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CHAPTER 13

Destruction Preservation, or the Edifying Ruin in Benjamin and Brecht

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Abstract

Walter Benjamin's short radio piece for children, "The Fall of Herculaneum and Pompeii," part of a mini-series on natural-historical disasters broadcast on Radio Berlin in 1931 and Bertolt Brecht's *Kriegsfibel* (*War Primer*), a collection of "photo-epigrams" compiled between 1937 and 1944, bookend a period of displacement, personal and political catastrophe and intense reflection on the uses and abuses of mythical thought and the humanist paradigm. Specific to the moment of their production and deploying genres and registers that speak to projects of transformation of enemy practices and "defunct forms," these writings may also be seen as staging dialectical negotiations of preservation and destruction, set in aftermath sites where ruin and critical recollection hold the line of defence against "dark times" and prepare the ground for radical edification in the future.

Keywords

Fascism; ruin value; Pompeii; *Bildung*; photo-epigrams

Ruin Value

In 1934, Adolf Hitler "surprised" the architect Albert Speer with his first major commission:

The temporary bleachers on the Zeppelin Field in Nuremberg were to be replaced by a permanent stone installation. I struggled over those first sketches until, in an inspired moment, the idea came to me; a mighty flight of stairs topped and enclosed by a long

colonnade, flanked on both ends by stone abutments. Undoubtedly it was influenced by the Pergamum altar. (Speer 1970, 96)

That collaboration was the first in a number of grand projects in the neo-classical mode through which the fascist leader was to create for his nation a portfolio of monumental constructions that would “transmit his time and its spirit to posterity,” representing in perpetuity the growing might of the heroic German spirit in triumphant recovery from the humiliation of the First World War. Speer’s recollection of the vision behind the undertaking is a gift to the scholar of ruin:

To clear ground for [the Zeppelin Field], the Nuremberg street-car depot had to be removed. I passed by its remains after it had been blown up. The iron reinforcements protruded from concrete debris and had already begun to rust. One could easily visualize their further decay. This dreary sight led me to some thoughts which I later propounded to Hitler under the pretentious heading of “A Theory of Ruin Value.” The idea was that buildings of modern construction were poorly suited to form that “bridge of tradition” to future generations which Hitler was calling for. ... By using special materials and by applying certain principles of statics, we should be able to build structures which even in a state of decay, after hundreds or (such were our reckonings) thousands of years would more or less resemble Roman models. To illustrate my ideas I had a romantic drawing prepared. It showed what the reviewing stand on the Zeppelin Field would look like after generations of neglect, overgrown with ivy, its columns fallen, the walls crumbling here and there, but the outlines still recognizable. (Speer 1970, 96-7)

Here is a vignette, then, of the workings of fascism as a myth machine, or, as Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy call it, after the Platonic model of myth, “a *fictioning*, whose role is to propose, if not to impose, models or types ... in imitation of which an individual, or a city, or an entire people, can grasp themselves and identify themselves” (1990, 297). This exemplary fashioning in Speer’s hands (or eyes) produces monuments that are deferent in their citation of classical and romantic styles, but also precocious in their ruin-readiness. While they may partly evoke the “beautiful ruins” of eighteenth-century aristocratic gardens, these imagined constructions are not merely ornamental, but rather ideological fancies. Nor are they allegories in the German Baroque mode, remnant-reminders

of the ever-presence of death,¹ but guarantors of permanence, or at the very least proud survival. As Speer put it in his memoirs, like Hitler, “I, too, was intoxicated by the idea of using drawings, money, and construction firms to create stone witnesses to history, and thus affirm our claim that our work would survive for a thousand years” (1970, 69).² In a mimetic sense, then, these “stone witnesses” are mock, wannabe allegories, presumptuous figurations of deathless style. While the neo-classical architectural style was already ‘a manifesto carved in stone, speaking to the inhabitants of towns and cities across the Nazi empire in the language of imperialism,’ as Johann Chapoutot puts it (2016, 260), the additional feature of its ruin-worthiness literally reinforced the citational, generative power to project the greatness of a fragmented yet persisting neo-antiquity into the future. There is a strong theatrical element to this vision, but also a didacticism – an attempted *Bildung*, a project of identity-formation and cultivation, and a rebuilding of history on mythical foundations.

