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THE PEARL DIVERS

HANNAH ARENDT, WALTER BENJAMIN AND THE DEMANDS OF HISTORY

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Deep in the Unknown to find the *new!*
Baudelaire, *Le voyage*
— Quoted in Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*

It is the task of the historian to detect this unexpected *new* with all its implications in any given period and to bring out the full power of its significance.
— Arendt, *Understanding and Politics, Essays in Understanding*

When Hannah Arendt and her husband Heinrich Blücher managed to sail for New York in April 1941, they were in possession of a set of manuscripts from Walter Benjamin.¹ Benjamin had handed the manuscripts over in Marseille, so that they could deliver them to Theodor Adorno in New York – a strange move, since Benjamin was supposed to arrive in the United States before them. Among the manuscripts were the ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’. Benjamin never arrived in the United States: he took his life at the Franco-Spanish border when he learned his transit permit was not valid. A few months later, Arendt and Blücher succeeded

to escape over the same route as Benjamin had planned. While waiting for their ship in Lisbon, they read Benjamin’s ‘Theses’ aloud to each other and discussed them with other refugees, debating the meaning of the moment-to-moment Messianic hope that Benjamin had proclaimed (Young-Bruehl, 1982, p. 162-3).

Benjamin was a distant cousin of Günther Stern, Arendt’s first husband. Arendt knew Benjamin in Paris, where they moved in the same circles of anti-Nazi refugees such as Alexandre Kojève and Raymond Aron. After Arendt and Stern separated, Arendt continued to see Benjamin in a circle of German Marxists, in which she met her second husband Blücher. Benjamin became the couple’s ‘best friend in Paris’.² In the United States Arendt would become a famous yet controversial political philosopher, and Benjamin would posthumously become widely known and recognized as a literary and cultural theorist. Arendt would play an important role in the reception of his work, since she was the first to introduce Benjamin to the English-speaking world by editing *Illuminations* (1999a [1968]).³ According to Elisabeth Young-Bruehl (1982, p.167, p. 200), Arendt edited Benjamin’s writings out of ‘continued loyalty to her dead friend.’ The recently published correspondence between Benjamin and Arendt shows their close personal friendship.⁴

In this article, however, I would not so much like to investigate the friendship as the intellectual relationship between Arendt and Benjamin, especially in regard to their ways of thinking about the altered status of the past and tradition in the modern age and the consequences for writing history. Arendt did not only edit and publish Benjamin’s writing out of friendship, she was strongly inspired by his work. Benjamin and Arendt held a similar approach to history, although they use this approach to articulate very different and in some regards opposite political and theological views. I will claim that Arendt’s often misunderstood historical works become more comprehensible when they are read with Benjamin’s ‘Theses’ in mind, and that in turn, Arendt’s thoughts on writing history after the Holocaust can help illuminate Benjamin’s fragmentary writings and terse aphorisms. Moreover, I will argue that their historical-philosophical considerations can be of major importance for contemporary historians, whom, after a period of postmodern de-

constructionism, now face demands from society to deliver new ‘grand narratives’ and provide answers to heated questions of (national) identity and memory. Arendt and Benjamin tried to do justice to the past, as well as to connect the past to the present in meaningful ways, and experimented with new ways of dealing with the past to fulfill these aims.

So far, not a lot of attention has been paid to the intellectual link between Arendt and Benjamin. Maurizio Passerin D’Entrèves was the first to observe this relationship in his dissertation (defended 1989, published 1994, pp. 31-33). He notes Arendt’s indebtedness to Benjamin’s ‘fragmentary historiography’ and selective reappropriation of the past. Seyla Benhabib (1990, 1996) picks up D’Entrèves’ remarks and explores the intellectual relation between Arendt and Benjamin in the direction of Arendt’s conception of political theory as ‘storytelling’. Annabel Herzog takes this line of reasoning one step further, assuming a ‘deep connection’ between Arendt’s and Benjamin’s conception of storytelling (Herzog, 2000, p. 3). While I agree with Benhabib’s (and D’Entrèves’) claim that Benjamin’s fragmentary historiography was of major importance for Arendt, I do not believe that she was influenced by Benjamin in her narrative approach to political theory, as Benhabib, and, to a greater extent, Herzog have claimed. Benjamin does not argue for a narrative approach to history; in fact, he observes a demise of storytelling in the modern age and is experimenting with alternative ways of presenting historical material (see also Evers, 2005).

An article that explores the relation between Benjamin’s and Arendt’s conception of history more substantially is Iseult Honohan’s (1990). According to Honohan, both defend a historiography with highly political implications, but while Benjamin’s emphasis is on redressing wrongs and (ultimately) hopes for Messianic redemption, Arendt sees the past as ‘a network of possibilities’. I completely agree with these conclusions. However, the focus of Honohan’s article is mainly on Arendt’s work, discarding Benjamin at the very beginning of his article by stating that Benjamin ‘does not develop a detailed argument to sustain [his approach to history]’ (p. 313), and she doesn’t discuss how Arendt and Benjamin put their historical-philosophical considerations into practice. A full account of the meaning and extent of the relationship between Arendt and Benjamin in

their thinking about the past, tradition, and historical method, is still missing.

