

strual tracking apps following stillbirths for signs that the pregnancy was aborted. One possible approach to these developments would be to decry the criminalisation of miscarriage and stillbirth as cases apart from the criminalisation of abortion. *Pregnancy Without Birth* demonstrates what we miss with this kind of approach. Browne never underplays the difference between experiences of abortion, childbirth, miscarriage and stillbirth, but insists that difference can be the grounds for solidarity. If contingency is a starting point for the philosophy of preg-

nancy, as Browne suggests it should be, then it becomes a lot easier to address the control, criminalisation and surveillance of pregnancy, which particularly impact the pregnancies of low-income and racialised people. This full-spectrum model of pregnancy reminds us that, in Browne's words, 'when we pay attention to miscarriage, we are not just learning things about miscarriage – we are learning things about pregnancy, and the imaginaries, temporalities, and power structures that shape it as symbol and as lived experience.'

Sophie A. Jones

Educational crisis

Walter Benjamin, *On Goethe*, ed. and trans. by Susan Bernstein, Peter Fenves and Kevin McLaughlin (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2025). 382pp., £103.00 hb., £23.99 pb., 978 1 50363 096 3 hb., 978 1 50364 222 5 pb.

'Goethe saw it coming: the crisis in bourgeois education', remarks Walter Benjamin in *Convolute N*, the most famous section of the mass of material gathered together as the *Arcades Project*. Although this comment is not reproduced in *On Goethe*, a new selection of Benjamin's writings about the German writer he engaged with more than any other, the crisis it alludes to casts a shadow over this relatively compact stand-alone volume, edited and translated by Susan Bernstein, Peter Fenves and Kevin McLaughlin, with additional translations by Jan Cao and Jonas Rosenbrück.

Benjamin was well acquainted with educational and academic crisis. His hopes of a conventional academic career were forestalled by the rejection of his *Habilitationschrift*, the second dissertation needed to secure a German university position, in the context of scholarly closedmindedness, eventual plagiarism and an institutional antisemitism whose intensifications in the later 1920s and 1930s reverberate throughout the material here. *On Goethe* catalogues what Fenves – the author of the book's introduction – calls an equally 'dismal affair'. The event, or nonevent, in question is the rejection by the Insel-Verlag publishing house of a proposed monograph whose publication would have coincided with the 1932 celebrations marking the centenary of Goethe's death, and on which Benjamin had apparently pinned many hopes. News of the rejection seemingly inspired a journal

with the morbid title: 'Diary of the Seventeenth of August, Nineteen-Thirty, until the Day of My Death'.

For the most part, the entries comprising the second part of *On Goethe* document Benjamin's critical responses, eventually under pseudonyms, to what was published, by other authors, for the 1932 *Goethe-Jahr*. Goethe's presence in German literary life in the early 1930s was so overbearing that one review is titled 'Books on Goethe – but Welcome Ones'. (First sentence: 'Every word not spent on speaking about Goethe this year is a blessing, and so nothing is more welcome than laconic anniversary books.') What Benjamin appears to welcome about the two books under discussion, besides their 'laconic' natures, is their factual rather than interpretive modes. One is a picture book that yields 'more solid instruction' for general readers than do most literary histories; the other a chronicle whose austerity (offering nothing but names and dates) is, not unlike the *Arcades Project* itself, paradoxically capable of inspiring 'fantasy', even among those readers most knowledgeable about Goethe.

There are two things about this review that – in terms of both Benjaminian content and editorial form – typify what is going on in the volume as a whole. Regarding content, the cheery review of 'welcome' books stands out in the context of Benjamin's lifelong, often quarrelsome relation to the Goethe literature. His early

sketch of a highly critical review of Friedrich Gundolf's wildly successful *Goethe* (1916) is reproduced here, as is an idiomatically-organised bibliography (sample headings: 'Concerning Goethe's Physiognomy', 'A Few Monographs') and a review of a 1000-page, two-volume book by Eugen Kühnemann, also called *Goethe* (1930), which, the editors guess, sought to emulate the sales of Gundolf's. Benjamin's review of the later *Goethe* unfavourably compares its international marketing of a sanctimonious 'human sciences' – the author travels around the world to present an idea that consciously minimises knowledge of Goethe's life or work, hence the review's title: 'Faust in the Sample Case' – with the far more modest 'philological method' practiced by one the university colleagues whose labours Kühnemann treats 'condescendingly'. The opposition of a minute philology, in which the researcher, like Goethe's natural scientist, 'makes himself intensely identical' to the thing studied, to the monumentalising but ultimately facile work of the Goethe cult, is at the heart of the material presented in the latter parts of *On Goethe*.