The instructive value of the future ruin was of course based on the assumption of longevity, at least enough for the passing of time alone to bequeath the magnificent constructions as recognizable remnants to future generations; what happened instead was the near-total destruction of German cities by Allied air raids. Berlin alone endured a reported 363 attacks and 45,517 tons of bombs between November 1943 and the end of the war (Brett 2016, 27), which precipitated the delivery-into-ruin of Hitler’s architectural vision. The Speer effect *did* account for the remarkable “verticality” of Berlin ruins, noted, for instance, by the Polish journalist Isaac Deutscher (then a correspondent for the *Economist*), for whom the city “was reminiscent of a strangely well-preserved ruin from the ancient world,” as “it [stood] upright in front of the observer to a truly astonishing degree” (Brett 2016, 35); but by the mid 1940s, 80% of historical German city centres was reduced to rubble. For Speer himself, by then Nazi Germany’s Minister of Armaments and Munitions, the theory of ruin value was superseded by a different kind of logistics: in a brief interlude between times of captivity in 1945, he was set up at the castle of Glücksburg to help the United States Strategic Bombing

¹ See, for instance, Walter Benjamin’s account of that mode in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (first published in 1928): “This is the heart of the allegorical way of seeing, of the baroque, secular explanation of history as the Passion of the world; its importance resides solely in the stations of its decline” (Benjamin 1985, 166). Benjamin links allegory with the “baroque cult of the ruin” in an aphoristic double definition that has gained much traction in studies of his thinking: “Allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things” (1985, 178). For an application of this Benjaminian formula to a reading of Henry James’s use of the ruin as mental analogue, see the essay by Chryssa Marinou in the present volume.

² For a full account of Hitler’s taste for antiquity, see Chapoutot 2016, 265-84.

Survey accumulate and assess data on the effects of bombings on both sides. As he recalled, “we went systematically through the various aspects of the war in the air ... During the next several days an almost comradely tone prevailed in our ‘university of bombing’” (1970, 500). On the “curriculum,” undoubtedly, will have been one of the flashpoints of the war, in July 1943, when the British and American air forces mounted a week-long campaign of raids on the city of Hamburg. It was at the time the heaviest assault in the history of aerial warfare, later called the “Hiroshima of Germany” by British officials. The attack killed 42,600 civilians and wounded 37,000, virtually destroying most of the city. Its codename was Operation Gomorrah (Sebald 2003, 26).

We will return to Gomorrah in a moment; for now, I want to broaden the focus to include a project of edification through the anticipation and contemplation of ruin, which may serve as a counterpoint to the type of hubristic exemplarity and mimetic identification through myth envisioned by the fascist model. For this, I turn to the thinking of two German contemporaries of Speer and Hitler.

Amongst the Rubble

ZIFFEL: The best school for dialectics is emigration. The sharpest dialectical philosophers are the refugees. They’ve been made refugees by great changes and all they study is changes. They sit amongst the rubble in their camps, under the stars, plotting victory from the catastrophe all around them. They study what their enemies have done to them to spot the tiniest contradiction, then wham, they’re into the crack with their knives out.

KALLE: Long live dialectics.

(Brecht 1986, 13)

A refugee from Nazi Germany since 1933, Bertolt Brecht wrote *Conversations in Exile*, a series of dialogues between a former scientist and a former labourer on the theme of displacement and war, in the early 1940s in Finland and Los Angeles. Back in 1934 and 1938, Brecht was often engaged in conversation with the fellow exile, collaborator and friend, Walter Benjamin. As Erdmut Wizisla notes in a recent account of that important friendship, for Benjamin, Brecht was one of those creative spirits “who begin by clearing a tabula rasa.” His “simplifications” were “not agitational but constructive,” as Benjamin put it, “and ... [his] work ... allowed theatre ‘to take on its most sober and unassuming, even its

