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Walter Benjamin for Historians

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Review Essay
Walter Benjamin for Historians

VANESSA R. SCHWARTZ

Pedagogic side of this undertaking: "To educate the image-making medium within us, raising it to a stereoscopic and dimensional seeing into the depths of historical shadows." The words are from Rudolf Borchardt's *Epilegomena zu Dante*, v. 1. [Berlin 1923] pp. 56–7.

Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (N 1, 8), 458.

CERTAIN INTELLECTUAL FIGURES inform and even set the theoretical parameters of historical and historiographical discourse at particular moments. If Michel Foucault seemed to emerge as the philosopher for historians in the 1980s, Walter Benjamin's ascent in American historical circles happened sometime in the 1990s and is not yet over. The latest stir around Benjamin arrives with the recent publication of the long-awaited translation from German and French of his unfinished magnum opus, which he described as "the theater of all my struggles and all my ideas," known in English as *The Arcades Project*.¹ Popular critical opinion about it has ranged from architectural critic Herbert Muschamp's delight in what he dubbed a "towering literary event" to Mark Kingwell's trace of contempt for "an intellectual folly, a massive and spectacular ruin."² Part encyclopedia of the nineteenth century, part model of a philosophy of history for the twentieth century, its more than 1,000 pages help to qualify the Harvard University Press edition as a major event in scholarship.

The English translation of *The Arcades Project* offers an occasion to reconsider the set of insights and organized chaos that lay at the center of Walter Benjamin's work. *The Arcades Project* needs to be understood in the context of what Benjamin called his "Parisian production cycle"—his work from *One-Way Street* written in 1927 to his "Theses on the Philosophy of History" in 1940.³ It is a body of work that

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¹ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, trans. (Cambridge, Mass., 1999), translators' foreword, x.

² *New York Times* (January 16, 2000): B1; Mark Kingwell, "Arcadian Adventures: Walter Benjamin, the Connoisseur of Everyday Life," *Harper's* (March 2000): 70–76, quote p. 71.

³ Margaret Cohen, *Profane Illumination: Walter Benjamin and the Paris of Surreal Revolution* (Berkeley, Calif., 1993), 3. The other Benjamin essays that are central are "Surrealism—The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia" (1929), "A Short History of Photography" (1931), "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936), "The Story Teller" (1936), "Eduard Fuchs,

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