Arendt was deeply impressed by Benjamin’s experimental approach to the past, even though she hardly refers to Benjamin’s work explicitly.⁵ Arendt’s introduction of Benjamin in *Illuminations* tells us as much about Benjamin’s as about her own way of approaching the past. Her introduction can in many respects be read as an *oratio pro domo*, a plea in her own interests. The key words to understanding Benjamin’s influence on Arendt’s work is what she describes in her introduction with the metaphor of ‘pearl diving’, by means of which one ‘descends to the bottom of the sea, not to excavate the bottom and bring it to light but to pry loose the rich and the strange, the pearls and the coral in the depths, and carry them to the surface’ (Arendt, 1999, pp. 54-55). The depth of the sea is here a metaphor for the past, the pearls symbolize fragments from the past that (according to the pearl diver) have gained in value over the years – value that only can be brought to light by someone who takes the effort to find those forgotten fragments and discerns new meaning in them.

This ‘pearl diving’ will be at the centre of my exploration of the intellectual relationship between Arendt and Benjamin. I will argue that pearl diving forms a tentative solution to a major problem, with which Arendt and Benjamin were both, in their own ways, struggling: the problem of the loss of tradition in the modern age. How to deal with the past, when traditional ways of writing history are no longer seen to be adequate, and the present seems to offer no new yardsticks on how to proceed? First of all I will examine what Arendt and Benjamin understood by ‘tradition’, and why tradition for them had become problematic. Secondly, I will discuss how Benjamin tried to confront the loss of tradition, and in what ways, under the flag of ‘pearl diving’, Benjamin’s approach was adopted and transformed by Arendt. For this aim, I will confront Benjamin’s *Arcades Project* (1999b) with Arendt’s historical works *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and *On Revolution*, works that are notorious for their puzzling ways of dealing with historical material. I will conclude with a discussion of the possibilities and limitations of ‘pearl diving’ for contemporary historians, and argue that Benjamin’s and Arendt’s approach can form an on-

going source of inspiration for a form of historiography that tries to do justice to the past, as well as to contemporary political considerations.

I. *Traditionsbruch* or the crisis of tradition in the modern age

In his essay ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’ Benjamin famously argues techniques of mechanical reproduction have altered both the status of works of art and the mode of perceiving art. With new media such as photography and print, works of art have lost their ‘aura’, which was based on their unique existence in time and place – and therewith, their traditional base of authority. In the age of mechanical reproduction, one can own works of art, and use them as one pleases. Although Benjamin is aware of the dangers of mass media, in his Artwork-essay he mainly emphasizes the revolutionary and emancipatory potential of mass media. His essay is usually read as a celebration of the liberating aspect of the modern forces of production and the possibilities that arise from it.

At the same time, Benjamin feared the decline of experience in modern age, that is, the capacity to live a meaningful and fulfilled existence. Benjamin wrote the article ‘The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nicolai Leskov’ in 1936, shortly after he completed his ‘Artwork’-essay. In contrast with the ‘Artwork’-essay, Benjamin here comes to see the forces of production in the modern age as destroying the irreparable structures of meaning. ‘It is as if something that seemed inalienable to us, the securest among our possessions, were taken from us: the ability to exchange experiences’, writes Benjamin (1999a, p. 83). Benjamin locates the turning point of this process in the First World War. The men returned from the battlefield ‘silent, not richer, but poorer in communicable experience’ (p. 84). Every reminiscence to values, ideals and desires preceding this catastrophic experience seemed to have become meaningless.

In Arendt’s work we can find a similar ambiguous analysis of the changed status of experience and tradition in the modern age. While writing on totalitarianism, Arendt developed the notion of the ‘break in tradition’

(*Traditionsbruch*). She would first use this notion in regard to the tradition of political philosophy, which would no longer be capable of explaining historical events. Later on she would speak of a *Traditionsbruch* in a wider sense, to characterize the loss of our political and moral standards, and even the loss of historical chronology as such. In her essay ‘What is authority?’ Arendt asserts that the break in tradition was preceded by a long process of disintegration of the Roman trinity of tradition, authority and religion in the course of the modern age (Arendt, 1993, p. 128, also Arendt, 1978, p. 212). It would become a central category in her thought (Vowinckel, 2001).

