of a "match") was for Benjamin an indication of personal understanding. His exchange of poems with his friend Gershom Scholem is replete with this heartbreakingly poignant use – rhyme as an expression of soulful affinity and entwined destiny. An echo of this sense of communion permeates the highly disjunctive Heinle sequence as well, where rhyme has more "meaning" than the poems' ostensible "content." As Benjamin writes in the closing couplet of no. 35, "Daß sie das Herz das liebte

im Geheimen / Nun aller Welt verschütten muß in Reimen” (So in whose heart your love held hidden / now must be outpoured to the world in rhymes). I should also note that for Scholem, rhyme indicates a theological-philosophical knowledge whose continuance was in question in 1934, the year of his rhymed verse lament addressed to Benjamin: “Memory can now only retain / a teaching that breaks semblance / in twain” (trans. Richard Sieburth).

But affined sensibilities are also at play in Howard’s translations. While Benjamin’s use of rhyme manifests intentional acknowledgment of the great poet, Howard’s renderings of Baudelaire take a different, though no less deeply engaged, approach. Though his English versions end up “eschewing the terminal consonance” of the French, the poet has determined other comparably relevant ways to express Baudelaire’s formal meanings. One alternative approach employed by Howard is the subtle use of assonance and dissonance. English (unlike French) is relatively rhyme poor, but the variety of its spoken vowels (particularly the American tendency to elongate into diphthong) can be quite useful in the translation of poetry. Echoing vowels, something almost like “slant” rhyme, can be used to link words within the line. For example in “The Bad Monk” :

There was a time when all refectory walls	[murailles]
were frescoed with images of Truth	[Vérité]
whose influence, kindling pious appetite	[entrailles]
tempered the chill of their austerity.	[austérité]

Though the rectangular shape of original’s end-rhymed room (literally, a four-walled *stanza*) has been abandoned, something of its effect is retained by keeping the original’s word order and placement within the line. Here *Truth / whose influence* (long *oo* repeated with two full accents and then down to unaccented second position) leads to *pious appetite* (first syllabic stress of the long *i* delayed to stressed third position – both echoing back to the first line’s once upon a *time*), and closes with *tempered austerity* (from unstressed second syllable to second stress followed by two dwindling unstressed syllables). Contrasting initial consonants (*kindling, chill*) are also strategically kept at their lines’ center to suggest Baudelaire’s embedded irony (*réchauffant, froideur*).

In some sense, Howard’s pitch-perfect technique is analogous to

musical harmony; two or more paired notes are not the “same” ones (played in the same scale but in different octaves) but rather have another relation of accord or disjuncture. And, in fact, this matter of assonance and dissonance is a poetic issue Benjamin himself gave some thought to. In one of his early essays on Hölderlin, he refers to the poet’s phrase: “Whatever happens, let it all be opportune for you! / Be rhymed for joy!” Benjamin comments: “Dissonance of the image, which given the most radical emphasis suggests a tonal dissonance, has the function of making the inherent intellectual ordering of joy in time perceptible, audible, in the chain of an infinitely extended event corresponding to the infinite possibilities of rhyme.” For Benjamin, tonal disharmony may indicate, and draw attention to, the possibility of rhyme’s accord. Similarly, for readers of Howard’s translations who are already familiar with the French originals, Howard’s lack of rhyme (its relative dissonance) has the curious effect of calling to mind the original’s system of meaningfully rhyming correspondence. For me, the effect is a very contemporary one, as Howard’s versions seem to openly acknowledge our distance from the poetic practice and historical time frame of the early modern original.

Howard’s translations are indisputably the work of a poet, which is something that simply can’t be said for Skoggard’s versions of Benjamin’s sonnets. But then, what is it that makes a person a poet? To create good poems, obviously one needs an ear and a subject; the poetic vocation itself is considerably harder to define. Thinking of Benjamin and Baudelaire, I extrapolate that it involves a life’s work determined to reveal “a world of secret affinities.” Here I need to return to my personal path to the recognition of Benjamin’s formal relation to Baudelaire. At an early moment in my vocation, I had several discussions with Richard Howard about poetry and translation. And although his Baudelaire had already been published when we first met, his translation choices came up in conversation with me about related matters.