Insofar as Kühnemann also opposes philology (practiced by workaday scholars) to philosophy (the task of great men), clear links can be drawn to the earlier texts reproduced in Part 1, which more obviously capture the book's stated intention of opening up the 'laboratory' of Benjamin's thinking. It would be hard to summarise the many procedures by which Benjamin uses Goethe's 'nonphilosophical' ideal of the artwork as a means by which to probe how singular truths can register, without systematising, the otherwise unthinkable 'unity of philosophy'. (Cantor's set theory, which Benjamin knew about through his great-uncle, is hinted at as another possibility.) A relatively well-known image for this situation is that looking at an artwork, as a method of philosophical thinking, is a bit like speaking to the sibling of a secretive person: you might learn something about your interest indirectly, but you're still encountering another person entirely. Another staging of this problem, whose published English translation comes as very welcome, finds Benjamin addressing the assumption that 'ontology' could capture this higher unity. Not so, he says. Ontology doesn't concern the truth, as we might suppose, but rather 'cognitions'. Its insights can only have the 'dimensions' of individual paintings. This means that 'ontology is not the palace' of philosophy that it wishes

to be (the higher unity); nevertheless, we can still 'fill out the walls of the palace with images, until the images appear to be the walls'. Art's truth-y nature, its modest dimensions, offers a better idea of how philosophical knowledge actually stands in relation to the thing – truth – that it's after, the fragment suggests.



All of this comes to a head in 'Goethe's Elective Affinities' (1924–25), whose scope and ambition still seem miraculous a century after its publication. Benjamin's account of the 'expressionless' – developed from his studies into the nature of lying; and naming a sublime, critical force that refuses the 'mixing' of semblance and truth in art – is probably where he departs most from Goethe's own writing, and where another through line to the work of Part 2 is established. In the context of *On Goethe* as a whole, it's as if the expressionless's 'moral word' is brought to bear on the liars who could not stop talking, certainly not when presented with the many publication opportunities offered up by an anniversary. He clearly wishes Goethe's celebrated readers would just shut up.

As for editorial form? The form-content dichotomy is a bad joke, of course, since Goethe's work regularly complicates the distinction, as most of his interlocutors

recognise. Nevertheless, a strange economy governs the selection of sources here. The book is structured in two parts according to a Goethean ‘polarity’, though we are also told that it might in fact be a *Steigerung*: an intensification or elevation, as Benjamin’s youthful literary-philosophical studies give over to materialist analysis. Yet these terms, Goethe’s ‘two great driving forces in all nature’, are also polar opposites, we read, so we can’t really escape polarity after all. Other Goethean models are at play. Only the main text of Part 1, ‘Goethe’s Elective Affinities’, was actually published; the other texts are unpublished fragments, notes and so on. But in Part 2, the major text, the article Benjamin wrote for the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia*, is the only thing that *wasn’t* published (at least not in the form Benjamin submitted it). This is just one moment in *On Goethe* where the chemical phenomenon giving its name to Goethe’s novel *Elective Affinities* is happily invoked: A and B are bonded together, as are C and D; but, like a married couple whose remote estate is interrupted by newcomers, A can get together with C, B with D. For example, when Florens Christian Rang aids Benjamin in placing his essay in the journal edited by Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Fenves phrases the situation, being sure to confirm the comparison, as ‘a delicate interplay among the four parties: Rang, Hofmannsthal, Benjamin, and the essay.’

Elsewhere, the editors invoke Gershom Scholem’s report that Benjamin himself was involved in a romantic entanglement similar to that animating Goethe’s novel: while still married to Dora Kellner-Benjamin, he was attracted to Julia Cohn, while Dora was drawn to another mutual friend, Ernst Schoen. Scholem insisted that Benjamin’s one-time dedication of ‘Goethe’s Elective Affinities’ to Julia Cohn ought to be foregrounded in the text’s presentation in the *Gesammelte Schriften* (the standard 7-volume German language edition of Benjamin, now being superseded by a projected 22-volume set). But in the introduction, and again in a lengthy footnote, the editors take issue with this, claiming that its gossipy ‘presumption of sentimental proximity’ in fact ‘obstructs access to [the] subject-matter’ of Benjamin’s essay. Here is one instance of a remarkable but truly curious – or even ‘queer’, as Goethe’s *wunderlich* is newly translated – attempt of the collection to follow the difficult coordinates, outlined in Benjamin’s Gundolf review, for respecting biographical detail without having it unduly influence how a work

is read. Other instances abound: Fenves guesses that Benjamin deliberately misnames the Goethe book he is reading in a letter to Scholem because the latter, a student of mathematics, would be distracted by its scientific claims, while Benjamin wanted to keep his friend focused on more spiritual matters. Elsewhere, we can read speculations about why Benjamin would have omitted certain information from an essay about Goethe he wrote when he was leaving high school. Even if one doesn’t know the names under discussion, the following gives some insight into the editorial method, equally odd and brilliant:

By acknowledging Rotten’s dissertation in the first footnote of the ‘esoteric afterword’ to the published version of his own doctoral dissertation, Benjamin may have been sending something akin to a secret signal, on the one hand, to ‘the universal genius’ and, on the other, to the siblings whose surname is contained in the suppressed name ‘Noeggerath’, that is Grete Radt and Fritz Radt, the latter of whom, as noted earlier, would later marry Julia Cohn, whose first name punctuates a poem Benjamin wrote around the time he was completing his dissertation, ‘Sonnet in the Night’.

