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There I was, a fairly young second-year graduate student in New York City. My graduate career was bifurcated between anthropology at the New School for Social Research—an institution closely tied to German traditions of critical, interdisciplinary scholarship—and the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, which is devoted to preserving and transmitting the vital heritage of East European Jewish culture. I had come there straight from college on the West Coast. It was the late 1970s, a heady time (as the cliché runs), or perhaps better the tail end of one. I was as devoted to activist scholarship as I was to learning about “my” East European Jewish heritage.

The difficulty in combining the two was marked by the trip between my two schools. The New School Graduate Faculty was located in a former bargain department store on 14th Street (that building has been demolished and the Graduate Faculty has built a spanking new one on its spot). YIVO, though by no means a wealthy institution, was located in the magnificent former Vanderbilt Mansion at 86th Street and Fifth Avenue (now Ronald Lauder’s Neue Galerie, since YIVO moved into the new Center for Jewish History on 16th Street).

Getting back and forth by subway wasn’t the hard part, of course. What perplexed me at first was a more abstract issue. There was a yawning gap, brutally carved out by the combined effects of modernization, immigration, Stalinism, and the Nazis, between myself and my Yiddish-speaking ancestors. Yet the attempt to somehow bridge that gap risked seeming a merely personal quest, or even (in the eyes of some of my radical friends) a chauvinistic one. What did it have to do with the traditions of radical, engaged, and universalist scholarship I was learning about at the New School?

In my second year at the New School I took a course with Professor Trent Schroyer on “Cultural Surplus in America.” Honestly, I don’t quite remember what the concept of “cultural surplus” conveyed. I do remember it as the most intensely engaging seminar on the politics of culture I’ve ever had the privilege of joining. Still, like many of my students at Cornell today, I found myself at a loss for a paper topic. Now, I can’t say I pride myself on my photographic memory, but the following scene is etched in my brain: I’m sitting across from Trent in his office, asking him to suggest a topic. He reaches onto his bookshelf, and hands me a slim paperback, published by Schocken. He hands it over to me, saying, “Well, here’s something I haven’t been able to make much sense of, but with your interest in Jewish culture, you might find it stimulating.”

The book was Walter Benjamin’s *Illuminations*, the first volume of this great German-Jewish critic and thinker’s work to be collected and published in English translation. As I learned from Hannah Arendt’s typically lucid, learned, and opinionated introduction—still, as I tell my students, the best place to orient oneself toward the work of this multi-faceted writer—Benjamin grew up in fin-de-siècle Berlin, formed the ambition of becoming the greatest critic of the German language, also formed a decades-long profound intellectual friendship with the pioneering Zionist scholar of Jewish mysticism Gershom Scholem, and was also deeply engaged with the Marxist social analysts at the Frankfurt School for Social Research.

Two things above all struck me on first reading Benjamin’s essays, and they stay with me almost forty years later. The first was that, for the first time, someone was telling me how I could engage a culture in ruins, based upon its fragments, and indeed without any pretense of recreating an image of it whole. And Jewish Eastern Europe was a culture in fragments par excellence.

The second lesson was that the lives of those ancestors I so desperately wanted to touch could be made to matter *today*, and not just for purposes of creating a personal identity, but in the shaping of political perspectives and rhetorics as well. This I learned above all from Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History," written in 1939 as the storms of war were gathering, and never published during his lifetime. In that text Benjamin analyzes the failure of the mid-1930s Popular Front to defeat the Nazis, and ascribes it at least in part to a philosophy of history that maintained a naïve faith in the ultimate inevitability of progress and the triumph of Reason. Instead of that philosophy of linear progress, Benjamin put forward a much more contingent notion of history and temporality, one in which at any moment a point or points from the past might be articulated with a present situation to reveal a Messianic opening "in the fight for the oppressed past." On the other hand, faced with the ongoing triumph of Fascism, Benjamin was hardly optimistic. As he wrote, in another of his eighteen Theses, "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. And that enemy has not ceased to be victorious."

I felt as though Benjamin—who committed suicide in April 1940, rather than be reinterned in Europe—were adjuring me from the other side of the abyss: "Yes, history matters. Yes, the lives of the ancestors matter. But even more, yes—not only is your passion for that past inseparable from the concerns of the present, but the past can only live again in full engagement with the present." This is a far cry from the "presentism" that historians decry, for it is as much about letting the past inform the present as being aware that the present reshapes the past. The aspiration to "awaken the dead" is an imperious one that Benjamin ascribes to no one less than the Angel of History. But for now at least, we still have the chance to be that angel's helpers here on earth.