

Uncreative Influence: Louis Aragon's *Paysan de Paris* and Walter Benjamin's *Passagen-Werk*

Vaclav Paris

University of Pennsylvania

This paper looks at the role Louis Aragon's 1926 novel Paris Peasant played in the composition of Walter Benjamin's Arcades Project. How we might theorize the literary appeal of the Arcades Project, as evidenced in contemporary poetry and visual art; and, more broadly, what is the relation between the aesthetics and the philosophy or politics in Benjamin's text? The model I propose is one of a Bloomian "anxiety of influence." By looking at Benjamin's earlier writings and his correspondence with Theodor Adorno and Gershom Scholem, we see not only that Benjamin's work shared much with Aragon's brand of Surrealism, but that Benjamin recognized this proximity as problematic. The quotations of the Arcades Project are thus a record of his conscious attempts to forge a separate, or negative, literary space around this influence.

Keywords: Walter Benjamin / Louis Aragon / Surrealism / quotation / influence

It opens with Aragon—the *Paysan de Paris*. Evenings, lying in bed, I could never read more than two to three pages by him because my heart started to pound so hard that I had to put the book down. What a warning! What an indication of the years and years that had to be put between me and that kind of reading. And yet the first preliminary sketches for the *Arcades* originated at that time.¹

So Walter Benjamin described, in a letter to Theodor Adorno, on 31 May 1935, the conception of the *Arcades Project*. It appears to be a simple case of inspiration: a literary love-affair with long-term parthenogenetic consequences. Benjamin lies in bed at night, reading Louis Aragon's *Paris Peasant* until, after only two or three pages, his heart starts to palpitate so severely that the book drops from his hand. Although he says no more to Adorno, we fill in the gap and assume that the excitement Aragon's pages roused is what drove him to emulate or develop them. Critics as diverse as Susan Buck-Morss, Jacques Leenhardt and Rolf Tiedemann have observed this source of inspiration, but for each of them, Aragon's influence is less important than a delineation of the *Arcades Project's* non-literary philosophical / political value. Yet in recent years these assumptions

have been challenged, not so much by Benjamin scholars, but by contemporary novelists, artists, and poets who find inspiration in Benjamin's work. "Conceptual" or "Uncreative Writing," in particular, has raised up the *Arcades Project* as a paradigm text for its own practices in the last decade.² As Marjorie Perloff contests in her chapter on Benjamin in *Unoriginal Genius*, there is not only a theoretical appeal, but also a "less clearly understood" "literary appeal" to be found in the *Arcades*—"an appeal evident in the response of its avid readers over the past few decades" (28, Perloff's emphasis).

In considering this elusive literary appeal, understanding the specifics of Benjamin's early encounter with Aragon takes on a new urgency. Clearly Benjamin saw in Aragon's book an originary force for his project, and clearly this force continued to exert itself over a considerable period. But beyond saying that Aragon stands at the beginning, the exact nature of this influence is explained neither by Benjamin nor his critics. This paper proposes that Benjamin's work performs its own belatedness in regard to Aragon's book. It was through his attempts to wrest from Aragon an independent and original space for his own non-narrative project, that Benjamin arrived at the form of the *Arcades*; and it is this "post-literary status" of the project which, I claim, has made it so attractive to contemporary conceptual writing.

The argument is divided into three parts. In the first, I give an overview of the lines of proximity between *The Paris Peasant* and the *Arcades*. In the second, I look at the historical development of Benjamin's ideas for the *Arcades* and their relation to Aragon. In the third, I suggest ways in which Aragon's model eventually served as a kind of negative—leading Benjamin to his much less traditionally creative mode of composition.

THE PARIS PEASANT AND THE ARCADES PROJECT

Originally serialized in Philippe Soupault's *Revue européenne* during the summer of 1924 and spring of 1925, *Le Paysan de Paris* was published as a complete book for the first time by Gallimard in 1926. I call it a book because it is difficult to define more precisely—neither quite a novel, nor a prose poem, nor a work of philosophy. It is composed of four parts: a short introduction ("Préface à une mythologie moderne"); a minute cultural geography of the Passage de l'Opéra ("Le Passage de l'Opéra"); a record of Aragon's trip to the Parc des Buttes-Chaumont with some friends ("Le Sentiment de la nature aux Buttes-Chaumont"); and a brief epilogue ("Le Songe du paysan"). At first sight, these four sections seem to have little do with each other. Nor are they particularly consistent within themselves. Digressions and philosophical reflections distract budding narratives. The book is untidy, switching rapidly between lyric effusions, theoretical excursions, obsessively detailed descriptions, oneiric visions, thoughts on Hegel, the price-list of different types of port at the Café Certa, newspapers, and reflections on city planning.

