NO-MAN’S-LAND: ON WALTER BENJAMIN’S “DESTRUCTIVE CHARACTER”

IRVING WOHLFARTH

“The Destructive Character”

It could happen that, looking back upon one’s life, one might come to the realization that almost all the deeper relations one had undergone originated with people about whose “destructive character” everyone was unanimous. One day, perhaps accidentally, one would come up against this fact; and the more violent the shock, the better one’s chances of portraying the destructive character.

The destructive character’s only watchword is: Make room; his only activity: clearing out. His need for fresh air and free space is stronger than any hatred.

The destructive character is young and cheerful. For destroying rejuvenates, because it clears out of the way the traces of our own age; it cheers up because every clearing away means, for the destroyer, a complete reduction of his own condition, indeed the extraction of its root. Such an Apollonian version of the destroyer imposes itself once one recognizes how prodigiously the world is simplified when it is tested with a view to its destruction. Such is the great chain of being. It provides the destructive character with an all-embracing spectacle of the deepest harmony.

The destructive character is a tireless worker. It is nature that dictates his tempo, at least indirectly: he has to forestall it. Otherwise it will itself take over the destruction.

The destructive character envisions nothing. He has few needs, least of all to know what will take the place of the destroyed. At first, for a moment at least, the empty space, the place where the object stood, the victim lived. Someone will turn up who needs it without occupying it.

The destructive character does his job. It is only creative work that he avoids. Just as the creator seeks out solitude for himself, the destroyer must continuously surround himself with people, with witnesses to his efficacy.

The destructive character is a signal. Just as a trigonometric sign is exposed on all sides to the wind, he is exposed on all sides to chatter. To defend him against it is senseless.

The destructive character is not at all interested in being understood. Efforts to this end he considers superficial. Misunderstanding cannot affect him. On the contrary, he provokes it, just as oracles, those destructive state institutions, provoked it. The most petty-bourgeois of all phenomena, gossip, only comes about because people don’t want to be misunderstood. The destructive character lets himself be misunderstood; he does not encourage gossip.

The destructive character is the enemy of those whose home is their case [Etui-Mensch] and who merely want their comfort. They line their shell [Gehäuse] with velvet, on which they impress their traces. The destructive character wipes away even the traces of destruction.
The destructive character stands in the vanguard of the traditionalists. Some hand things down by making them inviolable and conserving them; others pass on situations by making them handy and liquidating them. The latter are called destructive.

The destructive character has a historical sense: a basic, invincible distrust of the course of events and a permanent awareness that everything can go wrong. Thus the destructive character is dependability itself.

The destructive character sees nothing lasting. But for this very reason he everywhere sees ways and means. Where others come up against walls or mountains, there too he sees a way. But because he sees a way everywhere, he also has everywhere to clear the way. Not always with brute force, sometimes with its refinement. Because he sees ways everywhere, he himself always stands at the crossroads. No moment can know what the next will bring. He reduces the existing to rubble, not for the sake of the rubble but of the path that extends through it.

The destructive character does not live out of the feeling that life is worth living, but that suicide is not worth the trouble.¹

Walter Benjamin has long been frozen in this country as a hot tip. More translation cannot by itself remedy this situation. Sustained mediation is required if his conception of criticism as “quoting out of context” is not to be unwittingly parodied. The following essay tries, by way of a telescopic microscopie, to show what reading Benjamin involves. In necessarily programmatic fashion it situates a crucial “middle” text within contexts and problematics that anticipate our own. Positive negativity, non-Hegelian dialectics, the transvaluation of allegory, the undoing of “man,” “the subject,” “depth”—these are also the independent concern of much contemporary thinking, especially in France. My reading has in part been guided by such latent parallels (and divergences). They could not be mapped out here. Nor was there room to discuss the growing secondary literature. My implicit claim is, however, that Benjamin is also to be located between its entrenchments. Least of all can his position be reduced to “nostalgia” [Fredric Jameson, Marxism and Form (Princeton Univ. Press, 1971), pp. 60-83].

1. The constellation

“Where is my place of work? In Berlin W[est]. [. . .] But do you really mean to forbid me [. . .] at my little writing-factory from hanging the red flag out of the window on the grounds that it’s nothing but a scrap of rag? Given the ‘counter-revolutionary’ nature of one’s work—as you quite correctly characterize mine from a party standpoint—should one do the counter-revolution the further favor of explicitly placing oneself at its disposal? Shouldn’t one rather methylate one’s work, like spirits, to guarantee its unpalatability to the other side—at the risk of making it unpalatable to everyone?” [Br, 531]. Thus Walter Benjamin, a “prisoner of [Berlin] West” [GS, 4, 1, 287]—a middle-class neighborhood—on his socio-literary situation in April, 1931. The immediate occasion for this gesture of self-vindication had been the sharp response of his friend Scholem to his essay on Karl Kraus, which Benjamin had described as addressing the relation between the “fundamentally metaphysical orientation” of his research and his “application of the materialist approach” [Br,

Scholm answered that the essay merely consolidated an “illegitimate relationship,” which he would merely need to join the Communist Party to discover to be an untenable and costly piece of self-deception. The “tension” generated by “playing with the ambiguities and interferences” of the materialist method, Scholm went on, could not but “neutralize” the “moral basis” of his insights [Br, 526-27, 533]. Benjamin for his part traced the “ambiguity” of his work to the absence of a “German Bolshevik revolution.” “To respond in the right way—that is, with something ‘right’—to false circumstances,” he pleaded, exceeded his powers. Right could in this situation only mean “necessarily, symptomatically, productively false.” He did admit that the impossibility of “unambiguously distinguishing oneself from the bourgeoisie” left him vulnerable to charges of ambiguity. “Very well, I have reached a limit. Like one who keeps afloat on a shipwreck by climbing to the top of a mast that is already crumbling. But from there he has a chance to send out a rescue signal” [Br, 530-32]. The situation was indeed desperate. In July, Benjamin could still anticipate the imminent outbreak of civil war. But in October he recognized that with the massive rise in unemployment the National Socialists had replaced the Communists as the spokesmen of the masses. “The German economy has as much stability as the high seas, and emergency decrees overlap like breakers” [536-37]. Long-range thinking was a thing of the past [539-40]. The same month he mentioned to Scholem a newly written piece entitled The Destructive Character [542]. Its model was a banker friend, Gustav Glück.

Seven years later the issue of materialism versus metaphysics revived around Benjamin’s work on Baudelaire. Like the “theologian” Scholem, Adorno, himself a “materialist,” feared that Benjamin was doing “violence” to his innermost metaphysical powers. These would, freed from Marxist “self-censorship,” ultimately serve the materialist cause all the better [787]. Adorno was here practically citing the earlier Benjamin’s against the later. This did not, in Benjamin’s eyes, prevent the argument from being untrue to present priorities. There were truths and truths. Appeals to his “most precious asset” (Scholem) or his “very own substance” (Adorno) bore little relation to his own efforts to expropriate his “little writing-factory” from within. This side of Russia no revolutionary “melting-down process” of social and literary forms [UB, 90] had materialized. His own thinking was, however, in the “process of being totally Overhauled” [Br, 659], and this entailed the “violence” [793] about which Adorno was apprehensive. To evade a conflict that was incapable of non-violent resolution—this, as Benjamin saw it, was to “neutralize” the strengths his well-wishers wanted to see preserved intact.

Brecht’s Versuche, the first literary writings to which he could give his critical backing “without (public) reservations,” gave the most probing analysis, Benjamin maintained, of existing “socio-political tensions” [534]. It was in their private exchanges that the mutual differences emerged. If Scholem and Adorno feared for his metaphysical powers, Brecht felt impelled to protect the interests of socialist praxis. “Depth doesn’t get you ahead,” he objected after reading Benjamin’s essay on Kafka. Plumbing the depths, Benjamin replied, was his way of “heading for the antipodes” [UB, 110]. From the destructive tension between materialism and metaphysics—neither a clear-cut choice (Brecht vs. Scholem) nor their dialectical harmony (Adorno)—the latter was not, in short, the only one that stood to gain.