most reduced, form – to get it, as it were, through the winter in this way” (2016, 231, 232). Brecht and his work made it through the winter; Benjamin didn’t. During those fierce but productive years, they anticipated catastrophe and reflected on ruin in constructive, edifying ways. As the extract from Brecht’s *Conversations in Exile* suggests, “dark times” required conceptual rigour and vigilance, with which to address “great changes” and unique contradictions: while exile may have provided a safe distance, however precarious and troubling in its own right, there remained the clear and present danger of the enemy claims on the future. By 1938, that danger had drawn closer: on the third (and last) summer visit to Brecht and his wife in Denmark, Benjamin recalled in a diary entry the urgency with which Brecht defended his decision to include part of the lyric cycle “Children’s Songs” in a new volume of poems:

Brecht is envisioning an epoch without history; his poem addressed to the graphic artists presents an image of that age. A few days later, he tells me that he considers the advent of this age more probable than a victory over fascism. Soon afterward, something else emerged – yet another justification for incorporating the “Children’s Songs” into the “Poems from Exile.” Brecht, standing before me in the grass, spoke with rare forcefulness: “In the struggle against them, it is vital that nothing be overlooked. They don’t think small. They plan thirty thousand years ahead. Horrendous things. Horrendous crimes. They will stop at nothing. They will attack anything. Every cell convulses under their blows. So we mustn’t forget a single one. They distort the child in the womb. We can under no circumstances forget the children.”

(Benjamin 2002c, 339-40)

Brecht was one of Benjamin’s oracles at that moment, sharing some of the features of a particular type, important for his thinking, that he had presciently configured as early as 1931:

The destructive character sees nothing permanent. But for this very reason he sees ways everywhere. Where others encounter walls or mountains, there, too, he sees a way. But because he sees a way everywhere, he has to clear things from it everywhere. Not always by brute force; sometimes by the most refined. Because he sees ways everywhere, he always stands at a crossroads. No moment can know what the next will

bring. What exists he reduces to rubble – not for the sake of the rubble, but for that of the way leading through it. (Benjamin, 2005a, 542)³

It is worth noting the difference between this type and the character of the “inner emigrant” that Hannah Arendt made famous in her account of the immediate pre-war years: “As its very name suggests, the ‘inner emigration’ was a curiously ambiguous phenomenon. It signified on the one hand that there were persons inside Germany who behaved as if they no longer belonged to the country, who felt like emigrants; on the other hand it indicated that they had not in reality emigrated, but had withdrawn to an interior realm, into the invisibility of thinking and feeling” (1968, 19). Arendt’s model of the virtual or actual “refugee style” as enforced but productive alienation is still the most influential testimony to that historical constellation. For Arendt, that style comprised linguistic and psychological effects that correspond to an oblique, ironic perspective – as summarized by Lyndsey Stonebridge: “speak[ing] double, parrot[ing] oneself ironically ... Dreaming of oneself as an enemy alien, or as a remnant; this is the psychopathology of the crisis of international human rights which was inaugurated in the early part of the twentieth century” (2011, 75, 83). It is against this diagnosis of an internalised ironic detachment that I want to position Benjamin and Brecht, however, seeing instead in their work a strategic deliberation and deployment of the critical resources of the ruin.

Defunct Forms

In 1939, writing on Brecht’s work, in “What Is The Epic Theater? (II),” Benjamin makes an important distinction:

[According to Brecht], an actor should reserve to himself the possibility of stepping out of character artistically. At the proper moment, he should insist on portraying an individual who reflects on his part. It would be wrong to think at such a moment of Romantic irony Romantic irony has no didactic aim. Basically, it demonstrates only the philosophical sophistication of the author who ... always keeps in mind that the world may ultimately prove to be a theater. (Benjamin 2006b, 306-7)

³ According to Fredric Jameson, the prototype for this “destructive character” was actually Karl Kraus, not Brecht. See Jameson 1992, 26.