What was it about this peculiar French book that Benjamin found so inspiring? The *Passagen-Werk* itself—a project which in general had no qualms about quoting its sources—is surprisingly reticent on this question. The last version of the convolutes contains only four fragments of Aragon's book,³ as well as two or three passing references to the arcade's Aragonian "*lueur glauque*" or "glaucous gleam."⁴ Besides these, Aragon himself comes three times in Benjamin's discussions of Surrealism,⁵ and twice in reference to communism.⁶ Not exactly a major presence then—at least not beside Baudelaire, Fourier, Balzac and Saint-Simon. Why this should be the case I will address below, but for now it suffices to say that Aragon's influence cannot be understood only from these fleeting appearances. Rather, it is necessary first to consider the features *Paris Peasant* shares with the *Arcades Project*, and then to work backwards, reconstructing the attraction it had for Benjamin in 1928.

Three immediate possibilities as to what attracted Benjamin to this book present themselves: its locus, its politics and its form.

Locus. Opening *Le Paysan de Paris*, our gaze probably lands on Aragon's longest section—"Le Passage de l'Opéra"—a title which is suggestive not only of the same location that Benjamin chose in his earliest "complete" essay on the arcades,⁷ but also the later provisional title of *Das Passagen-Werk* (opera, we remember, has a Latin origin meaning work).⁸ Just as Aragon offers an introduction to the shops, cafés, prostitutes, and other denizens of his chosen arcade, so Benjamin's fragments focus not only on the arcades as an architectural or historical phenomenon, but on the local businesses (legitimate and illicit) found therein. In this sense both works have a guide-book quality. Robin Walz notes this when he compares *Le Paysan de Paris* to the 1923 walking guide, *Guide pratique à travers le Vieux Paris*, arguing that it "employed strolling techniques similar to Aragon's" ("Baedeker" 33). The reader in both is asked "through the written text, to imagine himself immersed in impossible simultaneities of time and space—a watered-down version of Benjamin's adage about the surreal power of words to supersede material reality" (34). Although Benjamin is mentioned here only tangentially, Walz's mode of analysis can be applied to some of the early passages in the same way. Consider for instance the early fragment, < C°,6>. Written sometime between mid-1927 and 1929, it opens with the words: "A walk through Paris will begin with an aperitif—that is, between five and six o'clock"—a straightforward approach. But then Benjamin offers us an alternative—"I would not tie you down to this. You can take one of the great railroad Stations as your point of departure . . ." (*AP* 830 C°,6)—before going on, hypothetically to unfold the many different directions that this walk could take. Our guide becomes less interested in monuments than the nameless squares that are "not the result of long planning, but instead resemble architectural improvisations—those crowds of houses where shabby buildings collide in a jumble."

From these we pass to the character of the true Parisian:

And should a neighbor present himself, he will most likely give the impression of being a provincial who has stopped in here at the end of the day to have a beer. Now, here we have a little secret password of freemasonry by which fanatical Paris aficionados, French as well as foreign, recognize one another. This word is “province.” With a shrug of the shoulders, the true Parisian, though he may never travel out of the city for years at a stretch, refuses to live in Paris. He lives in the *treizième* or the *deuxième* or the *dix-huitième*; not in Paris but in his *arrondissement*—in the third, seventh, or twentieth. And this is the provinces. (AP 832 C°6)

Benjamin offers us the shibboleth to authentic Parisian behavior: not cosmopolitanism so much as an exaggerated provincialism. To be a true Parisian, one must throw away the Baedeker and become a Paris peasant. Accordingly, the next passage begins with a sense of having lost track of the evening altogether. Like the *Paysan de Paris*, this early version of the *Arcades* is less interested in practical advice for getting somewhere in Paris than in losing oneself within its architecture. As Walz concludes, “commercial guides protected readers against the dangers of being disoriented and lost in Paris. But such a loss of bearings was precisely what the surrealists wanted their readers to experience” (36). As Aragon’s passage is a threshold space or “passage” between different subjective and objective, private and public realms, so Benjamin’s passages are both interior and exterior, part-real and part-dreamscapes, entries into a collective experience.