His various associates were, despite their differences, all agreed that such a tension of contraries was likely to result in their mutual neutralization. Benjamin for his part looked to their liberating intensification to spark energies which might explode the bastions of the common enemy. The danger he saw lay not in overextending oneself but in an absence of generative tension between potential allies. What distinguished his position from theirs was the effort to have the extremes interact, no less radically, with one another and thereby form a popular front (l’enormité devenant norme, as the author of earlier Illuminations had put it); to make himself a medium for antagonisms between which there could be neither choice nor mediation; and to do so without sitting on the fence. Already in 1927 he considered the political state of “free-floating suspension” [GS, 4, 1, 486], with which
Scholem was to reproach him, to be untenable both in fact and on principle. The historical “disintegration of a ‘free’ intelligentsia” [GS, 3, 174] constituted a definitive refutation of Karl Mannheim’s still-born conception of a “free-floating intelligentsia.” Choices had to be made on the vanishing ground between class lines. At the same time a stand had to be taken in the cross-fire between secretly interrelated positions in order that something might be salvaged of their ultimate unity. If this messianic goal was as neutral “as white light to the colors of the spectrum” [I, 95], its standard was red. Energies which could neutralize the powers that be were to be assembled in neutral, strategically organized territory, a (wandering Jew’s) no-man’s-land that kept lines open and space free for Elijah and Utopia.

All these motifs intersect in The Destructive Character—unpalatable, objective ambiguity, the improvisation of a weak rescue signal, the right violence as the rallying-ground for the socio-literary vanguard of a dispersed opposition, the dismantling of hardening sectarian antagonisms, the breaking of new paths—not mediations—through seemingly impenetrable dilemmas, resolution at the crossroads, all in the impersonal person of an uncanny, providential nobody equipped to handle a runaway emergency and hold an untenable position between the lines. “Where thinking suddenly stops dead in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it imparts to that constellation a shock by which it crystallizes into a monad” [I, 262-63]. As it moves between theology and historical materialism and establishes (“illegitimate,” “free-floating”?) relations between Moscow, Berlin West and Jerusalem, Benjamin’s thinking suddenly stands amidst a force-field—it was increasingly turning into a mine-field—of tensions and crystallizes around a figure [Denkbild] which leaves none of its points of reference intact.

2. The destruction of character, the purification of destruction, allegory

The “destructive character” is no “character” in the psychological sense. Character is rather one of his targets. What emerges from its effacement is the faceless model of a positively conceived characterlessness. Why, then, still call him a character? For Benjamin, like Wilhelm Reich, denounced the very idea of character as an “armored concept” [Br, 329]. A short treatise written ten years earlier suggests an answer. Schicksal und Charakter (“Fate and Character”) sets about clearing away “superficial” notions of character to “make room” [GS, 2, 1, 176-77] for another, seemingly retrograde one based not on the psychological novel or “modern psihognym” but the comedies of Molière and the old “doctrine of the temperament” [179]. The notion of character is progressively disentangled from its association with fate, divorced from “moral evaluation,” placed beyond “psychological analysis” [177], and thereby, a decade before the addition of the predicate “destructive,” made invulnerable to gossip. “While fate ravel the enormous complication of a person’s guilt, the tangled skein of debt and liability, character constitutes an inspired solution to such mythical bondage. Complication turns into simplicity, fate into freedom” [178].

What “releasing the old words fate and character from their terminological shackles” [Br, 239] ultimately intends is the liberation of the bourgeois subject from the tutelage of his pseudo-emancipation. The return to pre-bourgeois models opens up the possibility of a post-bourgeois character. A “multiplicity of character traits,” which is generally considered synonymous with the “richness of a creative personality” [UB, 97], figures in this context as a mythical “net” [GS, 2, 1, 176-77]. It is as a highly developed individual that one might not be clear of fateful complication. Conversely, reduction to a single, seemingly immutable character trait does not necessarily connote the unfreedom of a compulsive monomaniac but rather a capac-

2 As a character in a pre-psychological sense, the destructive character is proof against the avenging reversals familiar to us from dialectics and psychoanalysis. His destruction does not take its toll on him. True, he does, in simplifying the world, also simplify himself; but his actions do not return to plague the inventor. On the contrary, they liquidate mythical guilt.
ity for single-minded action capable of cutting through the labyrinth of mythical "ambiguity" [GS, 1, 1, 288]. The ground is here already cleared for the destructive-ness that everywhere clears ways. The destructive character too has no personal character traits. To be possessed of a single property is equivalent to ow(n)ing none.

"Anonymity" [GS, 2, 1, 178] of character liberates the individual person from a labyrinthine "complex of law" [Rechtszusammenhang] and guilt [174, 176]. Subject means subjection. "The enormous complication of a person's debt" is liquidated by the discovery that the world is "enormously [. . .] simplified when tested with a view to its destruction." The "Apollonian image of the destroyer" stands out against the darkening gloom of bourgeois "inwardness" as clearly as once did the comic hero, whom Benjamin characterizes as the "sun of the individual in the colorless (anonymous) sky of man." As a "trigonometric sign" he illuminates the "affinity" of "freedom" and "logic" [178].

What the inverted commas around the "destructive character" mark off is less a literal quotation—the phrase is not a standard one—than a summary translation of prattle into language calculated to reduce it to silence. The pseudo-quotations is a doubly false one inasmuch as no-one of that description appears in older charac-terologies either. This merely makes the quotation all the more destructive. An older notion of character is cited in order to clear away modern misconceptions. The bourgeois character had flourished between the eras of the old subject and the new predicate. Their conjunction marks its withering away. The destructive character expropriates "possessive individualism" (C. B. MacPherson). Where once there was a variety of simple characters, the figure of the terrible simplificateur is now singled out as having the consistency with which to confront the present. Benjamin's Origin of German Tragic Drama resurrects the actuality of a quite different character—the brooding melancholic, who embodies a buried allegorical interpretation of the world. The destructive character is his "cheerful" counterpart. Instead of interpret-ing the world, he changes it. The one inhabits an inner laby-rinth; all the other's "paths" lead to "success" [GS, 4, 1, 349ff]. But the hostility he evokes in ideologists of creative individuality is of a piece with the bias against allegory on behalf of symbol.

Fate and Character destroys seemingly harmless ideas about character; Benja-min's later theses in The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction "brush
aside a number of outmoded concepts, such as creativity, genius, eternal values and mystery” (III, 218); and his concluding unscientific postscript Theses on the Philosophy of History explodes the category of progress. The Destructive Character focusses on the loaded concept of destruction itself, summarily effecting its destruction.

That destruction is bad and creation good is a very old story. Where all was once darkness and void, the good Lord created light and the world: “and, behold, it was very good.” A slot was thereby created for the evil (scape)goat. Goethe’s Mephisto, to be sure, is a mere shadow of his former self—one indication, this, of his latter-day emasculation, the destruction of the destroyer. With Chaos and “Mother Night” eclipsed by God the Father, Mephisto is relegated to impotent protest against the “creative power” which “inwardly unites the world” [die Welt im Innersten zusam- menhält]. The destructive “bond” that, according to a slightly emended self-quotatation from The Destructive Character, “unites in harmony [einträchtig zusamenhält] all that exists” [UB, 57], thus constitutes an inversion of the Goethean theodicy, where it is not the Destroyer but the Creator to whom the world offers “a spectacle of the deepest harmony.” Not that destruction is now blasphemously rechristened, à la Sade, to function as a positive, natural principle mobilized against culture and religion. And far from helplessly trying to introduce diabolical discord into cosmic harmony, the destructive character has cheerfully made his peace with the world. Not fighting a losing battle against nature’s god-given proliferation, he can, unlike Mephisto, be cheered by the knowledge that “everything deserves to perish” [Alles ist wert, dass es zugrunde geht]. It is destruction itself and not its cunning Goethean or Hegelian recuperation—that is here divinely authorized. The unifying Goethean life-force (Ludwig Klages called it “cosmogonic eros”) is in this perspective indistinguishable from the universality of mythical guilt [Schuldzusam- menhang des Lebendigen, in GS, 2, 1, 175]. The symbolic cosmos, which relegates destruction to both impotence and damnation, is itself consigned to allegorical “dis- memberment” [O, 186]. “The false appearance [falsche Schein] of totality evaporates. For the eidos is extinguished, analogy ceases to exist, the cosmos it contained shrivels up” [O, 176]. Goethe’s Verweile doch! du bist so schön! now applies to the moment when beautiful appearances [der schöne Schein] are destroyed. Only then does “Nature-History” [Natur-Geschichte], which appears to the melancholy al- legorist as a “death’s head,” “Passion” and “state of sin” [O, 166] and to the angel of history as a mounting “pile of debris” [III, 260], assume a redeeming aspect. “Where others shine forth as resplendently as on the first day”—herlich wie am ersten Tag echoes the Prologue in Heaven in Goethe’s Faust—“the image of beauty” which baroque allegory “holds fast” is that of “the last” [O, 235].