Time and again, Arendt situates this break after the Second World War, when the rumors about the existence of extermination camps turned out to be true. In a television interview with Günther Gaus she recalls: ‘Das ist der eigentliche Schock gewesen. Vorher hat man sich gesagt: Nun ja, man hat halt Feinde. (...) Aber dies ist anders gewesen. Das war wirklich, als ob der Abgrund sich öffnet’ (Gaus, 1964, p. 25). The political status of European Jewry ‘sank under their feet into bottomlessness’, both for assimilated Jews (*parvenus*) as for Jews who chose a conscious outsider position (*paria*’s) (Arendt, 1976, p. 72). With the Holocaust, Nazi Germany had tried to let Jewish people as such disappear into ‘holes of oblivion’, as though they had never existed. Two years after the publication of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, she noted in her ‘thought diary’:

‘Der Bruch war vorgezeichnet im Generationsbruch nach dem ersten Weltkrieg, aber nicht vollzogen, insofern das Bewußtsein des Bruches noch das Gedächtnis an der Tradition voraussetzte und den Bruch prinzipiell reparabel machte. Der Bruch erfolgte erst nach dem 2. Weltkrieg, als er als Bruch gar nicht mehr notiert wurde.’ (*Denktagebuch* XIII, Jan.-Feb. 1953, quoted in Vowinckel, 2001, p. 87).

Thus, according to Arendt, the ‘thread’ of tradition had worn thinner and thinner as the modern age progressed, and finally ‘broke’ with the horrors of the two World Wars. Hence, even more than Benjamin, Arendt was extremely aware of the acute dangers of the diagnosed loss of tradition in the modern age. She saw it as one of the prerequisites for the rise of totalitarianism, as a vacuum in which nothing can be taken for granted,

wherein literally anything can happen. On the other hand, she also saw the possibilities of this situation, that is, the chance to re-think our whole heritage and to create new standards of judgment, to see everything fresh and new, ‘wie ein Neugeborenes, [das] in den schmutzigen Windeln dieser Epoche liegt’, as Benjamin described his contemporaries (Benjamin, 1961, p. 315). Similarly, Arendt would use the concept of natality to describe the human condition: the fact that we are born, but also have the possibility to speak and act (our ‘second’ birth), the freedom to start something new (Arendt, 1973, p. 479; Arendt, 1998).

This diagnosis of a crisis in the authority of tradition brought Arendt and Benjamin tremendous problems in their historical writings. They both thought that traditional categories and forms to think and write about the past were no longer adequate, while on the other hand they were extremely worried that fundamental things would get lost – such as the capacity to share experiences or the fullness of experience itself, or in the case of Arendt, the capacity to enact freedom. To solve this tension, to write history between the loss of tradition and the demands of history, Arendt found inspiration from Benjamin, in an approach that was as informal as the title she gave it: ‘pearl diving’.

II. Pearl diving: a new approach

Arendt begins her account of Benjamin by quoting Shakespeare (*The Tempest*, I.2):

Full fathom five thy father lies;
Of his bones are coral made;
Those are pearls that were his eyes:
Nothing of him that doth fade
But doth suffer a sea-change
Into something rich and strange.⁶

In the first volume of *The Life of the Mind*, the last work that Arendt would write, she recites the exact same passage from Shakespeare, but

now as an explanation of what *she* is doing, as the ‘basic assumption’ of her *own* thinking (Arendt, 1978, p. 211-2). That this ‘pearl diving’ was of great importance for Arendt is moreover confirmed in a letter of Kurt Blumenfeld, in which he describes Arendt’s approach to history as *Perlenfischerei*, pearl fishing (Blumenfeld to Arendt, 21 July 1960, p. 252). The decisive problem was the doubtful status of tradition, which, according to Arendt, ‘[n]o one has expressed (...) more clearly than Benjamin in his “Theses on the Philosophy of History”’ (p. 42). She continues:

‘Insofar as the past has been transmitted as tradition, it possesses authority; insofar as authority presents itself historically, it becomes tradition. Walter Benjamin knew that the break in tradition and the loss of authority which occurred in his lifetime were irreparable, and he concluded that he had to discover new ways of dealing with the past.’ (p. 43)

After the break in tradition, Arendt claims, Benjamin knew that there was ‘no more effective way (...) than to cut out the ‘rich and strange,’ coral and pearls, from what had been handed down in one solid piece’ (p. 46).

It is important to note that ‘pearl diving’ is a metaphor to articulate an alternative approach to history; it is not a ‘method’ in the narrow sense of giving compelling prescriptions of how to deal with historical material. Both Arendt and Benjamin hesitated in giving outright explanations of their metatheoretical considerations and hoped that the material they presented would speak for itself.⁷ For both of them method is not a purely formal matter or an isolated abstraction which is merely to be applied to the studied object, but something closely related to the studied object; it arises from, and has implications for, the object (see Wolin, 1994, p. 79 ff.). Nevertheless, I would like to consider this ‘pearl diving’ that Arendt discerns in Benjamin’s writings at some more depth, and distinguish three distinctive features.