Politics. Along with Benjamin’s choice of Aragon’s setting, we also notice a shared political stance. Calling it political, however, is perhaps slightly misleading—as neither Benjamin nor Aragon had particularly rigorous political agendas or allegiances in 1928. A better term would be perhaps political affect: one of melancholy for the destruction of the arcades yet also of a decidedly non-conservative devotion to aesthetic innovation as well as the perspective of the city “peasant.” It is, as Fredric Jameson described it in *Marxism and Form*, a paradoxically “revolutionary” “nostalgia” (82).⁹

While the untraditional appearance of Aragon’s book encourages one to think of it as breaking with the past, *Le Paysan de Paris* was motivated at least in part as a defense of the old and out-of-date—positioned against encroaching Hausmannisation (which swallowed up the Passage de l’Opéra in 1925), and as a recognition of the potential (artistic and political) of the sites of the past. Despite its fanfare about awakening from the nineteenth century, Benjamin’s project too has a famously retrospective or preservationist agenda, one sympathetic toward, and even nostalgic for the arcades as ephemeral sites. Hence his inclusion of fragment C2a,9, one of the few direct quotes from *Le Paysan de Paris*:

“It is only today, when the pickaxe menaces them, that [the arcades] have at last become the true sanctuaries of a cult of the ephemeral, the ghostly landscape of damnable pleasures and professions. Places that yesterday were incomprehensible, and that tomorrow will never know.” (Aragon, *PP* 29; qtd. in Benjamin, *AP* 87 C2a,9)

Benjamin's cross-reference for this fragment is to the collector or "Sammler." By including Aragon's testimony to the ephemerality of the arcades, he also fixes it, archiving it as a collector preserves the ephemera of the past. Both authors stand to be interpreted within a broader progressive agenda, but in the first instance, their writings are collections: fragments shored against ruins.

Form. As my allusion to Eliot's *The Waste Land* might suggest, by attempting somehow to preserve the Passage de l'Opéra, Aragon appears to have offered Benjamin also an innovative formal approach. This may—in the light of Aragon's opening preface—seem like a surprising claim, for it is here that Aragon inveighs against the notion that everything has been said, and against the practice of quoters and quotation:

So we have the spectacle of the world's philosophers incapable of tackling the smallest problem without first going through the routine of recapitulating and then refuting everything their predecessors have had to say on the subject. And by that very fact their every thought is inevitably the function of some previous error, based upon it and inheriting some of its features. A curious and strangely contrary method: seemingly afraid of genius, in the one domain where the sole imperative must be genius itself, pure invention, revelation. (*PP* 19)

In Aragon's view, philosophers today reproduce old errors by trying to summarize what has been said before them on the topic, the irony being that this method precludes the expression of any genius—an expression which forms the basis of philosophy. As a result, Aragon's own book attempts to be fiercely independent, dispensing with forebears. Conversely, the great majority of the *Passagen-Werk* is quotation.

To see how Aragon influenced the form of Benjamin's book, it is necessary to expand our understanding of quotation, not as a scholarly (even scholastic) endeavor of citing textual authorities in service of a given argument, but rather as a creative practice—a way of engaging with the world as text.¹⁰ Although they appear at opposite ends of the spectrum in regard to this issue, both Aragon and Benjamin use quotation for just such an expression of genius.

Richard Sieburth provides the clue to this interpretation when he writes that the notes which comprise the *Arcades Project* are less preparatory to a never-written final text than they are an innovative form in themselves.¹¹ While Aragon never cites another author in *Le Paysan de Paris*, he does use other people's words. Consider for instance his quoted signs in doorways as boxed texts:

Aido - Commerce

Au 1er à Gauche

(*Paysan* 111)

Likewise, in Benjamin's *Convolut A*, we find signs interpolated between the other quotations and analyses:



(*Passagen-Werk* 40 A 3,3)

Like shards of the concrete reality of the arcade, these fragments pierce both Aragon's text and Benjamin's, breaking into the ostensibly separate realms of literary or philosophical production, weaving place and book together.

