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IL PARLAGGIO – RECENSIONI

FREDRIC JAMESON, *The Benjamin Files*, Verso, London-New York 2020, 262 pp.

Walter Benjamin played an important role on the backdrop of Fredric Jameson's thinking on literature. In the collection of *Marxism and Form* (1971) already, a paragraph had the title: *Benjamin, or Nostalgia*; but this time Jameson retracts his first reading of a "melancholic" Benjamin, because, he writes, he is also «the aggressive conversationalist, the alert commentator and diagnostician of the zeitgeist, the ambitious scrivener and journalist, the lover and world traveler» (p. 69). It is also true that melancholy – since humoral theory, then Dürer, Quijote, or the Baroque theater, until Freud – does not leave you without impetus: it is the fixation on an object considered as lost, and it is ardently imaginative; we might say with a metaphor: an object that in Benjamin could be History.

One of the aspects on which Jameson's book focuses is the fact that Benjamin's work presents itself as a cor-

pus of structurally and rhetorically inventive critical texts, from the literary "performativity" point of view – Jameson speaks in some occasions of the essay as «performance» (p. 40). If one thinks about it: Brecht, Asja Lācis, German dramatists of the 17th Century, in some way Kraus, the *theatrum mundi* is more than a fad for Benjamin. Jameson has the merit of discussing minor writings little noted so far, for example the *Epilogue to the Berlin Food Exhibition* (1928), or, more significant, the one about historian and collector Eduard Fuchs, in Chapter 7. And "collecting" is also the compositional style of *The Arcades Project* (1982); it is known that Benjamin's writings make one think – apart from the content they express – for the way they are written. Actually Jameson's reflections – themselves proposed, occasionally, with a "wilder" writing that thrives on the *plaisir du texte* – are fascinating especially when it comes to the most "literary" Benjamin, the Baudelarian one, the chronicler, the odeporic, and also the one of the obscure *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1928), discussed in Chapter 4, which gives also

some new perspectives about how the academic character of the dissertation on *Trauerspiel* influenced its argumentation, or about the possible links, just alluded by Jameson, between *Trauerspiel* and *Musikdrama*, that in the «unmusical» (p. 71) Benjamin seems to have no place.

In addition to the problem of *obscuritas*, of the figuration's high rate, Jameson deals first with the problem of fragmentism – which is not that of the early Romantik, of Friedrich Schlegel, but rather a Leibnizian one, it is as known a kind of monadism. Jameson deals with Benjamin's inclination towards *Denkbilder*, with the concentration of Benjamin's syntax – for which conceptual overload is expressed more in an image-like discourse – especially in relation to *One-Way Street* (1928), according to him Benjamin's «only real book» (p. 17). Indeed, Jameson points out, with a hyperbole, that Benjamin never wrote a real book. As mentioned, also the study on *Trauerspiel* was his habilitation thesis at University of Frankfurt, and was refused by the commission because of its illegibility, putting an end to his academic career before it started. But about that discontinuity in the form, I have a feeling that its reasonable explanation, its necessary reason for being, is to be found in a rhetorical question that speaks for itself: «how to operate with hyperintellectual intensity in a situation in which ideas have become commodities?» (p. 27), Jameson

writes. Only this sentence could open an infinity of considerations. In modernity, even the experience of ideas, or the work of art, is the mystified experience of the goods. It is, as Benjamin calls it, a phantasmagoria – almost the representational, but nearly epistemic mode of modernity, as the baroque one was allegory. In Benjamin, phantasmagoria shapes itself in that dynamic which he condemns as in Brecht's dramaturgical theory: empathic identification. There is a kind of “necrophilic” empathy of the subject with the commodified object. This unconscious state of things – which perhaps Goethe was the first to allegorize, for example with the figures of the undead lemurs: «Aus Bändern, Sehnen und Gebein / Geflickte Halbnaturen» – must be brought to the level of consciousness. This was somehow the project of the Frankfurt School. Benjamin is involved in this project, but his conception of the fetish character is more complex and contradictory. In fact, the most *flâneur* Benjamin, the one who looks for a poise in modernity, the one who reads Baudelaire, Nietzsche, and Auguste Blanqui's *L'éternité par les astres* (1872), seems to imply that the phantasmagoria, and its «eternal return», must somehow be “passed through” all the way.

But the scenario of empathic and mystified identification with the commodity is the scenario of a catastrophe. And History is a catastrophe in

Benjamin – besides, Jameson's *The Political Unconscious* (1981) already began with the motto «Always historicize!» and ended with the Benjaminian, but also Joycean one of the «history itself as one long nightmare». The understanding of this nightmare – in the theses *On the Concept of History* (1950), discussed as congruous in Jameson's last chapter – matches the standstill of historical course, the revolutionary chance as emergency brake. History can flash up through being refracted in a monadic past which lives a figural similitude with our point of view: our present in time of danger – «and surely», tells Jameson with an “actualization” of Benjamin's thinking that is spreading in recent critical literature, «the storm which immobilizes the angel's wings, dooming it to eternal paralysis and retroactive contemplation of the garbage-heap of history [...] is likely to be considered by those who live in it an irreversible state of historical climate change» (p. 239).

Western society saw Benjamin's thinking pass in its historical flow as it did with all the critical thinking of the 20th Century, and with that Century's disasters, ruins: at the best of times, it sclerotized its memory in the hermitage of academy as a cultural heritage. A «making-un-happened», as Adorno says about the way Schönberg's dodecaphonic revolution was “repressed”, in a psychic sense. Jameson's book – for the way it is written,

sometimes more a love declaration to Benjamin than an academic reading – seems also a critic of this state of things. From the motto of the book, «to transpose the crisis into the very heart of language», Jameson focuses on Benjamin's word, which like that of Kafka, or the oral Torah, wants to be perpetually interpreted. The book depicts Benjamin as a critic whose “literariness” was part of the struggle, not just the medium to talk about it. Without understanding this, we would not understand his *obscuritas*, his encryption of the language from the inside, his trying to violate its drift towards instrumentality – *Sündenfall*, as in the essay *On Language as Such and on the Language of Man* (1955) – his trying to open a break into the language, through which redeemed figures of an oppressed past could save a bit of present too.

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