First of all, the choice of material. Arendt and Benjamin turned their eyes on material outside the beaten paths of tradition and looked for forgotten fragments of the past, ‘the rags and refuse’ as Benjamin described them, such as quotes from old news papers, letters from famous but also unknown people, forgotten pictures, disregarded traditions and so on. The

term ‘pearl diving’ can be somewhat misleading, since the ‘pearls’ here refer not to traditional cultural treasures, but to unexpected or marginalized moments in history that (according to the historian) have gained in value over the years or ‘suffered a sea change’. It is uncertain where the pearl is to be found, just about anything that is left from the past could have the potential to contain an unforeseen value for the present. The choice of material is thus radically widened. At the same time, pearl diving is a fragmentary and discontinuous style of writing history, which turns historical material into a collection of isolated historical events, fragments, quotes or images, which are brought into new constellations with other fragments from the past.

This brings us to the second distinctive feature of pearl diving: the condition that the material should have a redemptive relation to the past and a constructive bearing on the present. In the ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’ Benjamin famously attacks the ‘historicists’ in the tradition of Leopold von Ranke⁸, whom, in the misleading naturalness in which they articulate events from the past, in fact legitimize past injustices and support the status quo. Instead, the historian should ‘brush history against the grain’: ‘Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins’ (Benjamin 1999a, p. 247, italics in original). Also Arendt wrote about the heirs of Ranke dismissively as ‘eunuchs’ because of their claim to objectivity (Arendt, 1993, p. 49). For Arendt and Benjamin, writing history is a moral endeavor with a twofold aim: on the one hand, the act of pearl diving cuts fragments from the past from their context to save them from oblivion, on the other hand they get the potential to gain new meaning in the present – where they, hopefully, change something or set something in motion.

In her Benjamin introduction, though, Arendt emphasizes Benjamin’s aim to save fragments, and she completely downplays his political aims. She characterizes him as an incomparable, whimsical private collector.⁹ For Benjamin, writes Arendt, collecting was bound up with redemption – the redemption of things, which is to complement the redemption of men. In this, ‘collecting is the passion of children, for whom things are not yet commodities and are not valued according to their usefulness’

(Arendt, 1999, p. 50). In my view, however, for Arendt and Benjamin both redeeming fragments from the past and using them to raise political awareness were important impulses – although Arendt has a very different understanding of the political: whereas Benjamin combined (or conflated) a Marxist position with theological-political Messianism, Arendt would develop a Republican notion of politics with tendencies towards direct democracy. Their different political positions lead to writings with different aims, but, as I’m arguing throughout this article, in their approach to history there are a lot of similarities.

The last, and most puzzling characteristic of pearl diving is the assumption that the saved fragments from the past, albeit incomplete, contain a ‘truth content’. Through pearl diving, the pearls are torn from their original context and brought into a new perspective that brings forth new insights – in which they, according to Benjamin ‘come into their own’ (1999b, p. 460). In Thesis XVII, Benjamin tries to illustrate this idea with the monad, the smallest, indivisible particle that at the same time comprises totality. In terms of history: a single historical event is seen to reflect a universal truth. In the *Arcades Project* he describes this as a ‘dialectics at a standstill’ or a ‘dialectical image,’ in which ‘what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation’ (1999b, p. 462).¹⁰ It is exactly this that Arendt is referring to when she at the beginning of her essay points to Benjamin’s work on Goethe’s *Elective Affinities*, in which he distinguishes between the commentator, which he likens to the chemist, and the critic, which he likens to the alchemist, ‘practicing the obscure art of transmuting the futile elements of the real into the shining, enduring gold of truth, or rather watching and interpreting the historical process that brings about such magical transfiguration’ (Arendt, 1999, p. 11). It is this intriguing yet problematic assumption that made Arendt and Benjamin expect (or hope) that the material they presented would speak for itself.

It should be clear here that pearl diving is insufficient to encompass all historical-philosophical considerations of Arendt and Benjamin. Two remarks should be made here. First of all, the metaphor of pearl diving seems to comprise two kinds of temporality. On the one hand, it refers to the moment of discovery, the moment in which the fragments from the

past ‘crystallize into a monad’ and become recognizable (Benjamin, 1999a, p. 254). On the other hand, it is a way to describe how history evolves, how historical events can have an afterlife. Related to this issue is the somewhat confusing way in which words like ‘crystallization’ and ‘configuration’ are being used. Natural processes of crystallization follow fixed patterns, whereas Arendt and Benjamin tried to avoid, and even dismissed outright, causality in describing historical events. With these terms they seem to refer to a moment in which several elements suddenly and unpredictably come together in a new constellation. The metaphor of pearls is not completely correct in this respect, since pearls do not actually ‘crystallize’: they come into being by chance, and afterwards grow in concentric rings, up until the moment they are found and cut out.

In order to give a more concrete idea of how Arendt and Benjamin put the approach of ‘pearl diving’ into practice, and in what ways Arendt can be considered to be indebted to Benjamin in this respect, I will now discuss and juxtapose some historical works of the two.