Howard is an advocate of good prose translations of poetry, especially classical epic, and we talked about several wonderful examples in French prose. We spoke of the power of the sentence, either in English or in French – a syntactic construction, he ruefully noted, that not too many younger writers seemed to have mastered. And so I can’t help but hear in my recollections of

Howard's praise of prose translation distinct echoes of an exclamation Baudelaire wrote in a letter to his editor, a rhetorical question Benjamin also quotes: "Who among us has not dreamt, in moments of ambition, of the miracle of a poetic prose, musical without rhythm and without rhyme, supple and staccato enough to adapt to the lyrical stirrings of the soul, the undulations of dreams, and the sudden leaps of consciousness?"

We also talked about the option of end rhyme. Howard spoke with great admiration about his colleague Richard Wilbur's mastery of the dramatic couplet in his translations of Molière's plays. I myself suspect that Wilbur's "trademark" use of end rhyme (in certain translated cantos of the *Inferno*, which had then just come out, as well as Wilbur's own Baudelaire translations) may have been one reason Howard avoided end rhymes in his *Fleurs du mal*. What he told me was that he was "going for something else." In his introduction he writes of wanting to maintain the structure and the thematics, rather than the end rhyme; he aims for "cumulative effects" that might suggest "the secret architecture" of which both Baudelaire and Benjamin speak.

Perhaps most important, for both Benjamin and Howard, poetic translation is integral to a larger shared "project," a life's occupation dependent upon networks of engaged reading; virtual communion and actual friendship – that phenomenon I have named vocational affinity. It has been my experience that this somewhat ineffable quality can be found in certain kindred elements. One indicator is a shared sense of the meaningful primacy of poetic form. Some might interpret Benjamin's Baudelaire as the expression of an agonism directed at Stefan George, though I view it somewhat differently. I instead see recognition of common projects and inspiration, of adding on to what's come alongside and before. As Howard writes about one of his own colleagues in his translation's foreword, "Ever since we were in college together, John Hollander's authority in literary matters has been a resource to me, and I remember as a kind of proleptic grace the effect his own translations of Baudelaire, done some thirty years ago, had upon my notions of what might be done, or at least not left undone; I hope to have proved worthy of those early and shared intuitions."

My interpretation of Benjamin is certainly the result of a

highly personal reading of Benjamin's temperamental attributes, most distinctly his soulful friendships with Gershom Scholem and Gretel Adorno. Others take a different view of the now-familiar tragic figure. For some he is an intellectual cliché. As Leonard Barkan puts it, Benjamin has been "elevated to the status of something like modernity's messiah, with the contents of hundreds of library shelves to prove it." Because of this reputation, Barkan is particularly resistant to Benjamin's cryptic charms; he openly admits he is not "an acolyte." In *Berlin for Jews* he introduces Benjamin as a failed academic, a person notable in his lifetime only for a "roster of professional shortfalls" and a handful of studies that would "hardly catch the notice of any tenure committees." Barkan's starting point for his armchair walking tour is Benjamin the Berliner, and so Paris forms little part of his particular portrait. The result is that the great poet's importance to Benjamin is reduced by Barkan to the summary judgment that Baudelaire "versified the world as seen through the eyes of the *flâneur*."

But I would argue that the existence of Benjamin's original poetry reveals a sensibility even more subtle than may be realized through his prose. I admit that my own awareness of the possible significance of his sonnets began as a young poet's intuition, stumbling across them by chance as I did so many years ago. By that point in my own writing life the personage of Benjamin had already made himself known, as he had to many, for a variety of reasons. But independent of any biographical narrative or critical interpretation, his often unfinished writing remains captivating even while, at its most enigmatic, it refuses to yield to paraphrase. Benjamin may well have been unsuccessful as a scholar in his lifetime, but his works bear the mark of great literature. His enduring sentences express a mind and voice in the process of being, a quasi-physical sense that comes across both time and linguistic translation. Capturing this intimate quality, not coincidentally, is exactly what Richard Howard wanted most to accomplish in his versions of Baudelaire; in especial he tried for that "certain private register" which comes across so distinctly in the French. Such a translation achievement allows for recognition of soulful affinity across language divides.

Paradoxically it was as a result of my familiarity with Howard's American translations, formally distanced as they are from the

French, that I was able to hear in Benjamin's own melancholy poems something that echoed with *Les Fleurs du mal*. This may seem like an odd displacement. But as Benjamin recognized in "The Task of the Translator," "a translation issues from the original – not so much from its life as from its afterlife." He also wrote that "a good translation will remain problematic, being haunted by an original which refuses to be dissolved in the second language." From my own perspective, if the individual experience of reading translation is a kind of spectral encounter, then engagement with an influential text's afterlife may be seen as an ongoing interaction with mutating presences who, once introduced, adamantly refuse to go away.