THE PARIS PEASANT, THE ORIGIN OF THE GERMAN TRAGIC DRAMA, AND ONE WAY STREET

We could go on listing similarities between Aragon's and Benjamin's work. If we hope to arrive at a full understanding of Aragon's role in the *Passagen-Werk*, however, we need to ask what it was about *Le Paysan de Paris* that attracted Benjamin to it in the first place. And what did Benjamin hope to achieve by using its location, politics, and form in his own work?

One answer is that when Benjamin first read Aragon's work, it excited him because he recognized in it something which spoke to his own earlier preoccupations in his habilitation thesis, *Origin of the German Tragic Drama* (*Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*), and in the experimental prose-work *One Way Street* (*Einbahnstraße*). Consider for instance the opening paragraph of "Le Passage de l'Opéra":

Man no longer worships the gods on their heights. Solomon's temple has slid into a world of metaphor where it harbors swallows' nests and corpse-white lizards. The spirit of religions, coming down to dwell in the dust, has abandoned the sacred places. But there are other places which flourish among mankind, places where men go calmly about their mysterious lives and in which a profound religion is very gradually taking shape. These sites are not yet inhabited by a divinity. It is forming there, a new godhead precipitating in these re-creations of Ephesus like acid-gnawed metal at the bottom of a glass. (Aragon, *PP* 27)

It is difficult to read these lines and not to feel in them an affinity with the concerns of the third part of Benjamin's *Habilitationsschrift*, although defining exactly where this affinity lies is no easy task. Written contemporaneously with the destruction of the Passage de l'Opéra in 1925, this section deals with allegory. Central to Benjamin's analysis, we will remember, is the ruin of antiquity and the secularization of belief. Just as in Aragon's text we see a concern with what remains of the gods in contemporary architecture, so in Benjamin's

analysis—borrowing from Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*—the ancient deities are still present as a force within the ruins of the Baroque as allegorical fragments:

For the Baroque, even for the Renaissance, the marble and the bronzes of antiquity still preserved something of the horror with which Augustine had recognized in them “the bodies of the gods so to speak.” Certain spirits have been induced to take up their abode in them, and they have the power either to do harm or to satisfy many of the wants of those who offer them divine honors and obedient worship. (*Origin* 225)

Hence the famous aphorisms that, “Allegory corresponds to the ancient gods in the deadness of its concrete tangibility” (226), and “Allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things” (178). We can read a similar narrative of dilapidation in Aragon's mysterious image of the ruined temple of Solomon which has “slid into a world of metaphor where it harbors swallows' nests and corpse-white lizards” (*PP* 27).

But where Benjamin's *Trauerspiel* study offers us an image of history as inevitable dereliction, a process of permanent catastrophe that points finally to the stability of the Judeo-Christian afterlife, Aragon's work seeks ways in which to transcend or to change this course. *Le Paysan de Paris* speaks to the fragmentariness and fragility of our present in a way that ultimately is not religious or even spiritual so much as angry. In it, Aragon aligns himself with the shop-owners defending their rights against the capitalist developers. He takes the peasant's side. The difference is one of religious and Marxist eschatology.¹² Aragon's book may well have excited Benjamin because it provided a way of presenting the ruin and the motley costumes of a past religion into a politically instructive and relevant form.

This is an interpretation of the *Passagen-Werk* suggested by Peter Bürger in his *Theorie der Avantgarde*. Bürger dissects the concept of allegory in the *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* according to a schema with four stages. In the first, “The allegorist pulls one element out of the totality of the life context, isolating it, depriving it of its function.” In the second, “The allegorist joins the isolated reality fragments and thereby creates meaning. This is posited meaning; it does not derive from the original context of the fragments” (Bürger 69). In this way the insertion of reality fragments into the artwork transforms the status of that art work from being the subordinate position (like that of mimetic works) to the status of reality itself. The fragments are no longer signs pointing elsewhere, but they are that reality. For Bürger, allegoresis can thus function as “a central category of the theory of the avant-gardiste work of art” both because of its discontinuous relationship with past art, and because its first two elements accord with what may be understood by “montage” (70), which was, of course, a key term for both Aragon and Benjamin. Extrapolating back to the case in hand then, Aragon opens up to Benjamin the contemporary application of allegory, and shows him the critical potential of the avant-garde work of art in an allegorical montage. Hence Bürger's claim that “one

may say that it is only in the avant-gardiste work that it [the concept of allegory] finds its adequate object" (68).