As all this might suggest, *On Goethe* as a whole calls out to be read as a narrative in itself, or, more accurately, as a series of narratives. In this sense, the effect of the book is not unlike that inspired by those stories Goethe enjoyed inserting into his novels, and which (like ‘The Queer Childhood Neighbours’, told in *Elective Affinities*) were often at the core of Benjamin’s readings. Like the embedded tales, *On Goethe* draws attention to the unreliable act of narrativising itself, with all the baggage that goes along with it. (Benjamin’s readings of another such tale, the story of ‘The New Melusine’ that Goethe placed in his final novel, *Wilhelm Meister’s Journeyman Years*, are unfortunately missing from the volume, largely owing to the editorial decision not to include correspondence. Though understandable, this is a shame since much of Fenves and McLaughlin’s recent work has pivoted around how Benjamin developed an undoubtedly queer philology out of Goethe’s even queerer story.) This sense of competing narratives owes less to the multiplicity of translators and editors, who share what to me is an entirely accurate and enticing approach to Benjamin’s work, than to the enjoyably combative attitude that’s taken with regard to other, mostly long-dead interlocutors.

A final example of the book’s strangeness resonates

with some of today's educational crises. It is again told in the form of a story (a 'curious coincidence' followed by 'still more coincidences', as the introduction has it). It's February 1923, a time of despair for Benjamin. He has just left a sanatorium on the Austrian border, cast aside plans for editing his own journal, begun 'something like a tour of Germany' during the nadir of hyperinflation, and has met Erich Rothacker, who teaches philosophy at Heidelberg. Seeking a home for the essay, Benjamin has passed his 'Goethe's Elective Affinities' onto Rothacker, who enters into a correspondence with Paul Kluckhohn, a professor at Münster. The two, equivalents of an 'adjunct' and 'assistant professor' respectively, have recently begun their own scholarly journal. They feel compelled to support the work of emerging 'would-be' scholars (a young Heidegger was in talks about submitting something too), but Benjamin's essay is of an awkward length, and he is unwilling to entertain the thought of cutting it. Besides, a more senior scholar, in fact Benjamin and Heidegger's former teacher, Heinrich Rickert, has submitted something which, though 'forgettable', needs to be published. Antisemitism also, again, inflects the mix of admiration and scorn: 'Strange, these altogether rigorous moral Jews (including Cohen quotes!) who have

gone through Goethe and Hölderlin', Rothacker writes.

Ultimately the decision is a polite no, or rather a 'revise and resubmit': 'Benjamin is accused', we read, 'of making a mistake typical of young scholars, who are always trying to cram everything they want to say into a single piece of writing.' This summary might give us pause. Is the judgment Fenves' or that of the journal's editors? Might it apply to today's young scholars too, as the interpolation of contemporary academic jargon suggests? The use of free indirect speech makes it hard to be sure, but it's suggested that, rather than trying to say everything, there are still opportunities for the kind of 'philological rigour' that Benjamin himself admired in others, which might help to curb such tendencies. Half of Rothacker's correspondence with Heidegger is now lost ('or is perhaps still in the Heidegger archive, waiting to be found'), for example. Fenves later asks a good question about how Benjamin, just about eking out a living, might have related to Kühnemann's overlong book, which happened to come out with the same publishing house that rejected his own: 'But is this separation of good from bad philology enough to generate the energy required to go through a thousand-page nullity?' It's very hard to say.

Christopher Law

Communist encounters

Robert Linhart, *The Sugar and The Hunger: An Inquiry into the Sugar Regions of Northeastern Brazil* (Helsinki: Rab-Rab Press, 2023). 177pp., €16.00 pb., 978 9 52651 834 3

In September 1979 Robert Linhart, former *établi* and militant of the *Union des jeunesses communistes marxistes-léninistes* and *Gauche prolétarienne*, undertook a two-week investigation into the condition of sugarcane workers in Pernambuco, Northeast Brazil. Following an amnesty after fifteen years of military dictatorship, Linhart travelled as a 'French journalist' to the *zona da mata*, the historic centre of the sugarcane plantations. There he made wide-ranging inquiries with landless agricultural workers, small peasants, trade unionists, government supporters, mill owners, scholars and old revolutionaries, documenting a new and deadly capital-intensive transition towards the production of ethanol fuel.

What he found there 'shattered' him: an escalating situation of 'elaborate hunger, advanced hunger, a hunger to be booming, in one word, a modern hunger', driven by a new wave of dispossession and mechanisation that eliminated whatever precarious access to land remained on the margins of the estates. Families were pushed to the slums from where they still travelled to work in the fields for less pay. Stuck between the urban and the rural (as one worker put it, 'lost in the middle of the world'), this intensified regime of real subsumption generated a crisis in the reproduction of labour-power: extreme malnutrition and alimentary monotony, widespread disease and high childhood mortality. For Linhart it was a