III. Fragmentary and exemplary historiography

To see Benjamin’s theoretical considerations in action, we should turn to the *Arcades Project*. Benjamin began the *Arcades Project* in 1927 as a rather small project, but he continued to work on it up until his death and it would remain unfinished. In the more than 1,000 pages of notes, sketches, drafts and quotations on life in the emerging modern metropolis of Paris one can find information on virtually every topic that was important during the nineteenth century: gas lighting, fashion, urban renewal, barricades, the *flâneur*, trains, exhibitions, prostitution, gambling and so on. His aim had been to ‘construct the idea of the epoch in the sense of an “ur”-history of modernity’ (Buck-Morss, 1977, p. 106). With ‘ur-history’ he did not mean to discover the ‘origin’ as the actual beginning, but to define what is ‘original’ in the studied object by bringing together its inner tensions. In the *Arcades Project* he did this by trying to show how the rise of modern consumer culture went hand in hand with a revival of myth (Wolin, 1994, p. 174).

The unusual aim of the *Arcades Project* was accompanied with an unusual approach. In one of the rare moments of self-clarification, he writes:

‘Method of this project: literary montage. I needn’t *say* anything. Merely show. I shall purloin no valuables, appropriate no ingenious formulations. But the rags, the refuse — these will I not inventory but allow, in the only way possible, to come into their own: by making use of them.’ (Benjamin, 1999b, p. 460).

The material used in this project is mainly constituted by quotations, complemented with interpretations and Benjamin’s own texts. He didn’t use quotations to verify and document opinions, but wanted to arrange them in such a way that they would constitute the main work. It is hard to judge whether Benjamin has fulfilled his aims, since the work has not been completed and was never meant to be published in the current form, although it is obvious the work had grown out of proportion. Tiedemann, who has edited the work, admits that it was tempting to leave out ‘the oppressive chunks of quotations’ and publish only the texts that had been written by Benjamin himself (1984, p. 135-6), but this would have been at odds with Benjamin’s own intentions. ‘To *write* history (...) means to *cite* history,’ wrote Benjamin (1999b, p. 476). The innumerable quotations in the *Arcades Project* were supposed to be brought together in such a way that they would illuminate the total event, that is, the rise of capitalism in nineteenth century Paris, and at the same time raise awareness of consumer culture today.

Reading Benjamin’s ‘Theses’ and the *Arcades Project* next to Arendt’s historical works *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and *On Revolution*, can help to illuminate what she is trying to do. Many readers have been puzzled by the apparent lack of unity between the three parts of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (‘Anti-Semitism’, ‘Imperialism’ and ‘Totalitarianism’), as well as by the question of how the comprehensiveness and variety of the discussed material relate to the central thesis of the book. The Dreyfus Affair, the Boer War, the French conquest of Algeria, and literary material such as Proust’s *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu* and Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* are just some of the themes she uses to explain the nature of

totalitarianism. The problem was, as she explains in a reply to a review of the book of Erich Vögelin,

‘how to write historically about something – totalitarianism – which I did not want to conserve but on the contrary felt engaged to destroy. My way of solving this problem has given to the rise to the reproach that the book was lacking in unity. What I did (...) was to discover the chief elements of totalitarianism and to analyze them in historical terms, tracing these elements back in history as far as I deemed proper and necessary.’ (Arendt, 1953, pp. 77-78)

She concludes that the book does not give an unequivocal explanation of how totalitarianism could arise, but ‘gives a historical account of the elements which crystallized into totalitarianism’ (p. 78). As Benhabib (1990, p. 172) has noted, the language Arendt uses to defend her approach, with words like ‘crystallization’, ‘configuration’ and ‘origin’, resonates with Benjamin’s introduction of his *Trauerspiel*-study and *Arcades Project* – and indeed, with Arendt’s Benjamin-essay. It suggests that historical events do not develop along foreseeable lines, but occur all of a sudden, when they crystallize into new forms. In Benjamin’s method of breaking continuity and instead practicing a fragmentary historiography, Arendt found a way of writing history without giving a justification for what happened. She refuses to write about the Holocaust as if it would be a logical outcome of history. Instead, she presents a lot of different events, as precipitated in the most various sources, that can help us to understand the nature of totalitarianism. Breaking historical continuity is a way of dealing with a past Arendt ‘felt engaged to destroy’, and in which Benjamin could only detect a ‘continuity of horror’.