The same holds for the destructive character’s “Apollonian” appearance. Whereas Nietzsche’s Birth of Tragedy had equated the Apollonian principle with schöner Schein and “the deification of the individual,” Benjamin’s essay on Goethe’s Elective Affinities defines the antidote to mythical nature in supra-individual terms as “the expressionless.” “For it smashes the surviving heritage of chaos beneath all beautiful appearances: the false, aberrant totality. What completes the work is its disintegration into a fragment of the true world, the torso of a symbol” [GS, 1, 1, 181]. “The Apollonian image of the destroyer” would thus constitute a paradoxx. Fair is foul, and foul is fair. “Classical harmony of form” [O, 166] has been implicitly transferred from the beautiful symbolic façade behind which the old chaos persists to the allegorical side of the opposition. As a result the destructive character’s Apol- lonian features are as “expressionless” as his cheerfulness is “Chinese.” “Whereas in the symbol destruction [Untergang] is tranfigured and the radiant face of nature fleetingly revealed in the light of redemption, in allegory the observer is confronted with the facies hippocratica of history as a petrified, primordial landscape” [ibid.]. In the figure of the destructive character the paralysed melancholic has been transformed into a doer whose acts restore the light of judgment to an allegorically perceived world.

What binds the world together is an ancestral curse from which it is waiting to be
released [III, 254]. This drastically revised version of “the great chain of being”—a topos of the same great tradition which the allegorist’s gaze unmasks as the ideology of the “victor” [III, 258]—results from a historical crisis which had shaken classical ontology to its foundations. Being no longer has an axiomatic raison d’être. Hegel’s “reason in history” has ceased to carry conviction. The world now has to show cause why it should not be destroyed. The destroyer’s relation to the existing order is thereby inverted. He now calls it to account as if he represented the Last Judgment. No positive standard (“that life is worth living”) is invoked, only a negative one (“destruction of what deserves destroying” [GS, 4, 2, 1001])—but no merely negative one. Destruction neither takes the place of the destroyed as some new, positive value, nor does it remain subordinate to the status quo as its loyal opposition. The eternal objection that the destructive have no constructive ideas what to “put in its place” is voided from the outset. The destructive character does, however, clear space as the lieu-tenant [Mandatar, in GS, 4, 2, 999] of an absent power. Destruction is thus invested with a positive force unmatched even by the powers that be, let alone their powerless “critic”—unless, that is, the latter is no longer conceived as a “carper” [GS, 2, 1, 350] or “Thersites” [GS, 4, 2, 999] on the sidelines of world events, but rather, as in Benjamin’s version of the critical annihilation practised by Karl Kraus, as a divine emissary “on the threshold of the Last Judgment” [GS, 2, 1, 348]. For the destructive character’s sociability is poles apart from the “unhappy consciousness” that is the lonely burden of the alienated social or cultural critic. Rather he embodies the solution to the unresolvable contradictions which threaten to reduce all resistance to spleen. His faits accomplis invalidate the unanswerable dialectical argument that unqualified destructiveness condemns one to “abstract” or “indeterminate” negation. Like Mephisto’s, it would, on a Hegelian diagnosis, be at once dangerous and harmless, wreaking nothing but havoc yet also untenable and easily contained. The destructive character is, rather, describable only in negative, tangential relation to existing models of destruction. He is, however, no intangible deus absconditus but rather the efficient executor of an eviction order.

3. The aesthetics of violence

The Destructive Character identifies the prevailing prejudice against destructiveness as “the most petty-bourgeois of all phenomena.” With the consolidation of bourgeois modes and relations of production all forms of destruction which do not in turn contribute to the turnover of capital are, with certain largely diversionary exceptions, generally tabooed, especially by small property-owners. What alarms them most is that those who need “free space” do not shrink at “suspending the rule of law” [GS, 2, 1, 202]. These “are called destructive”. During the last hundred years, the (anti) bourgeois avant-garde has regularly adopted as watchwords terms of abuse originally directed against it. The reevaluation of the destructive is a case in point. So

1 “This is the freedom of the void […] the fanaticism of destruction […] the elimination of individuals who are objects of suspicion to any social order, and the annihilation of any organization which tries to rise anew from the ruins. Only in destroying something does this negative will possess the feeling of itself as existent” [G. W. F. Hegel, Philosophy of Right, tr. T. M. Knox (London: Oxford Univ. Press: 1942), p. 18]. It is no accident that a philosophy of the state should choose the reign of terror as a paradigmatic example of “abstract negation.” Undialectical destruction can then be condemned as a voluntarist threat to the social order. The destructive character, on the other hand, is likened to a “destructive state institution.” If he momentarily savors a certain “freedom of the void,” then not for purposes of self-confirmation. Hegel too has a psychological theory of the destructive character. The destruction that Benjamin often equates with dialectics in fact distinguishes his thought from dialectical models. Jacques Derrida has shown how in Hegel’s master-slave dialectic a contest between the masters is evaded in the interests of the slavish reproduction of the philosophical economy. Cf. “De l’économie restreinte à l’économie générale” in L’Ecriture et la Différence (Paris: Seuil, 1967, pp. 369-407). The destruction that threatens to interrupt dialectical movement is suppressed by the destruction that is its motor. Likewise, Benjamin’s “dialectics at a standstill” [CB, 171] is, “for a moment at least,” the standstill of the dialectic that makes the world go round. Which poses the question of the relationship between Benjaminian destruction and Derridean deconstruction …
much so that the very gesture of modern literature has been plausibly seen in terms of a festive metaphorical destruction of the capitalist order.\footnote{In antithetical ways by Sartre in Qu’est-ce que la littérature (Paris: Gallimard, 1969) and George Bataille in “La Notion de dépense” (in La Part maudite (Paris: Minuit, 1967)) and La littérature et le mal (Paris: Gallimard, 1957).} The work-ethic was to be recklessly abandoned, its accumulated fruits conspicuously consumed. In rehabilitating destruction, Benjamin does not, for his part, place a contrary taboo on the utilitarian. His strategy is no more identifiable with quasi-aristocratic forms of revolt than with bourgeois capitalism. Once again the oppositions have been realigned. For here it is the destroyer who husbands his resources. He does not squander his energies on uneconomical acts of protest but “remains in control of his powers” [III, 264]. “He reduces the existing to rubble, not for the sake of the rubble but of the path that extends through it.” This sentence itself breaks new ground through existing oppositions. Whereas Romantic nihilism, wanton destruction for its own sake, represents a mere mirror image of production for its own sake, and to that extent a harmless by-product of the status quo, the effective nihilist “‘enters,’ “ in (un)Hegelian fashion, “‘into his opponent’s strength in order to destroy him from within’” [GS, 2, 2, 481].

