

# Bryn Mawr Review of Comparative Literature

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Volume 2  
Number 2 *Spring 2001*

Article 4

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Spring 2001

## Review of Carol Jacobs, *In the Language of Walter Benjamin.*

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### Recommended Citation

Bernstein, Carol L. (2001). Review of "Review of Carol Jacobs, *In the Language of Walter Benjamin.*," *Bryn Mawr Review of Comparative Literature*: Vol. 2 : No. 2

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**Carol Jacobs, *In the Language of Walter Benjamin*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999. 136 pp. ISBN 0801860318.**

**Reviewed by Carol L. Bernstein, Bryn Mawr College**

The density of Walter's Benjamin's language invites critics to respond in kind, in some unconventional, allusive way. No one does so with more brio than Carol Jacobs, who rises to the challenge in almost every sentence of this short book. No wonder that *In the Language of Walter Benjamin* is such an apt title, for Jacobs sets out not only to exhibit (*ausstellen*) what is "in" Benjamin's language but to perform (*darstellen*) it. She positions herself within Benjamin's language as a matter of critical principle—Benjamin's as well as her own. Both her description of Benjamin's linguistic methods and her argument (and they are usually inseparable) are constructed on Benjamin's ground. The precision conveyed paradoxically through puns and ambiguities, wordplay and ironies; the web woven of quotation, allusion, recurring images and references; epigrams lodged within long paragraphs: such characteristics as these, all to be found in Benjamin's writings, reappear in Jacobs's book. Nevertheless, Jacobs maintains her interpretive stance: in two interconnected groups of essays—one laying out a generic trajectory from autobiography through biography to fiction, the other examining questions of language involving translation, similarity and naming—she scrutinizes Benjamin's oblique approach to selfhood and communication in language. Jacobs's concept of interpretation—what she identifies as the reading of a writing—is not so focused upon language itself that it overlooks related concepts. Rather, the interpretation here increases one's understanding of the way they work: the double dialectic and the constellation, the non-linear idea of history, and the principles of critique that inform so many of Benjamin's writings are caught, as it were, in moments of critical performance. Nor does the interior interpretive stance turn Jacobs's writing into a mere echo of Benjamin's: as she implies, his own critical doctrine would not tolerate such a possibility. Instead, by telling her story in her own voice, "in the voice of a woman" (113), Jacobs honors the concept of nonsensuous similarity, thereby avoiding coincidence or a blend of voices. That is, Benjamin claimed, in "Doctrine of the Similar," that the mimetic in language can appear only in connection with something "alien" as its basis: the "semiotic or communicative element of language." In this respect, if not in others, the critic is closer to Benjamin when she does not simply repeat or imitate his writing.

What Jacobs implies, therefore, is that whatever his ostensible subject, Benjamin presents a rhetorical or performative model of critique. The writings, from *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* to the "Theses on the Philosophy of History," often include comments on what criticism is or does. Commenting on *OGTD*, Jacobs writes, "Criticism . . . shows the work to be a ruin in which factual content has fallen away and makes of the art form a ruin [like the allegorical baroque tragedy]. It is as though criticism were already in the work of art as its potential" (7). A passage in Benjamin's text clarifies the significance of this claim. Far from implying a loss or a critical appropriation of the artwork, the "mortification of the object" (Benjamin's phrase) entails a transformation of (or away from) "historical content" into "truth content" and resembles rather a form of *Erhebung* or sublation in which merely ephemeral beauty gives way to the work's enduring qualities. Because the process occurs "from decade to decade," as Benjamin writes, the critic must confront what is in the ruined work across a temporal gap—at a moment propitious for the ruin's "rebirth." Conversely, Jacobs notes in the chapter on Benjamin's Proust, ". . . as

Benjamin's 'critical' essay indicates the purely figural nature of the literary text, it also marks the fictionality of its own language. The name 'Proust' and the object *A la recherche du temps perdu* are metaphors in the fiction entitled 'Towards the Image of Proust' (57). The critic would thus participate in the "rebirth" not only of life (or biography) as fiction, but of criticism as fiction. In both this example and Benjamin's text, the transformation through critique is also distanced by historical time or critical space. The critic would thus seem to be complicit with the text in a double sense: drawing her interpretive argument from the one posited by the text in question, she nevertheless preserves an awareness of her own strategic moves.