Whereas in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* Arendt uses the principle of pearl diving mainly out of a negative consideration, namely the rejection of continuity and causality in explaining the rise of totalitarianism, *On Revolution* can be seen as an exercise in pearl diving in a positive sense: she is trying to bring to light the ‘lost treasure’ of the ‘rich and strange’ revolutionary tradition. ‘From the summer of 1776 in Philadelphia and the summer of 1789 in Paris to the autumn of 1956 in Budapest’, revolutions could all be told ‘in parable form as the tale of an age-old treasure,

which, under most varied circumstances, appears abruptly, unexpectedly, and disappears again, under different mysterious traditions, as though it were a *fata morgana*’, she writes in the preface of *Between Past and Future* (Arendt, 1993, p. 5). In *On Revolution* she retells this story of political revolutions, not in the standard reading in which the French Revolution is seen as archetypical, or in an antiquarian study with a detailed overview of all revolutions that ever occurred, but in a reading in which the American Revolution serves as a model, since it founded a (Republican) tradition that, according to Arendt, is worth being remembered. *On Revolution* can be seen as a creative act of re-thinking the past, with the aim to set free its potentials and thereby hoping to create political awareness: the fact that revolutionary change and political freedom have been possible in the past, should give us hope in the present.

The main difference between Arendt’s and Benjamin’s approach is that Arendt is not ‘merely’ showing fragments or quotations from the past, but is retelling forgotten events of the past in the form of a ‘story’ (1963, p. 215), a ‘parable’ (1993, p. 5), or even as a ‘legend’ (1963, p. 206). Quotations played an important role in Arendt’s work,¹¹ but her main effort was to carve a story out of exceptional events. ‘Storytelling’ would become a way to approach the past after the break in tradition and endow it with new meaning for the present (see Arendt’s essay on Isak Dinesen, 1968, pp. 95-110, also Benhabib, 1996 and 2000). It would become her Benjamin-inspired version of the pearl diving.

In *On Revolution*, Arendt first of all wants to tell a story that carries a moral and a clear political agenda: she wants to convince us that the revolutionary foundation of the United States should be exemplary for modern revolutions. For this reason she sometimes obscures facts in order to strengthen her argument. The existence of slavery at the time of the American Revolution, for instance, is conspicuous by its absence, and she completely ignores the role of the Civil War in the founding of America. For Benjamin, this kind of political storytelling would be unacceptable: every attempt to establish a new tradition goes hand in hand with new groups and events that are being marginalized and suppressed.

It is beyond the scope of this essay to sketch out all the differences between Arendt and Benjamin, but we could say that for Benjamin, the goal of redemption plays a bigger role, whereas Arendt places the exemplary character of selected fragments of the past in the foreground. It is important to keep in mind that they held very different conceptions of religion and politics. For Benjamin, redemption as a historical-philosophical category is wrapped up with theological considerations. In contrast to Arendt, Benjamin does not see the American Revolution as exemplary, but the Spartacus revolution of 1919, in which, according to Benjamin, the ‘image of enslaved ancestors rather than that of liberated grandchildren’ was at the centre (Benjamin, 1999a, p. 252). In Benjamin’s philosophy of history, this political ideal of redressing past injustices is connected with the theological idea of redemption. Saving forgotten moments from the past, then, is not done to give a specific interpretation of history, but as an act in humble anticipation of the Last Judgment. For Arendt, on the other hand, the political category of freedom has the highest priority. She developed an approach to history in which unexpected and, in her opinion, marginalized historical events are described and juxtaposed with a clear political agenda in mind. By showing how political revolutions as moments of freedom have been possible in the past, she wants to communicate hope for a better future. Theological considerations hardly play a role in her work. She does not write about the Last Judgment, but saw judgment as the highest faculty of the mind that every individual has to develop.¹²

It is interesting to see that Arendt and Benjamin both cherished revolutions as moments in which the radical new opens up, albeit within their, in some respects, contrary political views. However, it is exactly this open approach to history that binds their works together, and that can be summarized as ‘pearl diving’.

IV. Possibilities and limitations of pearl diving

The result of pearl diving can be described as brilliant or as a methodological chaos. ‘Im Grunde hatte sie keine Methode, sondern fügte mit

impressionistisch-einführender Assoziationskraft unterschiedliche Gegenstände in eine von ontologische geprägte Gesamtsicht zusammen’, writes Hans Mommsen about Arendt’s historical works. Stephen Wittfield is more enthusiastic: ‘No summary can adequately suggest how brilliantly Arendt could formulate her insights, how saturated with speculative daring her books are’ (both quoted in Vowinckel, 2001, p. 3n). Benjamin was also admired and maligned for his unique and puzzling method, which probably accounts for the immense secondary literature on his writings.