And yet the destructive character cheerfully lays himself open to the charge of aestheticism, without, however, flirting with it—for that would indeed constitute aestheticism. Though explicitly distinguished from nihilistic variants of “art for art’s sake”, his portrait evokes undeniably literary associations. A first draft presents him (not as rising up from Dionysian depths but) as a “contrasting image of positively Apollonian beauty” [GS, 4, 2, 999]. No phrase is more conducive to “chatter” (Gerede, itself, since Sein und Zeit, another loaded term) than “young and cheerful.” While still far removed from “blond and blue-eyed,” the phrase might, taken in isolation, seem indicative of Jewish self-denial or a dangerous proximity to superficially similar futurist motifs. The effort to distance himself unambiguously from the bourgeois “neighborhood” of Berlin West would in that case have landed Benjamin in the enemy camp. He himself construed his strategy differently. He assumed that only advance positions had any prospect of success in the struggle against Fascism. Abandoning disputed territory for fear of operating in the vicinity of the enemy meant, on this view, withdrawing to defenses that were bound to be overruled. Even barbarism was to be wrested away from the other side. As late as 1933 Benjamin was still siding with an avant-garde prepared, “if need be,” to survive culture with a Nietzschean “laugh” that might “at times sound barbaric” [GS, 2, 1, 219]. Such a “new, positive concept of barbarity” has, needless to say, nothing in common with “the wrong kind” [215, 219]. Benjamin’s concept of destruction, while easily misunderstood, is no less unequivocal. That there were wrong ways of liquidating tradition and purging the world was not something of which in 1931 one needed to be reminded. But to abandon “joyful wisdom” and the guilt-free beast of prey to the enemy—this was the short-circuit to be avoided. “Young and cheerful” is a Nietzsche quotation that has been liquidated and “hewn out” of (fascist) context [365], a “tiger’s leap into the past” [III, 263] rather than the original predator. The Destructive Character rests on the political assessment that liberal humanism is no match for a daemonic perversion of the Übermensch. Only the new Unmensch [GS, 2, 1, 354, 367] who has no dealings with a “noble, time-honored [...] image of man [Mensch]” but only, like Brecht, with “people” [Leute, 216-17] is equal to the situation.

Such realignments in no way efface the battle-lines. These are, on the contrary, sharply drawn where others blur them. The Destructive Character alerts the reader to aestheticist misunderstanding; and the epilogue to The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction [1936] unequivocally denounces both the fascist ideology of futurism (“culmination of art for art’s sake”) and the actual fascist “aestheticization of politics” [III, 243]. Already one year before The Destructive Character Benja-
min had subjected the most recent version of political aestheticism to sustained critical annihilation. His review of Krieg und Krieger, a volume of essays edited by Ernst Jünger and devoted to the glory of modern warfare, was simply entitled Theories of German Fascism [GS, 3, 238 ff.].

4. Between liberalism, Marxism and anarchism

Benjamin saw in pacifism no alternative to the cult of war but only its mirror image. His own Critique of Violence (1921) was a theory of the “divine” counter-violence capable of “arresting” the continuity of “mythical” violence [GS, 2, 1, 199]. He rediscovered it in Georges Sorel’s conception of a proletarian general strike which would aim not at political and economic blackmail but at the “suspension of law” and the “demolition of the state” [202, 194]. As a “pure means” such action would, regardless of its possibly catastrophic consequences, be “non-violent”; the state, however, brands such action as violence pure and simple [ibid.]. Awareness that the state and its laws were founded on revolutionary violence [rechtsetzende Gewalt] was, Benjamin argued, eroded by the latter’s transformation into a law-and-order conservatism [rechtserhaltende Gewalt] which legitimized the suppression of subsequent revolutionary subversion merely by identifying it as violence. Modern parliaments thus exhibited a weakened “sense of the constitutive violence vested in them” [190, 202]. Unscientific though Benjamin’s political analysis may have seemed, it was uncannily accurate. In the Weimar Republic liberal democracy and ideology were to prove no match for fascist violence. “While he spoke,” Benjamin noted in 1938 after a political discussion with Brecht in Denmark, “I felt the impact of powers equal to those of fascism,” powers that “sprang from depths of history no less deep than fascist power” [UB, 120]. The destructive character can take on the dark forces of latter-day, “enlightened” myth only because his own force goes equally deep. It is a matching combination, at once modern surface and archaic depth, “signal” and “oracle.” Oracles do not, of course, abide by parliamentary procedures. To invoke such “destructive state institutions” at the critical juncture when parliamentary democracy was trying to preserve itself from destruction was to invite political misunderstanding. Benjamin had invoked Sorel’s rehabilitation of violence without feel-
ing impelled to elaborate on its political ambiguity. Disregarding the rules of liberal scholarship, he had “cited” it out of context. From a liberal standpoint this was tantamount to a leap into the wrong camp, a blurring of crucial distinctions.

But a middle-of-the-road verdict on the extremism of The Destructive Character would itself have blurred decisive political dividing-lines. A comparison with Thomas Mann’s Doktor Faustus indicates as much. So broadly are the interrelations between nihilism, aestheticism, and political barbarism there construed that no positive notion of destruction can be visualized that is not a sinister portent of fascist violence. From the old-world humanist standpoint of Mann’s narrator Serenus Zeitblom no hard-and-fast distinction could ultimately be made between Benjamin’s destructive character and Jünger’s front-line hero. His portrayal of the so-called “Kridwiss circle,” a group of proto-fascist conservatives who champion Sorel in the name of a “deliberate rebarbarization” [Doktor Faustus (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1963), pp. 393, 397], is a case in point. “Their world was at once old and new, revolutionary and regressive,” no more or less reactionary than “the path that leads back round a sphere” [393, 395]. In the image of the sphere “progress and regression,” left and right, pre- and post-bourgeois impulses, both the reconciliation of myth and enlightenment and its diabolical parody, are interlinked as part of the same vicious circle. This no doubt accurate diagnosis of the dangerous games that certain intellectual cliques played simultaneously supplies the ideological scheme for an all-purpose defense-mechanism. How The Destructive Character would have been read on this basis can be deduced from Zeitblom’s shocked reaction to the Kridwiss circle’s claim that the First World War had definitively demolished bourgeois traditions. What most alarms him is that this should be announced in accents of joyful wisdom. That a cultural avant-garde should denounce the culture it feeds on—“and cheerfully at that” [392]—Zeitblom can only interpret as an act of “self-denial” [394]. Anxious humanists might likewise be expected to confuse the destructive character with the common enemy. It is, however, a different “relation of regression and destruction” [GS, 1, 3, 1244] that he embodies; and in shedding bourgeois selfishness, he rids himself in the process of its accompanying forms of self-denial.

If the destructive character lays himself open to the liberal confusion of left and right, orthodox Marxists could be counted on to charge him with anarchism. To protect him against them would indeed be “senseless.” A strain of “revolutionary nihilism” [GS, 2, 1, 299] is inseparable from Benjamin’s writings. The old struggle between Marxism and anarchism was far from dead. But Benjamin felt no compelling need to decide between them. On the contrary, he regularly accentuated his anarchist sympathies whenever he made a move in the communist direction, as if to test both in the border area between them. His essay on surrealism wants anarchist “revolt” inserted into the “methodical and disciplined preparation of the revolution” [GS, 2, 1, 307]; conversely, and synonymously, the political methods of the communists are to focus on the anarchist goal of ending all political goals [Br, 426]. Marx, Bakunin [GS, 2, 1, 306] and Blanqui [III, 262] variously figure in Benjamin’s writings as comrades in arms. Such imaginary alliances, it could be objected, obscure actual historical conflicts. To this there is a concrete historical answer. Warring factions which no existing state socialism could reconcile were to be made to interact in the non-man’s-land of an openly committed mind. Relations that had been prematurely broken off needed restoring. The destructive character posts himself at their intersection. He conjoins the contradictory forces of a divided yet common opposition. After all, not only anarchism but Marx too refuses to “envision” the future, and thereby contaminate it with petty-bourgeois dreams; and, conversely, organization is Blanqui’s watchword. More radical even than radicals, and better-adjusted, too, the destructive character is an anarchist in the guise of a banker.

