

INTRODUCTION

“Sparks Will Fly”

*Andrew Benjamin and
Dimitris Vardoulakis*

Walter Benjamin and Martin Heidegger were almost contemporaries, born in the last decade of the nineteenth century. But their life trajectories were very different. Benjamin failed in his attempt to obtain a position at a university and subsequently concentrated on essay writing, initially in the form of reviews. When that became impossible in 1933 and Benjamin was forced to exile in Paris, he started writing for academic journals published outside Germany. Heidegger became an academic star in Germany with the publication of *Being and Time* (1927). The following year, he succeeded his former teacher, Edmund Husserl, as professor at Freiburg University and five years later—at the same time that Benjamin was ostracized because of his Jewish background—Heidegger was joining the Nazi Party in order to be elected Rector. The troubled years of exile ended in Benjamin's death under unclear circumstances at the Spanish borders in 1940. Heidegger was “denazified” after World War II and allowed to return to teaching. Given their life histories, then, Benjamin, the cosmopolitan Jew, and Heidegger, who preferred his peasant hut in remote Todtnauberg to city life, seem hardly to have anything in common.

And yet, the two figures have gradually been brought closer together since the 1960s. The first move was the rediscovery of the work of Benjamin when his old friend, Theodor Adorno, started republishing his work. But the decisive move that brought Heidegger and Benjamin into contact was Hannah Arendt's introduction

to *Illuminations*. Arendt, who knew both men, suggested that Benjamin's concept of truth is similar to Heidegger's concept of *aletheia*. Arendt also pointed out that they both shared a concern with the destruction of tradition, and concluded that "without realizing it," Benjamin had a lot in common with Heidegger.¹ According to Arendt, then, the two contemporary thinkers, who were quite revolutionary on their own—Benjamin as a reformer of a "crude" Marxist tradition and Heidegger as precipitating in the renewal of phenomenology and hermeneutics—and who seemed to be unaware of each others' work, were nevertheless working on philosophical platforms that can be aligned.

Arendt's interpretation is, however, problematized if we turn to Benjamin's correspondence. In a letter to Gershom Scholem, dated January 20, 1930, Benjamin intimates that he has been reading Heidegger and that when the confrontation of the thinking of the two ultimately takes place "sparks will fly." It appears then that Benjamin was aware of Heidegger's work, and moreover he was agonistically disposed toward it.

The premise of this book is that both Hannah Arendt's verdict and Walter Benjamin's remark in his letter to Scholem contain an element of truth. In other words, there are indeed certain affinities between Benjamin and Heidegger. These affinities, however, not only do not obliterate their differences, but rather they highlight the points where their thought diverges. The "wager" of all the papers contained in this book is to affirm both the continuities and the discontinuities in the thought of the two thinkers.

There are a number of sites that provide fertile ground for such a confrontation to take place. Arendt was correct to recognize that the most obvious similarity between Heidegger and Benjamin was their distancing from a certain philosophical tradition that relied on a metaphysics of presence and an epistemology of representation. The first crucial site is the theory of knowledge. Peter Fenves approaches this site through Heinrich Rickert, the neo-Kantian philosopher who was the teacher of both Benjamin and Heidegger; and Gerhard Richter shows what is at stake when the theory of knowledge privileges either critique or an investigation of the various modalities of the cognition of the thing. The theory of knowledge leads back to a reconceptualization of the subject through Benjamin and Heidegger's attempt to rethink the concept of experience. Ilit Ferber examines how emotions figure differently in the two thinkers; and Kiarina Kordela uses the Lacanian concept of the gaze to adumbrate a comparison between their distinct conceptualizations of experience.

Benjamin never wrote in a published or finished work on Heidegger. But we know from his notes that were eventually collected under the title *The Arcades Project* that he was particularly concerned to engage with Heidegger's notion

of temporality. For instance, in the crucial *Konvolut N*, titled “On the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress,” Benjamin explicitly states that “Heidegger seeks in vain to rescue history for phenomenology abstractly through ‘historicity’” (N3,1). Paula Schwebel shows how Benjamin and Heidegger’s theories of time diverge by going to one of the sources of their respective theories, the philosophy of Leibniz; and, Andrew Benjamin argues that it is in their respective conceptions of the present that the real difference on the philosophies of time can be discerned.

Another major site of confrontation is Benjamin and Heidegger’s appropriation of the Romantic heritage. Benjamin was interested in the Romantics from early on, writing his doctoral dissertation on the concept of criticism in Jena Romanticism. Heidegger was also indebted to Romanticism as we know from a series of lecture courses he offered, such as the lectures on Schelling. But there is perhaps no better place to stage the confrontation on this issue than the figure of Hölderlin. Benjamin wrote a significant essay on the Romantic poet in which his whole reception of Romanticism can be gleaned. Heidegger on his part turned to Hölderlin at a difficult time, when he resigned his Rectorship and as the clouds of war were gathering around Europe. Antonia Egel and Joanna Hodge stage the confrontation between Benjamin and Heidegger through Hölderlin, providing not only incisive readings of their essays on Hölderlin, but also highlighting the philosophical implications of these divergent readings.

There is, perhaps, no more contentious site of comparison between Heidegger and Benjamin than the question of the political commitments in their work. This is not simply because one initially embraced National Socialism while the other, by virtue of his Jewishness, was excluded from it. In addition, Heidegger is usually portrayed as a conservative thinker who can, some have argued, offer valuable insights to a politically committed position, even promote a renewal of Marxism. Conversely, Benjamin wanted to make his friends at the Frankfurt School and Bertolt Brecht believe that he was a Marxist, but did not manage to convince either that he was Marxist enough. Krzysztof Ziarek approaches this complex set up by showing that when it comes to the concept of revolution, the thoughts of Heidegger and Benjamin have certain important similarities. David Ferris and Dimitris Vardoulakis both note that Heidegger and Benjamin offered significant insights into their political commitments when they wrote about art. Thus, Ferris shows how the “uselessness” of art is in fact determinative of the politics of both Benjamin and Heidegger; and, Vardoulakis shows how the figure of Carl Schmitt can provide a cipher for their divergent politics.

The different contributions to this volume do not seek to side with one or the other thinker. Rather, they seek to realize Benjamin’s prediction to Scholem—that the confrontation of their thought will make “sparks fly.” Sparks, unlike a fire, do

not burn out into cinders. Rather, sparks can continue to be generated whenever the two thinkers are set agonistically against each other. Thus, this book seeks to indicate that the sparks can keep on flying in productive and illuminating ways by exploring the convergences and divergences of Benjamin and Heidegger's thinking.

Notes

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1. Hannah Arendt, "Introduction: Walter Benjamin 1892–1940" in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), 46.