The possibilities of the above sketched ‘pearl diving’ lie in opening up a variety of unconventional sources as possible historical material, experimenting with new modes of exposition of the material and critically questioning the nature and relevance of historical, literary and political tradition. In the last decades, deconstructing literary canons and historical master narratives has become a mainstream activity for scholars, and through the formation of cultural studies this development has even gained a more or less permanent position within academia. Arendt and Benjamin can be seen as highly original pioneers of this movement. However, pearl diving is not only concerned with deconstructing traditional ways of thinking. Arendt and Benjamin actively searched for new ways of dealing with the past in light of the present; they asked for a constant and critical reappropriation of the past in order to illuminate the present and to ‘fan the spark of hope’. Whereas the postmodern movement of cultural studies is under threat of losing its redemptive potential by not paying too much attention to history at all, the neoconservative revival of the last years is lacking in ideology critique. In a time that cultural studies seems to be losing its critical potential,¹³ and while at the same time historians are asked to deliver instant collective identities in the face of existential uncertainties in a globalizing world, there is a lot of discussion going on among historians about their position in society. If historians are prepared to play a role in the public sphere and not limit themselves to exclusively academic disputes, the work of Arendt and Benjamin and their approach to history can be seen as an ongoing source of inspiration.

Nevertheless, pearl diving also has some serious limitations. First of all, this has to do with the choice of material: their call for widening of the choice of material is not accompanied with clear prescriptions on how to

proceed. Both Arendt and Benjamin are not very explicit in what guides them in choosing their material. Their assumption that the presented material would somehow be self-evident, could be interpreted as a way to avoid articulating yardsticks on how to judge past events. This is exactly the point in the ‘Adorno-Benjamin dispute’ of the 1930s, in which Adorno dismissed Benjamin’s proposal for *The Arcades Project* as ‘on the crossroads between magic and positivism’, as though the mere quotations he used would reveal their truth content instantly in a kind of religious ‘incantation’ (*Beschwörung*) (Adorno quoted in Buck-Morss, 1977, p. 169). In her Benjamin introduction, Arendt gives a more sympathetic interpretation of Benjamin’s approach, in stating that Benjamin was ‘neither a poet, nor a philosopher’ but a ‘poetic thinker’, indeed, an ‘alchemist’ who, by juxtaposing existing fragments from the past, created new insights about past and present (Arendt, 1999, p. 10). By placing Benjamin’s approach in the realm of art, she avoids demanding explicit standards on how to proceed. It makes pearl diving an elusive approach, and, apart from the encouragement towards creativity, hard to pass on to others.

Another limitation of pearl diving lies in its fragmentary character. Arendt and Benjamin both fiercely rejected the idea of historical causality, but it is unclear what logic of line of reasoning should replace it. Not making explicit the connections between different parts of a work leads to an indirect manner of exposition that can easily be misunderstood. In their avoidance of establishing causal connections between the fragments of the past, there always remains a leap between the analyzed event and everything that preceded it — what Benjamin called ‘a tiger’s leap into the past’ (1999a, p. 253). The historical panoramas and many excursions into little known and seemingly unrelated issues of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, and especially the endless piles of quotations in Benjamin’s *Arcades Project* need a lot of patience and imagination on the part of the reader to create unity. Here exactly lies the danger that the ideology critique, which both Arendt and Benjamin wanted to put forth, gets overshadowed by redemptive criticism. The fragmentary character of *On Revolution*, on the other hand, threatens to turn into a selective and politicized form of writing history, at the expense of redeeming past injustices.

Related to this is the high potential for abuse: pearl diving is supposed to have emancipatory potentials by giving unforeseen perspectives on reality, but it can also be used for creating new myths. At the end of his Artwork-essay, Benjamin shows that he is aware of this problem by pointing out abuse of mass media by fascism, in their effort to force new ritual values on the masses through suggestive successions of images. Nevertheless, he was to be too fascinated by his new approach to discard it. In *On Revolution*, Arendt is consciously trying to create a new tradition, in putting forward the ‘forgotten treasure’ of freedom as it is enacted in political revolutions. In articulating her vision, she places a selective reading of some (relatively) marginalized events such as the American Revolution to the foreground, whereas other events, such as slavery, are suppressed. This reveals an important paradox of pearl diving: redeeming fragments from the past from oblivion is an infinite task, whereas fragments that have a constructive bearing are necessarily limited. For good reasons Arendt would devote the last years of her life to the problem of judgment: when tradition has lost its authority, the question of what is worth saving, what is to be highlighted from the past and for what reasons, is the most urgent question to be asked (Arendt 1992; Yar 2000).

Conclusion: True to Walter Benjamin?

I have tried to make clear that Arendt’s work shows clear Benjaminian preoccupations, and that Arendt’s representation of Benjamin in her introductory essay to *Illuminations* tells us as much about Arendt as about Benjamin. The ‘pearl diving’ that Arendt discerned in Benjamin’s writing was a tentative solution to a problem they both struggled with: how to approach the past, when tradition has lost authority? Arendt was inspired by Benjamin’s approach, but gave it her own interpretation. The most important difference between the two in dealing with the past is that Arendt in her later work put the emphasis on creating stories in order to endow the present with meaning, thereby ignoring the specific to some degree, whereas the main thrust in Benjamin’s philosophical considerations is ‘to what extent you can be ‘concrete’ in historical-philosophical contexts’ (Benjamin, quoted in Tiedemann, 1983, p. 236) and focuses

much more on the fragments as such. In this sense, Arendt is not exactly true to Benjamin and she can even be seen to be treacherous to his legacy. In a different reading we could understand Arendt's editorial work for Benjamin itself as an act of 'pearl diving': she saved Benjamin from oblivion, pulled him away from the past to let him shine in the present, and lets him come into his own, by making use of him.