Benjamin's clarification suggests that the ironist's position, or put in literary and philosophical terms, Romantic irony, may be too familiar to contemporary (German) audiences, and as an expert on the matter (having written a doctoral thesis on *The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism* in 1912), he makes a point of disabusing prospective recipients of Brecht's work. The emphasis on didacticism as opposed to irony interests me here, as it may help identify a shared aim that comes to the fore in the work of the two writers. Already in 1931, Benjamin had drawn a line between the nihilistic "left-wing melancholy" or "know-all irony" of Weimar poets whom he accused of "complacency and fatalism," and Brecht's "political lyricism" (2005c, 424, 426). In later pieces, such as the 1935 account of the *Threepenny Novel*, he returned to the necessary Brechtian treatment:

There are many who consider the dialectician a lover of subtleties. So it is uncommonly useful when Brecht puts his finger on the "crude thinking" that dialectics produces as its antithesis, includes within itself, and needs. ... The forms of crude thinking change slowly, for they are created by the masses. We can still learn things from defunct forms. (Benjamin 2002b, 7)

There is an important difference, then, between the "hollow forms" of "former spiritual goods," "absentmindedly caressed" by the ineffective, quietist ironists castigated by Benjamin in "Left-Wing Melancholy" (2005c, 424-5),⁴ and the "defunct forms" created by the masses from which "we can still learn." Against the emphasis on the "crudeness" of the thinking as opposed to its dialectical impetus, and against the received perception of Benjamin as the emblematic solitary and melancholy thinker, I see a strong current in his work of the 1930s that generates projects of intellectual recuperation within the didactic and empowering frame of a new German *Bildung*, projects of popular cultivation in the classical mode.⁵ In that he was not alone; as Jean-Michel Palmier notes in his comprehensive study of *Weimar in Exile*, the German intelligentsia of the late 1920s and 30s identified a common

⁴ Namely, the poet, novelist and journalist Erich Kästner, author of the popular children's book *Emil und die Detektive* (Emile and the Detectives; 1928), the journalist and historian of the German Democratic Party Franz Mehring, and the journalist, poet and essayist Kurt Tucholsky, members of a "left-wing intelligentsia," which in Benjamin's account is presented as "the decayed bourgeoisie's mimicry of the proletariat" (2005c, 424).

⁵ On the philosophical and political resonances and cultural contestations of the German *Bildung*, see Kettler and Lauer 2005.

cause in “show[ing] what [the] supposed [fascist] ‘Germanity’ had falsified, but also to emphasize the extent to which the classical German heritage was indissociable from those values now trampled on by the Nazis.” (2017, 290).

Benjamin’s individual projects included attempts at popularising, reframing for the moment of danger and thus defending an intellectual heritage against the enemy. One such example is *Deutsche Menschen* (*German People*), a collection of letters for which Benjamin wrote a preface and commentaries and which was published in Switzerland in 1936 under the (non-Jewish) pseudonym Detlef Holtz. The twenty-five letters featured in the book date from the period 1783-1883 and among the authors included are Lichtenberg, Johann Heinrich Voss, Hölderlin, the Grimm brothers, Goethe, David Friedrich Strauss, and Georg Büchner. A copy of the book that once belonged to Benjamin’s sister and was found in a Zurich antique shop bears the dedication: “This ark, built on the Jewish model, for Dora – from Walter. November 1936.” As Peter Szondi notes, “One may well apply to the ark of *Deutsche Menschen* these lines from [Benjamin’s] *Theses on the Philosophy of History*: ‘Only *that* historian has the gift of kindling the sparks of hope in the past who is thoroughly imbued with this idea: even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to win’” (1978, 505-6).

The selected letters are Benjamin’s “conversations in exile” in more than one sense: the letter-form is of course conversational in one respect, but also lends itself and poignantly so to the displaced perspective of the exile. The use of the non-Jewish pseudonym underscored in the dedication to his sister in a very Jewish way, adds biographical and intellectual resonances, as does of course the fact of Benjamin’s own exile in Paris at the time. In a literal sense too, the selection is apt as the letters in Benjamin’s *Deutsche Menschen* were written by German intellectuals in exile in an era marked by the influence of the Enlightenment on the German bourgeoisie, as well as in three notable cases, by witnesses to the French Revolution. According to Patrick H. Hutton, Benjamin collected the letters “as testimony of an enlightened German culture now obscured by the rise of National Socialism” and believed that they “possessed a potentially liberating power” (2008, 239-40). As Theodor Adorno, a fellow exile, collaborator and correspondent put it, though effectively defunct as a high-art form, “letters were for Benjamin natural-history illustrations of what survives the ruin of time” (qtd. in Hutton 2008, 238). In Benjamin’s terms, what survived, revealed in his collection were “the lineaments of a ‘secret Germany’ that people nowadays would much prefer to shroud in heavy mist” (2005b, 466).