Praxis is, according to one of Benjamin’s letters, only possible “in religious or political terms”: “I do not grant any essential distinction between the two. Nor for that matter any mediation” [Br, 425]. The Destructive Character in turn nullifies the standard alternative between political Romanticism and pragmatic realism. Oppositions which Benjamin disqualified have, however, reappeared in the secondary liter-
nature, most elaborately in the case of Rolf Tiedemann’s appeal to a “soberly” con-
ceived “historical materialism” against the nihilistic, apocalyptic aspects of a “politi-
cal messianism” which, he claims, led Benjamin to aestheticize politics in ways he
was elsewhere the first to condemn.5 And whereas readings of Benjamin that came
out of the German student movement tended to discount theology in favor of praxis,
more recent philological work has rediscovered the theological dimension of Ben-
jamin’s thought only (in order?) to conclude that no political praxis can come of it.
Where Scholem had warned against the false combination of politics and religion,
the premise shared by Benjamin’s younger readers is that the two cannot mix at all.
He himself assumed the opposite: “I speak here of an identity which emerges only
from the paradoxical reversal [Umschlagen] (in whatever direction) of one into the
other, the indispensable precondition being that action is contemplated uncondi-
tionally and radically enough. [. . .]. Always radically, never consistently [kon-
sequent] [. . .].” [Br, 425].

5. “Efface [Verwischen] the traces” (Brecht)

There is much evidence to suggest that Brecht was one of Benjamin’s models for
The Destructive Character, which was written during a period of intense discussion
between them.6 “Differences arose over the criteria by which the critic measures
what the truth is. Whereas Brecht [. . .] defines truth in terms of ‘what is socially
practicable,’ progress towards it being achieved by the correction of ‘thought by
reality,’ Benjamin [. . .] conceives it as the ‘radical demolition of the world of im-
ages.’ There are, he argues, two ways of achieving this goal: theology and materialist
dialectics” [Cf. Bernd Witte, Walter Benjamin—Der Intellektuelle als Kritiker
(Stuttgart: Metzler, 1976), p. 171]. In The Destructive Character Benjamin’s strategy of
alternately testing opposing positions against their most searching adversaries in-
volves a further criss-crossing of opposites. In recording the corrective impact of the
“pragmatist” on the “theologian,” it also smuggles theology into the pragmatism.
For truth is in this instance both “what is socially practicable” (“ways”) and the
“radical demolition of the world of images” (“envisions nothing,” “rubble”). The
pragmatism borders on the miraculous, and the theology is identifiable only by the
depth of its soberness and the radicalism of its profanation. The interplay between
the poles is also interior to each. What seemed a one-way contact between impervi-
sious agent and passive observer turns out, at least retroactively, to exert a reciprocal
impact. To that extent violence is also done to the destructive character’s models.
They are translated into a language in which polar opposites engage in a “paradoxical
reversal of one into the other”—a movement which Benjamin captures in such
oxymorons as “profane illumination” and “holy-sober” (Hölderlin’s heilignuchtern).
The Destructive Character invests a Brechtian figure with something of that “aura”
which, on a theory Benjamin was to elaborate four years later, is itself the chief target
of revolutionary, Brechtian destruction. This is in turn subjected to (un)Brechtian
reconstruction [Umfunktionierung, UB, 93]. Aura survives its demolition—without
necessarily outliving itself and turning into an ideological smokescreen—as the aura
of the auralless. Brecht was to return the compliment by translating Benjamin’s
paradoxes into the language of “crude thinking” [plumpes Denken; UB, 81]. “All so

5 Cf. his Afterword to Charles Baudelaire. Ein Lyriker im Zeitalter des Hochkapitalismus
[Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1969], pp. 185ff. and his essay “Historischer Materialismus oder
politischer Messianismus?” in Materialien zu Benjamins These: ‘Über den Begriff der Ges-

6 Benjamin refers explicitly to Brecht’s “destructive character, which puts everything back in
question almost before it has been achieved” [UB, 119]. Cf. also his commentary on the eighth
stanza of O! Poor B.B.: “Will survive of these cities what went through them: the wind? / The
banqueter is glad to empty the mansion. / We realize that we are purely provisional / And after us
will come—nothing worth mention” [56]. Reduced to his initials, B.B. is himself an interim
stage: “The best defender of a cause is one who has made a start by letting go of himself” [58].

diacritics/June 1978 57

“And if this sobriety seems holy, it is, curiously, perhaps only in Goethe's eyes that it is not” [GS, 1, 1, 196-97]. Two totally different versions of sobriety underly the exchanges between Benjamin and Brecht. The latter feels drawn to logical positivism, and considers Chopin and Dostoevski unwholesome [UB, 114]. Benjamin's notion of sobriety goes back to German Romantic speculation, which conceived prose not as the sober antithesis of poetry but as its “creative ground” [GS, 1, 1, 102], the colorless, “sober light” [119] which comprises the whole spectrum within it. He rediscovers it in the “dialectical optic” of the surrealists, who recognize “the everyday as impenetrable and the impenetrable as everyday” [GS, 2, 1, 307]. In the figure of the destructive character one version of sobriety is irradiated by the messianic light of the other. While he “envisions nothing” [kein Bild], his “dialectical destruction”—the “radical demolition of the world of images” [Bildwelt]—nevertheless opens up a surrealistic “space of images” [Bildraum; p. 309], a messianic world of “liberated prose” [GS, 1, 3, 1235]. The impenetrably everyday language of The Destructive Character points towards that promised land. At once “oracle” and “signal,” down-to-earth and Luft von anderen Planeten, it is generated by a tension between conflicting conceptions of language. The Brechtian component liquidates “the barbarity of formulaic language” [Br, 329]. If faint traces of a dimension not wholly “cleansed of all ceremony” [GS, 1, 3, 1235] can still be detected in the repetitive, almost ritual invocation of “the destructive character,” this is perhaps because, trapped in a “necessarily false” situation, it subliminally enacts a litany which, like the theological ghost in the machine called historical materialism, “has to keep out of sight” [III, 253].

The Messiah will, according to a “great rabbi,” “change the world not by violence but by the merest readjustments” [GS, 2, 2, 432]. It is by similarly fractional realignments that Benjamin turns the violent impact of Brecht's “crude thinking” to messianic advantage. The Brechtian “alienation-effect” is itself slightly alienated by being conflated with Benjamin's “dialectical optic” on history: “[Epic theater] lets existence spurt up high from the bed of time and, for an instant [Nu], hover iridescent in empty space, the better to bed it afresh” [UB, 13]. Such penetration of the everyday is synonymous with “profane illumination.” Seemingly incomensurable energies, the mystical nunc stans and the anarcho-syndicalist general strike, are to act in concert to bring history to a revolutionary standstill. The moment of alienating suspension—a politicized version of a classic, Schillerian definition of the role of art—is its aesthetic counterpart, an iridescence which contains the spectrum of possible futures. It is fleetingly lingered over. “For a moment at least,” life appears to have escaped the laws of inertia. The axioms according to which nature abhors a vacuum, makes no leaps, etc., would, applied to society, constitute the mythical constants of its natural history. Benjamin conceives revolution as the leap that abruptly suspends it. To the stoppage of time, the “Messianic cessation of happening” [III, 263], corresponds the destructive expropriation of space; to the emptying of space, the instant that hovers in empty space. “For deep down life does not,” concludes the first version of The Destructive Character, “go on [...] but from one extreme to the other” [GS, 4, 2, 1001]. At the surface no traces remain of these inner tensions. They are buried from view, like “the traces of [the theater's] sacral origins” since the “filling-in of the orchestra pit” [UB, 1]. But it is only from the surface that they have disappeared. The pragmatic motto “Efface the traces” will later be adapted to theological ends—another unbrechtian version, this, of Brechtian Umfunktionierung. The parable of a dwarf hidden inside a chess automaton whose hand it invisibly guides hints that theology too has to preserve its anonymity to be able to enter into secret partnership with its natural allies. Whether historical materialism knows that it should, or already does, incorporate theology, or whether the dwarf has to infiltrate it as a secret agent, the parable does not say. What does emerge is that the “eristic dialectic, which [...] enters the opponent's strength” is complemented by the opposite strategy of bolstering one's allies from within. But it
evidently belongs to the hide-and-seek—the cunning of messianic reason—that the secret also be partly disclosed.