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¹ Note on translation: I have made use of English translations. When no translation was available, I have quoted from the original language.

² Arendt to Jaspers, 30 May 1946. In Arendt, H., & Jaspers, K. (2001), p. 77.

³ Arendt was working on a second volume of Benjamin's writings by the time of her death in 1975. This volume

was finally published under the title *Reflections* in 1978 with an introduction by Peter Demetz.

⁴ Arendt, H. & Benjamin, W. (2006). See also Schöttker, D., & Wizisla, E. (2005).

⁵ In the *Origins of Totalitarianism* (1973, p. 143) Arendt cites the part of thesis IX of Benjamin's 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' about the 'Angel of History', and in *The Life of the Mind* (1978, p. 122) she gives a short analysis of Benjamin's use of metaphors.

⁶ 'Sea-change' has become an established expression in English to refer to profound transformations. Ursula Hennigfeld has suggested that Shakespeare could very well be playing here with the poetic conventions of Petrarch's standardized metaphor system, in which eyes are typically likened to suns, teeth to pearls, lips to coral, etc. Shakespeare's 'Dark Lady' Sonnet (130) is known for reversing the qualities Petrarch ascribed to his beloved Laura: 'My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun' (see Duncan-Jones, 1997). In the above quoted passage from *The Tempest*, Shakespeare doesn't reverse these metaphors but uses them in a completely new context, thereby articulating the idea of '(sea-)change' themselves.

⁷ In announcing the above-cited fragment from Shakespeare in *Life of the Mind*, Arendt writes: 'Let me now (...) draw attention, not to my 'method', not to my 'criteria', or worse, my 'values' (...) but to what in my opinion is the basic assumption of this investigation' (Arendt, 1978, p. 211). Benjamin would describe some of his metatheoretical considerations in Konvolut 'N' of his *Passagenwerk*, but still he hoped that his 'literary montages' would reveal their truth to the readers without or with a minimum of theoretical clarification.

⁸ What Benjamin describes as 'historicism' is more his own construction than a complete representation of the number of theories that are associated with this notion. There are, for instance, several parallels between Benjamin's own philosophy of history and the historicism of Ranke that he attacks. But the question here is not so much whether Benjamin gives a correct interpretation of historicism (or historical materialism that he sets against it), but what he is trying to express in the 'Theses'.

⁹ Friedlander has read Arendt's Benjamin-essay as harsh criticism: 'Instead of opening the possibility of inheriting him, it would posthumously isolate him' (2002, p. 96).

¹⁰ Vowinckel (2001, p. 202ff.) asserts that the tendency to visualize time as a means of understanding history constitutes the very center of Arendt's approach to history. She makes a comparison with Malraux's idea of the 'imaginary museum' in which seemingly unrelated images are confronted with each other, so that both can be seen in a different way. This idea shows close resemblance to Benjamin's constellations of seemingly unrelated quotations in the *Arcades Project*.

¹¹ In an afterword to a poem collection by the Berlin poet Robert Gilbert, Arendt pictures quotations as words with a 'laurel wreath', that is, with authority. In modern age quotations have lost their authority, they have become *Lorbeerlos*, which is not necessarily bad, 'since we can look upon things as a child again' (Arendt, 1989, p. 295).

¹² Arendt had just started writing a book about judgment, which should have become the final part of the *Life of the Mind* after 'Thinking' and 'Willing', when she died of a heart attack in 1975. A sheet with the heading 'Judging' and two epigraphs was found in her typewriter. The first epigraph, a quote by Cato, would certainly have appealed to Benjamin: 'The victorious cause pleased the gods, but the defeated one pleases Cato.'

¹³ For a critical review of recent developments in cultural studies and *Kulturwissenschaft* in the US and Europe, see Steinfeld (2009). Steinfeld discusses one of the best attended sessions of the last conference of the Cultural Studies Association, 'The University after Cultural Studies.' The main argument was that the mission the American cultural studies association had set itself, namely criticizing elitist, male- and Eurocentric curricula, has lost its urgency, since the humanities themselves have completely changed in the last two decades. Cultural studies is criticized for having no clear subject matter and leading to overly generalized cultural criticism. The situation in Europe is different, since cultural studies have not arisen from 'culture wars' as in the US but as a reaction to overspecialization within the settled disciplines in the humanities. Nevertheless, in Europe the field of *Kulturwissenschaft* is fragile and constantly has to prove its urgency, since it does not only move between disciplines but also influences developments within these disciplines.