Benjamin himself makes still another distinction between inside and outside in his images: a distinction that Jacobs foregrounds in her *Darstellung*. In *A Berlin Chronicle*, street images govern Benjamin's account of his early years. "It is likely that no one ever masters anything in which he has not known impotence," he writes, using his "poor sense of direction" to exemplify his "impotence before the city." Later, such images as crossing thresholds and standing on the edge of a void accrue to this city map whose master image is that of the labyrinth. Labyrinths, Jacobs remarks, are without beginnings and endings (20-21)—and this is only one of the ways in which they are related to writing. The inner position of the writer/autobiographer, important as it is for observing and acquiring forms of urban knowledge, resembles that of the critic, who must cede power to her textual surroundings in order to strengthen her own voice. Still another image commenting upon labyrinthine self-loss is that of the rolled-up stocking, the kind children find in a laundry basket and like to play with. If one asks what is "in" it and unrolls the stocking to reveal its "contents," there is—precisely—nothing. Apply this to language, or to the self, as Benjamin does in his discussion of Proust, and as Jacobs does in her writing on Benjamin, and the result is both disconcerting and revealing. What seems to signify the self, just as the stocking seems to signify that it contains something, turns out to be an empty sign. The rolled-up stocking is a trap, a children's game played repeatedly by both Proust and Benjamin to mark "the discrepancy between life and text" (47). (Rolled up, the stocking bears an uncanny resemblance to the "Little Hunchback" from Benjamin's childhood, or the spool-shaped figure of Odradek in the essay on Kafka.) Jacobs remarks that in *A Berlin Chronicle*, Benjamin enacts self-revelation by means of "self-burial through a maze of rhetorical figures that leaves nothing as it was" (29): Don't expect to get to the heart of a labyrinth, for negotiating its passages is more important than arriving at a goal. Although it may seem, as many critics have claimed, that Benjamin's writing must be understood through a hermeneutic model, Jacobs tells us that his method, *in his language*, is inseparable from interpretation itself. For that reason, and for the reason "enrolled" in the images of maze and stocking, temporal and linear continuity are the adversaries of his writing, which thrives rather upon fragmentation, montage, repetition and reversal.

Such critical principles are apparent in the structure of *In the Language of Walter Benjamin*. Although the argument develops through biographical and generic motifs toward and through questions of language, the text is marked by anticipations, allusions, cross-references, digressions, and detours, all within a set of rigorous close readings and analyses. Benjamin's recollection of his Aunt Lehmann on Steglitz Street comes to focus on her toy mine enclosed within a glass rhombus, a mine that bears a "non-sensuous connection" to its "apparently real surroundings." Her "'breakable'" voice, Jacobs comments, "speaks 'gläsern'—in a glasslike manner" (31). Moreover, the name of her street, Steglitz, echoes the name of the bird, *Stieglitz*, in her room. Stairs *stiegen* (climbed) to her flat, and *Steiger* (mine inspectors) inhabit the toy.

Despite the aural echoes, these words are not onomatopoeic in relation to their various objects: the observation anticipates the later analysis of “Doctrine of the Similar.” The entire section—from *A Berlin Chronicle*—“hides” (Jacobs’s term) both Proust and Benjamin’s essay on Proust. The toy, the glass rhombus, is Benjamin’s “mine,” in the complex senses of image and object stored for later re-collective use. Such tactful punning, mining the text in order to bring Benjamin’s unconventional rhetoric to light, represents only one striking example of Jacobs’s close reading.

The free associations and cross-cutting prompt one to wonder whether the insistent focus upon texture and weaving, and the turn and return to undoing do not eventually blur or even dissolve the argument. Although the image of weaving runs throughout the book, the originary use (for Jacobs’s purposes) appears toward the beginning of Benjamin’s “On the Image of Proust”: “For the important thing to the remembering author is not what he experienced, but the weaving of his memory, the Penelope work of recollection [*Eingedenken*]. Or should one call it, rather, a Penelope work of forgetting? Is not the involuntary recollection, Proust’s *mémoire involuntaire*, much closer to forgetting than what is usually called memory? And is not this work of spontaneous recollection, in which remembrance is the woof and forgetting the warp, a counterpart to Penelope’s work rather than its likeness? For here the day unravels what the night has woven” (“On the Image of Proust,” in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Volume 2, 1917-1934* [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999], p. 238). Here, as in the other essays, it is Benjamin’s language that sets the terms of interpretation. Jacobs frames her argument by reminding the reader that it is always Benjamin (if not Proust, or Adam, or any of his other texts of origin) who “said it first.” The concept of origin (*Ursprung*), however, has little to do with genealogy or “progressive becoming” (8). It has more to do with “becoming and vanishing,” with springing forth, as the word suggests, out of a whirlpool composed of both processes.