This particular story of “a radical German Enlightenment reduced to exile and obscurity,” as Irving Wohlfarth puts it (2005, 38), speaks of the present condition of the storyteller himself, then, but also of an obscured vision in ruins that stands as a counterimage to the presumptuously monumental “Germania” of Hitler and Speer. In this sense, Benjamin’s project proposes an alternative theory of ruin value,⁶ or a sustained mnemonics and reclamation of the past for future use. What Benjamin preserves here is the destruction of an original vision, but also the conviction that amongst its ruins remain signs of a salutary witnessing, fragments of the past that may be defunct, but ripe for strategic reconstitution.

Learning from Ruin

“The Fall of Herculaneum and Pompeii,” Benjamin’s radio piece for children broadcast on Radio Berlin on September 18, 1931, and Brecht’s *War Primer*, a collection of photo-epigrams produced between 1940 and 1944, bookend those ruinous times. In their treatment of the classical trope of the instructive rumination on ruins, the foregrounding of the witness’s perspective, and the invocation of the works’ pedagogical effect, they share a common purpose. Benjamin’s piece, the first in a series of brief accounts of natural-historical catastrophes,⁷ introduces an iconic site. The pedigree of Pompeii as prime ruin-gazing material, and as cultural and literary spectacle is well-established:⁸ since the first discovery of human remains in 1765 that prompted a series of highly dramatic ruin-reflective visits by scholars, artists and emperors,⁹ and the popular success of Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s 1834 *The Last Days of Pompeii*, and its numerous filmic adaptations (7 versions alone between 1910 and 1935), the site has been the setting for countless iterations of its visual, allegorical, pedagogical, even (psycho)analytical potential (such as Freud’s close reading of Wilhelm Jensen’s 1902 novel *Gradiva*, one of his first literary forays into the field of psychic archaeology).¹⁰

⁶ On this juxtaposition, see also Mark Featherstone (2005, 319) and Naomi Stead (2003).

⁷ The broadcast on Pompeii was followed on October 31 of the same year by “The Lisbon Earthquake.” The series continued with “Theater Fire in Canton” (November 5, 1931), “The Railway Disaster at the Firth of Tay” (February 4, 1932), and “The Mississippi Flood of 1927” (March 23, 1932).

⁸ See Blix 2009, Hales and Paul 2011, Thomas 2017.

⁹ See Dwyer (2010).

¹⁰ See Freud ([1907] 1959, 3-95).

Pompeii is also a leitmotif in the related themes of ruination and revolutionary discharge in Benjamin's own *Arcades Project*. As Jeffrey Mehlman points out, Pompeii was "a constant reference for Benjamin during his work on the Paris Arcades. [...] Precision of delineation and apocalyptic ending are the two most charged features of the European imagination's fascination with (and excavation of) Pompeii, and, in a different distribution, [...] were central to Benjamin's own excavation of the Paris of the nineteenth century" (1993: 23). Pompeii is thus a meaningful and strategic analogue for Benjamin's Paris in the Arcades compendium, where, as Esther Leslie puts it, "[r]uin and devastation recur, as motif and historical fact [...], as a natural phenomenon and a social one" (Leslie 2006, 108): as Benjamin notes in Convolut C [Ancient Paris, Catacombs, Demolitions, Decline of Paris], "Paris is a counterpart in the social order to what Vesuvius is in the geographic order: a menacing, hazardous massif, an ever-active hotbed of revolution. But just as the slopes of Vesuvius, thanks to the layers of lava that cover them, have been transformed into paradisaal orchards, so the lava of revolutions provides uniquely fertile ground for the blossoming of art, festivity, fashion" ([C1,6] Benjamin 1999, 83).