The destructive character is easily mistaken for a crypto-fascist of the left or right. But his motto resembles nothing so much as the socio-economic imperative of bourgeois society itself. He taps its strength in order to turn it against itself. For it was bourgeois capitalism that was first motivated by the imperious “need for free space,” the better, of course, to “occupy” it; that has effaced traces on a universal scale in order to create an imperialist “world in its own image” (Marx); and that could finally proceed to remove some of the evidence of its own destruction. It represses the memory of its violent past so effectively as to be able to conceive it in evolutionary terms. Correlatively, the “scientific character” of positivist historiography is achieved by the “total eradication of everything that recalls its original vocation as remembrance” [GS, 1, 3, 1231]. In the process no traces were more systematically erased than those of the destructive character himself. Revolutionary counter-violence was, in one exemplary case, silenced twice over—solitary confinement, the simple punitive answer to the need for free space, being further prolonged by subsequent oblivion: “Within three decades [social democracy] managed virtually to erase the name of Blanqui, the rallying cry which had reverberated through the preceding century” [III, 260]. Such methodical destruction reduces the world to rubble without redeeming it. It would, unchecked, pave the way for a brave new world which, having removed the last vestiges of a past it considered obscene, would be left marking time. So-called “progress” is, Benjamin argues, predicated on the inert eternity of “homogeneous, empty time” [III, 262], the clock-time of Baudelairean spleen, which voids its history and effaces its destruction. Only a contrary evacuation, which produces “the instant that hovers in empty space,” can arrest its perpetual motion. Making empty space available for the new would thus constitute a mimetic redemption, an expropriation, of capitalist activity. Each neutralizes the other’s devastation. Capitalism is the most enlightened of mythical, the most mythical of enlightened forces. It both capitalizes on the mythical “heritage of all who ever emerged victorious” [III, 256] and brands counter-violence as atavistic. The destructive character’s strength is that he does not belong among the “primitive rebels” (E. J. Hobsbawm). He meets the double threat of a mythical enlightenment by welding disparate forms of resistance into a force which confronts the status quo with an apotropaic version of its own undeviating positivism.

The Brechtian motto puts a favorable construction on an unfavorable state of affairs. Benjamin’s commentaries on the relevant poems accentuate its ambiguity. Thus the vagrants in the Handbook for City-Dwellers have no individual traces to efface; those they do manage to leave behind, such as stains in a whore’s bedclothes, are “best unmentioned,” and the “precept […] ‘Efface the traces’” is “supplemented by the adjunct: ‘rather than have someone else efface them’” [UB, 64]. There is, likewise, hardly any aspect of the destructive character that is not without its negative counterpart in some other text of Benjamin’s. Brecht may be “an expert in fresh starts” [UB, 37], but “starting all over again,” “the regulative idea of both gambling and wage-labor” is elsewhere equated with the unsalvageable emptiness of someone who has been “reduced to reflex responses” and “cheated of his experience, a modern” [CB, 137]. Such people “live their lives as automatons and resemble Bergson’s imaginary characters who have completely liquidated their memories” [135].

There can be no guarantee that the individual, once rid of his inwardness, will,

---

7 Effacing the traces—forgetting—is also as imperative a psycho-biological need as remembering. Cf. Freud’s theory of consciousness—which grew out of research on war neuroses—as a transparent shield, the self-effacing outer layer of a “mystic writing-pad” [Standard Edition (London: Hogarth Press, 1974), Vols. 18, p. 24ff. and 19, p. 267ff.]. This is practically the only psychoanalytic account relevant to someone whose task is to be pure (“historical”) consciousness. Self-adaptation in his case consists in dismantling the psyche. Like consciousness, and unlike the windowless monad, the destructive character—the product of a “glass culture” [GS, 2, 1, 217]—is all wind-shield.
instead of becoming a hollow man, “let go of himself” [UB, 58] “in the right way”; will, rather than succumb to collective inertia or the psychology of crowds, emerge “new-born” from the “matrix” of a critical mass [III, 238]. What, then, distinguishes right from wrong ways of liquidating the past, and mechanical alertness from true presence of mind? Benjamin banks on the “exchange of a historical for a political perspective” [GS, 2, 1, 300]. At the risk, no doubt, of losing perspective. But this is not necessarily the worst loss one can incur. A poor exchange can nevertheless constitute the right course of action, a liquidation of tradition which thereby restores whatever liquidity it still has: “We have been reduced to poverty. We have surrendered one heirloom after another, often depositing them at the pawnshop for a hundredth of their value, in return for a few pennies in negotiable currency [die kleine Münze des Aktuellen]. Economic crisis looms ahead, and beyond it the shadow of impending war” [GS, 2, 1, 219]. There can, under such conditions, be no biding one’s time; the only right moment is the present. At least from the late twenties on, Benjamin’s writings constitute an “uninterrupted series of tiny improvisations” [CB, 70], strategies intended to quell despair, “preventive measures and antidotes” [Br, 556] calculated to cope with situations in which “everything can go wrong.” Where everything is at stake, thought is driven to new levels of speculation. The Destructive Character is, like The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, a historical gamble. The vindication of destruction in the one corresponds to the rehabilitation of “disreputable” [III, 239] categories in the other. As an attempt to wrest the solution from the very givens of the problem by giving a further twist to an already devious turn of phrase, Benjamin’s version of “Efface the traces” stakes its hope on a historical turn of events which failed to materialize. Only in foreshortened retrospect, however, did it never have a chance. To speak here of voluntarism would be to exchange back a political for a historical perspective. The destructive character, for his part, “never thinks he ‘has a choice’” [GS, 4, 2, 1001].

The effacement of traces and, correlativelly, the loss of aura are objectively ambiguous developments. Benjamin’s response is twofold. The Destructive Character is counterbalanced by The Storyteller, which singles out the trace of the artisan’s hand as the hallmark of a disappearing world of “experience.” It is not, at least not primarily, these authentic traces that invite destruction but rather the secondary substitutes that cover up their actual historical effacement.8 The scene of their monstrous accumulation is the bourgeois interior. Comfortably ensconced within it, celebrating their respective rituals, fusing over the velvet-lined “traces of [their] earthly days” (Goethe) within the hermetic safety of their own four walls, dwell the Etui-Mensch and the “creative individual” [GS, 4, 2, 1000]. Traces have come to belong to the artificial paradise of interior decoration. They are “phantasmagorias of the interior” [CB, 167] based on denial and substitute-gratification. To efface the substitutes one merely need reapply the logic of the substructure to the ideological superstructure. All that the destructive character has to do is to introduce bourgeois matter-of-factness into places from which it has been elaborately screened.

Preserving authentic traces and destroying their false substitutes are complementary activities. But while they may share the same ultimate purpose, the two can in the short run prove irreconcilable. The Destructive Character is predicated on the assumption that there are critical moments when it is only through “destruction” that “humanity […] can prove its mettle” [GS, 2, 1, 367]. “Some hand things down by making them inviolable and conserving them; others pass on situations by making them handy and liquidating them.” The former ignore the situations from and into which seemingly self-sufficient traditions are handed down; a well-preserved façade of apparently inviolate things blocks the political view. Such traditionalists include not merely ideologists who shuttle between the “cultural treasures” and the respective historical “victor” [III, 256] but also those spokesmen for the oppressed who still subscribe to the reigning belief that “the truth won’t run away from us.”

---

6. Cultural Bolshevism between East and West

“A fine phrase of Brecht’s will help us out, a long way out: ‘Efface the traces’” [GS, 2, 1, 217]. For several years after visiting Moscow in 1927 Benjamin saw Soviet Russia as pointing the way out. “The new perspective one gains on Berlin,” he noted, “is the most unquestionable advantage of a stay in Russia” [GS, 4, 1, 316]. The East-West comparison underlies a number of his subsequent writings; The Destructive Character is also written in this margin. If it is in the “wretchedness of the interior” [GS, 2, 1, 299] that the prisoner of Berlin West experiences the clausrophobia of bourgeois society, Russia figures, conversely, as the answer to the need for “fresh air,” the Archimedean point from which the old world might be moved.