It is helpful to remember that in 1928 Frankfurt University rejected Benjamin's habilitation.¹³ His discovery of *Le Paysan de Paris* may have played a role in his resolution not to sequester his mind in academia, but to focus instead on "materialist" issues, "political things," and the world of "profane illumination."¹⁴ It may have offered him a way of applying his dialectical methods to the "real" world. Indeed, one of the most obvious aims of *Le Paysan de Paris* is to reform ways of writing philosophy, which as discussed above, preclude the expression of genius. Consider again the opening:

Every idea, these days, seems to have passed its critical phase. It is a generally accepted fact that abstract notions about mankind have all been eroded imperceptibly by the investigation they have undergone, that human light has infiltrated its rays everywhere and that as a result nothing has escaped this universal process which is subject, at the most, to revision. (Aragon, *PP* 19)

This opening resembles, as Josef Fürkäs has argued "a parody of a Cartesian meditation" (*Surrealismus als Erkenntnis* 51, my translation)—a play on the time-honored doubting epistemology. We expect a disquisition on the problems of worn-out ideas, but then Aragon breaks his stride to offer us a completely different insight:

I had just reached this point in my thoughts when, without any warning, spring suddenly entered the world.

It happened in a flash, one Saturday evening around five: everything is bathed in a different light and yet there is still a chill in the air, impossible to say what had just taken place. (*PP* 21)

Thus begins the narrative element of the work, switching from academic past tense to the immediate present. It strikes one as a non sequitur. But Aragon is giving form to his own argument here, trying, in the words of Ezra Pound's Confucian motto, to "make it new" and refresh formally the stale philosophical arguments that have passed their critical phase. Looking at this passage more carefully, we also notice the word "lumière," which appeared, we remember, in reference to the light of the human mind. It seems as if the metaphorical epiphenomenal light has been literalized and refreshed, as if the book has begun again in a concrete sphere of profane illumination, breaking from the Cartesian prison into the daylight of real life and real things.

This self-conscious intervention of an author into his book, bringing together its production and its topic, is something that *Le Paysan de Paris*, like *Don Quixote* or *Tristram Shandy* (which Benjamin read in 1926)¹⁵ plays with throughout. Another amusing example comes seventy pages in:

LOUIS!

I'm coming out, I'm coming out: now who can be calling me? The crowd is still strolling to and fro outside. No one I know . . . ah yes: the desire to see my first name, so seldom used in my circle, printed in capitals of a rather imposing size. (Aragon, *PP* 71)

Or later in the book, Aragon includes one of his letters to Philippe Soupault, where he satirizes the notion that imaginative work (fiction) has no validity in the abstract eyes of thought. One might recall in this context, Benjamin's own peculiar self-reference in *Convolut N* in the midst of discussing Adorno's quotation of Kierkegaard on the importance of the image:

Dialectic comes to a stop in the image, and, in the context of recent history, it cites the mythical as what is long gone: nature as primal history. For this reason, the images—which, like those of the *intérieur*, bring dialectic and myth to the point of indifferentiation—are truly “antediluvian fossils.” They may be called dialectical images, to use Benjamin's expression, whose compelling definition of “allegory” also holds true for Kierkegaard's allegorical intention taken as a figure of historical dialectic and mythical nature. (Benjamin, *AP* 461 N2,7)

This oft-cited fragment is remarkable not only because of its multiple layers of citation like the layers of rock in which Kierkegaard's antediluvian fossils are found (I quote Benjamin who is quoting Adorno who is writing on a quotation from Kierkegaard and quoting Benjamin), but also because this knot of quotation occurs as a way of explaining Benjamin's “dialectical image.” This is a notion that Benjamin again may have borrowed from Aragon's adjacent concept of the “poetic image” as a mode of philosophy, discussed at the end of *Paris Peasant*.

In a number of ways then, Aragon showed Benjamin how to apply the philosophical interests of his dissertation to a secular modernity. This view, however, is complicated by *One Way Street*—a highly untraditional work also written before Benjamin's alleged first encounter with *Le Paysan de Paris*.¹⁶ Much like Aragon's book, *One Way Street* is a patchwork of reflections on everyday objects alongside theoretical reflections, theses on writing and criticism, and records of dreams. And like Aragon's book, it is largely in the first person, discontinuous, and often highly poetic. Before assuming that Aragon was responsible for the form of the *Passagen-Werk*, we must consider its inheritance from Benjamin's own immediately preceding work.