The 1931 radio piece for children starts with a mythical reference to the ancient Greek labyrinth where the "hideous monster" Minotaur, half man-half bull, awaited its regular victims:

Have you ever heard of the Minotaur? He was the hideous monster that dwelt in a labyrinth in Thebes. Every year a virgin was sacrificed by being thrown into this labyrinth, whose hundreds of meandering, branching and crisscrossing paths made it impossible for her to find her way out, so she was eventually eaten by the monster; that is, until Theseus was given a ball of thread by the Theban king's daughter. (Benjamin 2014, 152)

Benjamin stages his listeners' entry into the world of the past in the fabulistic, magical way he used elsewhere as a kind of *coup de mémoire*,¹¹ or as an image-marker for the primitive urban underworld.¹² He drops the mythical but proceeds with an atmospheric, uncanny effect that serves as a form of caution too:

¹¹ See "Berlin Childhood around 1900 (Final Version)" (Benjamin 2002a, 352).

¹² See the entry C1a, 2 [Ancient Paris, Catacombs, Demolitions, Decline of Paris], in *The Arcades Project* (Benjamin 1999, 84).

How often it happened that, while walking through the dead city with one of my friends from Naples or Capri, I turned to him, pointing out a faded painting on a wall or a mosaic underfoot, only to find myself suddenly alone; then anxious minutes would pass as we called out each other's name before finding out each other again. You mustn't think that you can stroll through this defunct Pompeii as if it were a museum of antiquities. (2014, 152)

The eeriness of Pompeii, maze of ruins, induces in the visitor "a strange state" (2014, 153), compounded by the fact that, as Benjamin explains, the city was already partly a ghost: sixteen years before the eruption, a "horrific" earthquake had almost destroyed the city. Its final "fall" is told in dramatic detail through two long quotations from the letters written to the historian Tacitus by Pliny the Younger. "These letters may be the most celebrated in the world. They tell us not only about the events that transpired, but also about how they were understood," Benjamin notes (2014, 154). Pliny the Younger's extraordinary eyewitness experience is contrasted in Benjamin's telling to the short-sightedness of those residents of Pompeii whose "primary concern was saving their possessions, leaving them too little time to save themselves" (2014, 155). The subtle moral lesson is reinforced by Benjamin in a final flourish that forges a link between the then and now:

Over hundreds of years the city vanished from memory. In the last century, however, as the city reemerged from the Earth with its shops, taverns, theaters, wrestling schools, temples, and baths, the Vesuvius eruption of 79 A.D., which destroyed the city two millennia ago, appeared in a whole new light: what for its contemporaries meant the destruction of a flourishing city, for us today meant its preservation. A preservation so precise and so detailed that we can read the hundreds of small inscriptions that covered Pompeii's public walls the same way leaflets and posters cover ours ... Of these hundreds of inscriptions, we will conclude with one, which we can well imagine was the last; as the menacing, fiery glow fell over Pompeii, a Christian or Jew well versed in such matters must have scrawled this final and uncanny inscription: "Sodom and Gomorrah." (2014, 157)

The writing on the wall is a riddle and an epigraph at once, a last word and a warning. Its preservation spells destruction (as it evokes an archetypal scene of ruination), and a memory

image, which persists (and flashes up in a moment of danger) as an interpretative code. The graffito he isolates for commentary presents a visual gag, a snapshot of a petrified, emblematic *memento mori*, capturing and interpellating, forcing the gaze of the visitor (from the future) to enact a “backward look” – such as the look that crystallised Lot’s wife and forever deprived Orpheus of his muse, or on which Benjamin’s “angel of history” is unable to act as he is blown into the future.¹³ Benjamin’s inscription may also suggest that ruination is a necessary corrective to memory, or rather, memorialisation; its ambivalent temporality (as it is still not clearly established that there were in fact Christians in Pompeii at that time,)¹⁴ compounds the prescience of the message: whether carved before or after the eruption, the fragment resonates by establishing its own continuum. What carries meaning and weight here, of course, is the insight the inscription of the Biblical name affords into “how [the events] were understood,” rather than the fact of a true or false consciousness of them. It may be argued, then, that the piece ends as it begins, with an evocation of mythical thinking, but if so, it is a frisson and a fear that may be recuperated, harnessed to the cause of edification of future residents of “flourishing” cities.