In his own thinking Benjamin seeks to initiate an equivalent process to this “world-historical experiment” in social transformation [GS, 4, 1, 330], experimentally identifying it with the blank space in which solutions to the “antinomies” [UB, 89] of bourgeois society could be worked out. Where familiar notions “have almost disappeared from the face of the earth” [GS, 2, 2, 743], the anonymous effacement of traces no longer connotes the social alienation that drives windowless bourgeois monads back into their shells. The abolition of private property has been implemented by “sealing off everything private to an unimaginable extent” [Br, 439], thereby clearing, for more than “a moment,” a tabula rasa, the “empty space [. . .] where the thing stood, the victim lived.”* Every thought, every day and every life lie here as on a laboratory table. [. . .] On the shop-floor, in the houses and buildings, employees, offices and furniture are regrouped, transferred and shifted about” [GS, 4, 1, 325]. The furnishings inside Russian houses—which are “merely used as camping-sites”—may only amount to a collection of “petty-bourgeois odds and ends,” but their weekly rearrangement constitutes a “radical means of ridding the air of ‘snugness’ [Gemütlichkeit] and its accompanying melancholy” [328]. In the West Sundays mark a weekly rendezvous with the spleen that Baudelaire pictures as the hopeless, angry jangle of chafing church-bells [CB, 144]. Moscow, on the other hand, is “practically liberated from the chimes which on Sundays spread such profound sadness over our large cities” [GS, 4, 1, 344]. The insides of overladen byzantine churches have “not merely been cleared out but gutted like game” [346].

Is, then, the destructive character the Bolshevik’s Western counterpart and vice versa? “What distinguishes the Bolshevik [. . .] from his Western comrades is his state of utter preparedness. He manages on so little that he is, year in year out, ready to give it up and start afresh. He would not otherwise be equal to the task” [326]. Inapplicable though it is said to be to the Bolshevik’s Western comrades, this characterization also holds for the destructive character; conversely, the following sentence might have been formulated with the Bolshevik in mind: “What matters to him are not private adventures but the permanent certainty of having a historical job to do” [GS, 4, 2, 1000]. The social arena as the essential dimension of existence, impersonal relations incompatible with a bourgeois or feudal order, authoritarian watchwords, the futility of suicide—these are among the motifs that recur in both contexts. But every common trait pinpoints the vast divergence between them. “Being able to insert one’s ideas into a pre-given field of force; a mandate, however implicit it may be; organized, guaranteed contact with one’s comrades” [GS, 4, 1, 327]—these advantages are not available to the destructive character, who first has to gather “people”—not “comrades”—around him and, significantly, receives his mandate

*This phrase too is calculated to arouse political suspicions. But if the destructive character clears away, he does not purge. There are victims, but no sacrifice. Otherwise destruction would be still caught up in the toils of myth, which is “mastered neither by purity nor by sacrifice” [GS, 2, 1, 387].

diacritics/June 1978 61
from an unnamed authority. His borderline situation is also implicit in a comparison omitted from the final version: “Contrast the builder: the conditions of his existence deteriorate daily; his sphere of action is increasingly narrow; and his equilibrium—
closer, even at the best of times, to the unsteadiness of the creative temperament
than the stability of the destructive character—is progressively imperilled” [GS, 4, 2,
999]. Der Aufbauende—itself an unconvincing neologism—falls unhappily between
the “creator” and the destroyer. He combines the former’s nerves with the latter’s
commitment to praxis—a discrepancy which threatens to reduce his constructions to
harmlessly “creative” castles in Spain. The refined inmate of the bourgeois interior
has from the outset sought shelter from the testing pressures with which builder and
destroyer have to contend. That only the latter can cope with them is symptomatic of
a specific “historical” situation. He has “a historical sense: a basic, invincible mistrust
of the course of events.” The history is a permanent routine emergency has
become a self-evident truth. It requires the individual to pawn things of sentimental
value, above all himself, and “exchange the play of his features for the dial of an
alarm-clock” [GS, 2, 1, 310]. Only the destructive character knows how late it is.
Where the economy has “as much stability as the high seas,” the unsupported pri-
Private initiative of the “builder” lacks any foundations to build on. But where, as in
Russia, the evacuation of the old coincides with the construction of the new, the
alternative between building and destroying no longer obtains. If from within Berlin
West Benjamin distinguishes the destructive character from the bourgeois nihilist,
the two are from a Russian viewpoint practically indistinguishable. “Everything is in
the process of being built or rebuilt,” writes Benjamin from Moscow,” and almost
every moment poses very critical questions” [Br, 439]. These, however, no longer
place the whole society in question by exposing structural contradictions.

Some pass on “situations by making them handy and liquidating them.” “No-
thing short of a German Bolshevik revolution” could decisively alter the destructive
character’s situation. Benjamin variously correlates the Russian experiment with the
impulses of the disparate, necessarily superstructural avant-garde he identifies with
Brecht, Loos, Klee, Le Corbusier and others. The Western counterpart to Bolshevik
reconstruction is not the “builder” but the “constructor” who “starts out from scratch” [GS, 2, 1, 215]. In Russia culture is under standing orders to place itself in
the service of an ongoing process of social renewal; in the West it is the gathering-
place for frustrated social impulses violently at odds with the cultural ghetto within
which they have been confined. The Destructive Character practises a form of cul-
tural bolshevism. Its constructor was aware that the Party would label him “counter-
revolutionary.” He did not contradict Scholem’s contention that the Russians would
have no use for his “dynamite” except in the bourgeois camp [Br, 527].

7. The “liquida-
tion” of theology

Does the destructive character come to prepare the way for the Messiah, or is it
his job to destroy theology too? Convincing evidence exists for either alternative.
Scholem’s reading of “profane illumination” places most weight on the noun; others
accentuate the predicate. Both are surely right only against the other. It was the
difficult, compelling tension—not the well-trodden alternative—between the posi-
tions to which Benjamin responded.

It was, he conceded in a late jotting, beyond his powers to eradicate all traces of
theology. “My thinking relates to theology like blotting-paper to ink. It is totally
soaked in it. But if the blotter had its way, none of the writing would remain” [GS, 1,
3, 1235]. The blotter can only blot theology, it cannot blot it out. It is, however, not
content to dry and thereby consolidate holy writ. Its ambition is to liquify and
thereby liquidate it, to transform its canonic forms back into ink, leaving behind a
tabula rasa. It can, however, blot nothing without thereby absorbing it; and its
capacity for absorption has limits. Only a blotter more magical than Freud’s “mystic
writing-pad,” only an apparatus whose possibilities of self-evacuation matched its
need for free space, could solve the dilemma. The blotter would have to be able to blot itself, to be constructed, in other words, like the destructive character. For to erase the tablets completely would require the capacity to efface both inner and outer traces of one’s destruction. That is the destructive character’s secret: he can continue to empty space because he himself never fills up. Only a blotter, a receptive “witness to his efficacy,” could, it is true, have registered his impact and formulated his impress. But by the same token a blotter can only dream of assimilating a mode of operation no longer based on the usual models of assimilation. Never immersing himself, the destructive character never gets bogged down. His work differs no less decisively from Hegelian immersion [Verseknung], with its “patience of the concept” and its “labor of the negative.” The “indefatigable eater with the iron jaw” [UB, 57] who has “eaten his way through” [gefressen] humanist culture and “had more than his fill” [GS, 2, 1, 219] works reality over far differently than the Weltgeist. His relation to the past marks a clear departure from the Hegelian digestive system, an encyclopaedic, (anal-)retentive, self-interiorizing memory [Erinnerung] which “preserves-and-negates” [aufheben] the entirety of its prehistory. Aufhebung might be said, oversimply, to have split apart into its component meanings. Transposing the bourgeois “phantasmagoria of the interior” to academic scholarship, historicism had reduced memory to the indiscriminate accumulation of bric-a-brac from a historical past which, Nietzsche insisted, it was wholly incapable of digesting and sometimes ought actively to forget. To such toothless eclecticism—historicism at one level, social democracy at another—Benjamin opposes “destructive powers of mind” [GS, 2, 2, 481], which he equates with his version of dialectics [478].