The interpretive game Jacobs plays, therefore, is both a language game and a game of transformation. Like the stocking, that “sign for Proust’s dream world,” interpretation takes place in some marginal territory between dream and waking, self and surroundings, sacred and profane, and—as we saw above—becoming and vanishing. As a figure for involuntary memory, the stocking promises what it cannot deliver: “access to a non-existent plenitude,” whether conceived of as the self or as memories that elude conscious awareness. Within such a model, interpretation cannot come to a final determination, although it can, nevertheless, keep open a realm of rich possibilities. One of them is the transformation into art. If the self is mere figure, that is because Proust’s game is not to retrieve his life but rather to write “so that the image of his own writing may arise out of the discrepancy between life and literature. It rises up out of the articulation of Benjamin’s sentences” (47).

This fine distinction also operates at the level of genre: autobiography gets woven into urban images, or transformed through wordplay into a dream fantasy; biographical essay turns into literary critique. The latter in turn becomes meta-critique through its “awareness” of both its own moves and of the figural nature of literary and critical language. What results is a threshold form, both biographical essay and literary criticism. Figurality may be mystifying, even self-mystifying, but it is not self-negating. The repetition in both the child’s game of unrolling the stocking, or in weaving and unraveling, speaks to the *process* of critique, a joy of uncovering that Jacobs comes to share with Benjamin.

Interpretation, or reading, however, is never as simple as unrolling a stocking to find there is nothing inside. Just as there is an “inside” to Benjamin’s acts of memory (in the labyrinth, in the medium of digging) or criticism (“Intrinsic criticism, Jacobs writes, “appears . . . as a discrepancy indicated by a language of fiction. . . . Benjamin “speaks in the name of another”), so there is an “inside” to Jacobs’s language. “The moment of interpretation,” she writes, “takes place from no privileged, external vantage point” (71). Rather, this moment, this “flash,” is “what Benjamin calls the perception of similarities” (71), arrived at through diverse means, including hashish, reading, and writing (73). It may seem surprising, then, that the immediate effect of translation is to render one’s own language “radically foreign” (76). The relation between original and translation seems more tangential, as Benjamin remarks in an image, than “similar” in his sense of the term. Translation, to conflate the titles of Benjamin’s essay and Jacobs’s chapter, is a “monstrous task.” Its purpose is neither to communicate nor to transform itself organically from the original language into the language of the translator, and it leaves language itself “broken.” Jacobs touches tangentially upon the possibility, as Benjamin himself does, that translation is in some sense (ironic) criticism, only to move on to the suggestion that the translator himself “is abandoned.” Even in the “most perfect” translations of Holderlin, “meaning plunges,” to find a base in the literal language of the holy text—literal “because language and revelation coincide absolutely” (Jacobs’s phrase, 88). The concluding irony of the essay belongs to Jacobs, or rather, to the passage of *The Gospel According to John* to which Benjamin refers: in pure language, it comments upon the very issues that Benjamin and Jacobs have identified.

Jacobs’s chapter on “Doctrine of the Similar” and “On Language as Such and the Language of Man” pursues concepts that seem self-evident, only to foreground their elusiveness. Similarity, traditionally linked to the concept of mimesis, gives way to non-sensuous similarity, a concept crucial insofar as it brings “Doctrine of the Similar” close to the essays on Proust and “On the Concept of History.” Rejecting the linear temporality of both history and biography, which entail steady decline or progress, Benjamin arrives repeatedly at the concept of the constellation, itself belonging to a constellation of terms—constellation, shock, monad, standstill—that oppose simple progress but promise some form of the human, some form of renewal. As Jacobs suggests, the brief life of the constellation at a moment of perception ensures the inclusion of the reader/writer. The constellation’s brevity, and thus its openness to reconstitution, are part of its value for “the birth of the human” (103) signaled at that moment. It is not surprising, then, that Adam’s acts of naming his helpmate in Genesis, which Benjamin scrutinizes in “On Language as Such,” should be the object of Jacobs’s interpretation. “Woman” before the Fall, she is “Eve” after the fall. Here, Jacobs finds, Benjamin “implicitly reread[s] the immaculate reconception of the story of Eve in the story of Mary . . . conceiving the female differently, *doubly*, as woman-and-Eve” (111). Such an act of reading does nothing less than ironize “the teleological structure of typological interpretation.” The doubly named woman-Eve is herself a constellation, Jacobs argues, employing the logic of “neither one [woman] nor the other [Eve] yet both at once” and invoking the site of conception within the conceptual field of a new constellation. Although often her writing is double-voiced, in Benjamin’s language as well as her own, or occasionally polyphonic as she invokes the voices of the Bible or Proust or Benjamin’s dream-doubles, the voice at the end is Jacobs’s (as woman), turning the dense weave of her argument into a narrative.

The book is remarkable for its insight and astute critical imagination. Among an impressive group of writers on Benjamin's language and theory of language, Jacobs stands out for the way in which she foregrounds performance as an element in it—and makes performance part of her *Verstehen*.