The myth of Sodom and Gomorrah is subtly weaponized here in an invocation of exemplarity that introduces an ambivalence in the eloquent message of the ruin. In that sense, the inscription is oracular; preserved within this act of citation is the certainty of destruction, an iterative process that may overcome but not silence fully the possibility of critical witnessing. Had he survived the war, one can only speculate on what Benjamin would have thought of the later iteration of destruction wreaked in the name of that mythical site of catastrophe, namely the Allied bombers’ Operation Gomorrah in 1943.¹⁵ The date of the broadcast (1931) is a few years away too from the bombings of the Spanish Civil War, another Gomorrah, which he and Brecht followed on the radio while in Denmark, but the

¹³ See “On the Concept of History”: “His eyes are wide, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how the angel of history must look. His face is turned toward the past. Where a chain of events appears before us, he sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise and has got caught in his wings; it is so strong that the angel can no longer close them. This storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows toward the sky” (Benjamin 2006c, 392).

¹⁴ See Beard 2012 on this conundrum.

¹⁵ On this hypothesis, see Pensky 2011, 77.

thinking of that earlier period already demonstrates a concern with the training necessary for receiving images of the past as infused with present danger (and vice versa).

As edificatory ruin, another “stone witness,” Benjamin’s Pompeii anticipates the final contribution to a radical *Bildung* for ruinous times to which this essay will now turn. In 1937 Brecht wrote a first series of anti-Nazi epigrams under the title “German War Primer,” which were published in the Moscow magazine *Das Wort* and set by the composer Hans Eisler as variations for unaccompanied chorus titled *Against War*. They were fruits of exile and writings on the wall. The ancient Greek epigram was one of the “defunct forms” Brecht found most relevant for the time spent witnessing from afar the rising tide of war. From the fall of Barcelona, the Spanish Civil War to the Munich agreement and the Nazi onslaught, the period (spent in various places of exile) was a prolonged reflection on the ability of language and art to capture the reality of disaster. The “political lyricism” that Benjamin had celebrated in his account of Brecht, combined with an urgent desire for “concreteness” and a purging of language from fascist propaganda (a “linguistic cleanup,” as Brecht put it [2017, 88]) made out of Brecht’s personal reportage an ABC of humanity at war. For Benjamin, who commented in late 1938-early 1939 on the collection, Brecht’s formal choice was pertinent:

The “Kriegsfibel” is written in a “lapidary” style. This word comes from the Latin *lapis*, meaning “stone,” and refers to the style which was developed for inscriptions. Its most important characteristic was brevity. This resulted, first, from the difficulty of inscribing words in stone, and, second, from an awareness that anyone addressing subsequent generations ought not to waste words. ... Accordingly, the character of the “Kriegsfibel” can be seen as arising from a unique contradiction: words which through their poetic form will conceivably survive the coming apocalypse preserve the gesture of a message hastily scrawled on a fence by someone fleeing his enemies.

(Benjamin 2006a, 240)

The composition of the work which would eventually be published as the *War Primer* is recorded partly in the journals Brecht kept meticulously while in exile; on 25 July 1940, he writes of the anthology of epigrams his son had brought to Finland: “the mood of these greek [sic] epigrams is set by their marvellous concreteness, together with their sense of how a specific wind (evening wind, dawn wind, april wind, wind off the snows) will stir the leaves and fruit on a given tree” (1993, 80). The journals themselves are a remarkable collagistic text, a scrapbook of diary entries and clippings from contemporary magazines and