The blotter is not content to function as a secretarial ancilla to theology. For theology, the adversary of myth, is itself in need of redemption. Only where “origins and destruction find one another” [GS, 2, 1, 367] will the reign of myth finally come to an end. Benjaminian demythologization differs markedly from standard versions of rationalization, secularization, etc. Even his liquidation of theology is not without a hidden messianic dimension. This does not, however, make it a “negative theology.” And to view Benjaminian destruction, à la Scholem, in exclusively theological terms would be to reconstruct the traces instead of effacing them; to deny that the destructive “process of transformation” on which Benjamin staked his development ever took serious effect; to be unwilling to concede any destructive powers, however “weak” [Ill, 254], to the blotter. Nor, finally, is Benjamin’s difficult, uneven relation to theology to be conflated with the steady filtered flow of metaphysical motifs into Adorno’s “negative dialectics.”

Were the blotter to succeed in erasing holy writ, it would have cleared the empty space that is the incognito of the new. Translation into the language of the profane would leave none of the original intact. But theology would not thereby have been simply superseded. Its liquidation would be its fulfillment, a void “filled with the presence of the now [Jetztzeit]” [Ill, 261]. The destructive character “envisions nothing.” But whenever Benjamin momentarily departs from the Jewish taboo on “investigating the future” [Ill, 264], the moveable feast that ensues is openly theological in character. With the unwriting of Scripture re-emerges the original messianic language that preceded the written word, a language of “ubiquitous and integral actuality” released from all prescription, “integral prose that has burst the fetters of the written.” The multiplicity of fallen languages is translated into a single idiom that is no longer “written but [. . .] festively enacted” [GS, 1, 2, 1238]. It coincides with an uninterrupted messianic effacement of traces, an erotic nihilism. For “true actuality” is enacted by angels whose destiny it is, “after singing their hymn before God, to cease and disappear into nothingness” [GS, 2, 1, 246]; and the rhythm of this “eternal and total transience” is the definition of “happiness” [204]. For all this the destructive character, who cannot afford to divert any attention from the shifting historical moment, has no time. But its attainment remains “the task of world politics, whose method will have to be called nihilism.”

diacritics/June 1978 63
8. “Pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will” (Gramsci)

The Destructive Character is the scene of a peculiar “identification with the aggressor.” Only in the intervening space it simultaneously creates could the text have come into being. The brief, self-reflexive preamble hints that one of the text’s enabling conditions was the match made between a character who effaces traces and the writer who retains them. The destructive character, one of those moderns who have made it their business to “free themselves from experiences” [GS, 2, 1, 218], is himself the object of an almost Proustian experience. “Looking back upon one’s life,” one might, “perhaps accidentally,” be jolted into recognizing the pattern of one’s “deeper relations.” This could scarcely happen to anyone as shock-resistant as the destructive character. It is, on the other hand, only by borrowing his technique that the “blotter” can trace his portrait. In the interval between the shock and its articulation—the gap between the first paragraph and the rest of the text—the “mimetic faculty” [GS, 2, 1, 210], which is itself destructive, has been at work. Its object, the destroyer’s strength, is itself mimetic—the protective mimicry it takes to negotiate the jungle of the cities. The way the text imposes itself corresponds to its subject’s faits accomplis. It likens him to an oracle, and itself exercises an oracular authority all the more mysterious for having removed any overt traces of the occult. Instead of offering the reader a piece of well-developed characterization, it leaves empty gaps, eschews progress, makes fresh starts, and prompts misunderstandings that it neither seeks nor avoids. It proceeds, in other words, like the destructive character himself. What began as a simple opposition turns out to be an elective affinity between secretly interrelated positions. To “hand on” his version of the destructive character, the author has forged a destructive style; conversely, the destructive character “stands in the vanguard of the traditionalists.” The lines are crossed: the no-man’s-land is formed by the x of a chiásmus. Both the destructive character and The Destructive Character are intersections of tensions. The text sets up an interaction between the character, himself a conjunction of forces, and his “other”; and the destructive character is himself the product of that encounter. Was Benjamin himself a destructive character? A metaphysician, melancholic and collector, he inhabited a far from empty space. He was by his own account no “unwritten page” [Br, 579] and hence could not bring himself to “clear out” of Europe. But in Brecht, Baudelaire, Kraus, Loos, Blanqui and others he was drawn to destructive characters that corresponded to and with his own.

Their Denkbild is both “an image from involuntary memory [. . .] which suddenly appears at a moment of danger” [GS, 1, 3, 1243] and a construct “designed on the drawing-board” [GS, 2, 1, 216]. The authoritative, if not authoritarian, gesture of the text imparts self-actualizing power to a speculative construction. Like its subject, it forces, wills, open a passage. The closed formation of its assertions asserts them against the power of the facts. Its “technique is that of the putsch” [CB, 100]; it too “forestalls” normal expectations. Embracing a multiplicity of existing idioms, it “prodigiously” simplifies them; a montage of heterogeneous materials, it is yet all of a piece. There is indeed scant trace of any breaks that would betray the hidden presence of inner tensions. They too have been effaced, no more and no less, to reinforce “the unreality of despair.” Where the Baudelairean dandy represented

---

10 This concept of Anna Freud’s recurs in Adorno’s writings on Benjamin. Cf. Br, p. 16 and the following response to The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction: “[. . .] as if you were afraid [. . .] of the invading barbarity and had resorted to placing an inverse taboo on the feared object” [Uber Walter Benjamin (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1970), p. 130]. More generally, Benjamin’s critics regularly reintroduce psychological categories precisely at those points where he himself was looking for ways out of bourgeois interiority. By contrast, Benjamin’s One-Way Street is dedicated to the woman who “engineered it in the author” [GS, 4, 1, 83]. The destructive character evacuates “object relations” and “libidinal cathexes”; he no more “invests” people than he “occupies” space.

11 “In my [Kraus’s] case psychological insight is combined with the larger capacity to ignore psychological given. This is the actor’s inhuman, cannibalistic side” [GS, 2, 1, 358].
a fictive persona who redoubled the individualism of the bourgeois monad inan effort to master the problematic situation of the “lyric poet in the era of high capitalism,” the destructive character has the task of rescuing a still bleaker situation by dismantling the subject. The flâneur “makes a virtue out of necessity, and in this displays the structure which is in every way characteristic of Baudelaire’s conception of the hero” [CB, 70-71]. The analogous brittleness of Benjamin’s post-heroic hero is heroically denied by the contrary assertion of his unshakeable strength. But his robust doings remain a fragile fiction, his realism magical, and the leap beyond the merely literary perhaps still all too literary. In reality—a relevant criterion in his case, if also the touchstone of the “victors”—the established order would have little trouble in containing or harnessing his subversion. What “the drowning man clutches at” is a “straw” [GS, 1, 3, 1243]. How, then, decide whether the intended embodiment of total vigilance is any more than the mirage of a rescuing organizer, whether the “organ of historical awakening” [CB, 176] is not a last-minute dream that mistakes itself for its awakening, a phantasmagoria of the exterior, the trap of antiromantic Romanticism? Benjamin himself left the question open whether Blanqui’s relative lack of interest in the theoretical underpinnings of socialism might not have been “rooted in a deep-seated mistrust of the findings that wait for anyone who immerses himself too thoroughly in the structures that govern existence.”

This commentary has essayed a “philological” reconstruction of the buried context in which The Destructive Character intervened. Commentators and philologists are by profession preservers and readers of traces, “collectors, conservative, conserving natures,” who, rather than make “situations [...] quotable” as destructive types do, seek to ensure that “things” remain “transmissible” [GS, 4, 2, 1000]. What nevertheless justifies the commentary in Benjamin’s eyes is the urgent need to preserve texts from destruction. “Tomorrow,” he predicted, “may bring disasters of such colossal dimensions that we can imagine ourselves separated from the texts [...] of yesterday as though by centuries” [UB, 44]. An “exhaustive” archeology of The Destructive Character would, however, rebury it. What needs to resurface is its force. The only adequate response is to “quote” it, thereby destroying it, but introducing “prudence and circumspection into the destruction” [Br, 709]. For The Destructive Character not merely describes its own destructive production, it also prescribes what its reception should be—an exchange at the going rate. “Presence of mind is of the essence [...] . To interpret or to use [the signals], that is the question [...] . If we miss the chance, then, and only then, is it decipherable. We read it. But now it is too late” [GS, 4, 1, 141]. The present reading stops where intervention should, belatedly, begin.

Irving Wohlfarth teaches Comparative Literature at the University of Oregon.