From Benjamin's first letter to mention the *Passagen-Werk*, we learn that he intended the essay he then called “Pariser Passagen. Eine dialektische Feerie” to finish off the cycle of production begun in *Einbahnstraße*:

Once I have, one way or another, completed the project on which I am currently working, carefully and provisionally—the highly remarkable and extremely precarious essay, “Paris Arcades: A Dialectical Fairy Play” or similar (never have I written with such a risk of failure)—one cycle of production, that of *One-Way Street*—will have come to a close for me in much the same way in which the *Trauerspiel* book concluded the German cycle. (*Correspondence* 322, translation modified)

Certainly, *Einbahnstraße* shares many features with the *Passagen-Werk*. It is, as mentioned, a montage of many little sections. It employs quotations (albeit nowhere near so many) from Baudelaire, Mallarmé, and Proust. And it expresses an interest in cultural geography, with many of the fragments taking the form of tour-guide information. Additionally, it contains a reference to Hausmannisation in the famous dedication to Asja Lacis (“This street is named / Asja Lacis Street / after her who / as an engineer / cut it through the author” [Benjamin, “One Way Street” 444]). We begin to wonder what possible space is left for Aragon’s influence. Consider also the half-proud, half-jocular tone of *Einbahnstraße*; the fact that its fragments (by contrast to the *Passagen-Werk*) do not come from a library; that its passages on stamp-collecting seem to echo Aragon’s on philately, and we come to a rather unsettling conclusion: that *Einbahnstraße* in many ways has more in common with the *Paysan de Paris* than does the *Passagen-Werk*!

But how can this be, if Benjamin, as heretofore assumed, only discovered Aragon’s text in 1927 or even early 1928? One convincing answer might be that Benjamin in fact read the *Paysan de Paris* earlier—either upon its publication in 1926 or in its original version in the *Revue européenne*. Bernd Witte suggests as much in his biography of Benjamin, claiming both that the passage on stamp-collecting and the organization of the textual fragments “like a row of houses on a street” are borrowed from Aragon (91, 95). While Aragon is not cited in *One Way Street*, and while the textual echoes do not seem sufficiently strong to serve as definitive proof of familiarity, this idea gains credence when we consider that Benjamin mentions Aragon as part of his milieu in a letter from 5 June 1927 letter to Hugo von Hofmannsthal, and does so in connection with the composition of *Einbahnstraße*:

In France individual phenomena are engaged in something that also engages me—among authors, Giraudoux and especially Aragon; among movements, surrealism. In Paris I discovered the format for the notebook. (*Correspondence* 315)

It is possible that this is the time that Benjamin was referring to in his 1935 letter to Adorno, and that he was including *Einbahnstraße* as an early expression of what would become the *Passagen-Werk*, perhaps even as the point of its origin, *Ursprung*—or break—with the *Trauerspiel*. Perhaps he thought of the “beginning” of the *Passagen-Werk* as the beginning of its “production cycle” (*Produktionskreis*).

BENJAMIN’S BELATEDNESS

There is, however, another reason why Benjamin might have thought of Aragon as the beginning of the *Passagen-Werk*: as a negative force, something to write against, or as in the sense of a photographic negative, something to develop. Reading *Le Paysan de Paris* in bed, Benjamin’s heart pounds because he recognizes in it something close to his own work in *Einbahnstraße*, and close also to his interests developed in the *Trauerspiel* study. Already enchanted by the Paris

arcades, Aragon holds up a shocking mirror to Benjamin's intentions. Whether his first encounter with *Le Paysan de Paris* came before or after *Einbahnstraße*, in order to try to resolve the undeniable and unacknowledged similarity between the two, Benjamin begins to write the *Passagen-Werk* as a response and rebuttal. Aragon stands at the beginning as a point of departure—something left behind.