newspapers, which are then recycled into the mixed medium of the *War Primer*, comprising a series of 85 ‘photo-epigrams’, or quatrains that epigrammatically comment on, explicate, lament, animate and echo an equal number of photographs from the popular press. This collection of “poor monuments, an aid to critical remembering,” as David Evans puts it (Evans 2003, 9), completed in 1944 and published after a struggle with various authorities in 1955,¹⁶ can be approached via various entry points: as “the last great achievement of a montage culture focusing on the photograph as historical document” (Evans 2012, 174), as an example of the film-strip technique that Benjamin identified in his analysis of Brecht’s theatre (Evans, 2003, 8), or as a series of “perfect instants,” arranged in the manner of Diderot’s didactic tableaux that Brecht (like Eisenstein) greatly admired.¹⁷ For Diderot, as Roland Barthes notes, and in Eisenstein’s and Brecht’s redeployment, these “crucial” instants are “hieroglyph[s] in which can be read at a single glance ... the present, the past and the future; that is, the historical meaning of the represented action” (Barthes 1977, 73).¹⁸

The first photo-epigram presents the Führer in hypnotic, magician mode, as per the established trope of the Cagliostro-type figure that writers like Thomas Mann had configured in prescient tales of dangerous demagoguery in the late 1920s.¹⁹ “Like one who dreams the road ahead is steep / I know the way Fate has prescribed for us / That narrow way towards a precipice. / Just follow. I can find it in my sleep.” The second cuts to the material base, “brothers” building “iron wagons” for the war, while the third photo-epigram fuses the ancient motif of the “sunken ships” with the image of a woman bathing on the Spanish coast, hands and feet coated in “black oil,” “the only trace left” of that war that set brother against brother. Subsequent photograms animate natural scenes, agitated by the impending disaster (nos 6-7), followed by a series on air bombing (nos 16-19 and 23-25) initiated by a press photograph of bomber pilots, all-too human agents of destruction, that changes the scale and by giving the bombed city a “voice” turns the table on clichéd ruin-gazing; photo-epigram no 22 returns to the material base, offering a poignant comment on war as the continuation of business by other means: a photograph of children gathered around the exits of London air-

¹⁶ For a full account of the text’s fortunes, see John Willett’s “Afterword,” in Brecht 2017, 87-94.

¹⁷ In “Diderot, Brecht, Eisenstein,” Barthes reports that “Round about 1937, Brecht had the idea of founding a *Diderot Society*, a place for pooling theatrical experiments and studies – doubtless because he saw in Diderot, in addition to the figure of a great materialist philosopher, a man of the theatre” (Barthes 1977, 78). For a study of Brecht’s theatrical debt to Diderot, see Von Held 2011.

¹⁸ On Diderot’s ‘hieroglyphs’, see Berri 2000 and Wettlaufer 2003.

¹⁹ See for instance Mann’s 1929 novella *Mario und der Zauberer* (*Mario and the Magician*).

raid shelters carrying prams with blankets and mattresses available to hire, along with their own reserved places in the shelter, for a price: “For older than their bombers is the hunger / That they’ve unleashed on us.”²⁰ In the final image, a strong, direct awakening from the trance of the first photogram, a student audience in a place of learning throws up a visual riposte to the image of Hitler as orator-in-a-trance at the very start of the book: “And now don’t hide your head, and don’t desert / But learn to learn, and try to learn for what.”

True to its title, Brecht’s “primer” begins with an image of mystification and ends with one of its salutary opposites, a scene of instruction, and perhaps caution. It is interesting to note that the instructor/authority figure is missing from the last photograph, though still present in the formal address of the accompanying epigram. As an ark of images and inscriptions, it preserves destruction concretely, one might say “crudely,” as a fable and as a manual for disenchanting it (the German word *fibel* contains both senses). By revisiting the Greek poetic mode and juxtaposing it to the image in mass circulation, Brecht repurposes both. Like Benjamin’s Pompeii for children, the seemingly inert ruins (of cities and humans) in Brecht’s collection speak of an incomplete, ongoing process of radical awakening. To the phantasmagoria of the fascist dream and its beautiful ruins-to-be, they issue a warning and a memory flash from the immediate past for present and future edification.

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²⁰ The photograph, so evocative of *Mother Courage*, Brecht’s prescient war play, written in 1939, is a clipping from an unidentified Swedish paper dated 3 December 1940.

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