There is much evidence to support this third view. Benjamin expressly admits to Gershom Scholem on 30 October 1928 that

An all too ostentatious proximity to the surrealist movement might become fatal to the project, as understandable and as well-founded as this proximity might be. In order to extricate it from this situation, I have had to expand the ideas of the project more and more. I have thus had to make it so universal within its most particular and minute framework that it will take possession of the inheritance of surrealism in purely temporal terms and, indeed, with all the authority of a philosophical Fortinbras. (*Correspondence* 342)

The wording of Benjamin's letter to Adorno used as an epigraph to this essay gives further proof. Immediately after describing the experience of reading *Le Paysan de Paris*, he sounds an alarm bell—"What a warning!"—as if Aragon were a competitor, a reason to learn about his subject far more carefully than he had before (and hence perhaps to include all of the quotations missing from *Einbahnstraße*): "What an indication of the years and years that had to be put between me and that kind of reading" (*Correspondence* 438). If we also read the sentence that precedes Benjamin's description of Aragon standing at the beginning of the *Passagen-Werk*, we get another clue to the nature of his inspiration:

If I have ever put my Gracian motto into practice, to wit, "Seek to enlist time on your side in all things," I believe I did so in the way I persevered with this project. (438)

In 1935, as in the 1928 letter to Scholem, Benjamin saw himself as appropriating the inheritance or "*Erbschaft*" of Surrealism, bringing Aragon's pages (*Seiten*) and his time (*Zeit*) to his own side or page (*Seite*). It is an inheritance that seems to take him years to negotiate.

A similar tendency is visible in Benjamin's contemporaneous essay on Surrealism. It shows to a great extent his anxiety about treading on Aragon's feet on the issue of profane illumination. "This profane illumination," writes Benjamin, "did not always find the Surrealists equal to it, or to themselves; and the very writings that proclaim it most powerfully, Aragon's incomparable *Paysan de Paris* and Breton's *Nadja*, show very disturbing symptoms of deficiency" ("Surrealism" 209). Benjamin positions himself in the essay as a post-surrealist attempting to describe how to fix this deficiency. We see Benjamin trying to put Surrealism behind him in statements such as these:

The German observer is not standing at the source of the stream. This is his opportunity. He is in the valley. He can gauge the energies of the movement. (206)

Today it [the development of Surrealism] can be foreseen. For there is no doubt that the heroic phase, whose catalogue of heroes Aragon left us in that work, is over. (208)

In the last pages of this essay, Benjamin argues the need for a new work in the place of the old Surrealism, “a poetic politics,” which extends the insight into the “distinction between metaphor and image” in Aragon’s latest book, *Traité du style*, “to discover in the space of political action the one hundred percent image space” (217). It is hard to read this call to arms as anything other than a justification of the pertinence of the *Passagen-Werk* over Aragon’s own writing.

The greatest testimony of this negative role of Aragon in the creation of the *Passagen-Werk*, however, comes from the *Passagen-Werk* itself. As I wrote at the beginning of this essay, Aragon’s presence does not correspond to the importance Benjamin claims for him in 1935—suggesting that at first he was uncomfortable with the role Aragon played. Nearly every time Aragon is mentioned in the *Passagen-Werk*, whether as part of the last version of the convolutes, or as part of the preparatory notes, Benjamin disagrees with him or claims to outdo him.

Jacques Leenhardt notes this in his essay “Le Passage: Forme d’Expérience.” Taking up the distinction between Benjamin’s historical work and Aragon’s sense of “mythology,” Leenhardt quotes first from Benjamin’s materials for the exposé of 1935 where Benjamin “characterizes his own position through his relation to Aragon, but negatively” (164, my translation): “Opposition to Aragon: to work through all this by way of the dialectics of awakening, and not to be lulled, through exhaustion, into ‘dream’ or ‘mythology’” (Benjamin, *AP* 908). Leenhardt then also quotes the following fragment from Benjamin’s first notes: “Delimitation of the tendency of this project with respect to Aragon: whereas Aragon persists with the realm of dream, here the concern is to find the constellation of awakening” (*AP* 845 H¹⁷). He concludes that for Benjamin, Aragon was only concerned with mythology, which is to say he was only concerned with the realm of the dream. In contrast, Benjamin was interested in waking into history, “that is to pass by mythology into the space of history” (Leenhardt 164, my translation).¹⁷ I find this distinction to be too neat: Aragon was not as interested in dreams as André Breton, for instance; and the *Arcades* do not renounce mythology for history as completely as Leenhardt or Benjamin might like. However, the important thing is to recognize Benjamin’s own effort to distinguish himself from Surrealism, to assure us that he is out-doing it.

Benjamin’s similar self-distancing from Aragon can be found in a fragment of the early notes, where he punningly describes the origin of Surrealism:

The father of Surrealism was Dada; its mother was an arcade. Dada, when the two first met, was already old. At the end of 1919, Aragon and Breton, out of antipathy to Montparnasse and Montmartre, transferred the site of their meetings with friends to a café in the Passage de l’Opéra. Construction of the Boulevard Haussmann brought about the demise of the Passage de l’Opéra. Aragon devoted 135 pages to this arcade; in the sum of these three digits hides the number nine—the number of muses who presided as midwives at the birth of Surrealism. These stalwart muses are named

Ballhorn, Lenin, Luna, Freud, Mors, Marlitt, and Citroen. A provident reader will make way for them all, as discreetly as possible, wherever they are encountered in the course of these lines. In *Paysan de Paris*, Aragon conducts as touching a requiem for this arcade as any man has ever conducted for the mother of his son. It is there to be read, but here one should expect no more than a physiology and, to be blunt, an autopsy of these parts of the capital city of Europe, parts that could not be more mysterious or more dead. (*AP* 883 h°,1)

Here again we see Benjamin's obsession with counting Aragon's pages, arriving through their sum at the number nine—the number of classical muses (transformed of course into contemporary allegorical figures), which preside over artistic production. Might this fragment—which takes place only slightly altered towards the beginning of the convolutes (C1,3)—not be considered as Benjamin's invocation of the muses; as the beginning of his own Aragonian prose-poem epic? While Benjamin would go on, in his 1930 review of Alfred Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, to suggest that montage was the proper form for a modern epic,¹⁸ here he firmly distinguishes his project from that of Aragon, and from any poetic or imaginative work. Aragon's text is a "requiem" or more precisely, an obituary (*Nachruf*), whereas Benjamin's is an "autopsy" or dissection (*Sektionsbefund*), a scientific investigation giving a physiology of a mysterious and dead architecture. Benjamin claims he will not follow Aragon in rhapsodizing. How seriously we can take this claim, however, is debatable since it is made in a fragment that is not only highly poetic, but also makes history into myth rather than vice-versa.

Benjamin's mythologizing turns Dada, Surrealism, and the arcades into a symbolic family. The father of Surrealism—appropriately named and appropriately masculine-gendered—is Dada, its mother, a feminine passage. This genealogy is perhaps more than merely flippant. Benjamin presents Aragon's relationship with his mother the arcade in terms of the Oedipus myth. Surrealism kills Dada and falls in love with its mother, the passage. This Oedipal model for the development of art movements is one into which Benjamin's own work then fits remarkably neatly when we remember his own statements dealing with the conception of the *Passagen-Werk* in bed with Aragon and his "inheritance" from Surrealism. The *Arcades Project* is the incestuous offspring of Surrealism's love of its own mother—a kinship in which Aragon takes on the role of supplanted Laius.

Benjamin's model for thinking of the literary genealogy of the *Arcades Project* is reminiscent of Harold Bloom's theories in *The Anxiety of Influence*. Benjamin executes a rereading with regard to Aragon's *Paysan de Paris*, which in itself performs just such a rejection and rereading in regard to the staid philosophy of his introduction. While it would be reductive to try to fit the link between *Paris Peasant* and the *Arcades* into any one of Bloom's categories ("clinamen," "tessera," "kenosis," "daemonization," "askesis," or "apophrades"), Bloom's descriptions of these dynamics do often fit with Benjamin's explanations of his methodology. Benjamin's quotations of Aragon's text for instance, and his reinterpretation by providing his own context and annotation, might be seen as a kind of *tessera*—a

filling-in or completing of a past author: "In this sense of a completing link, the *tessera* represents any later poet's attempt to persuade himself (and us) that the precursor's Word would be worn out if not redeemed as a newly fulfilled and enlarged Word of the *ephebe*" (Bloom 67).

Bloom's use of "redemption" as a trope of literary development echoes Benjamin's strange historical view of the function of the arcades as "redeeming" the nineteenth century. (One might also compare this relation between texts to that presented in "The Task of the Translator.") Likewise, Benjamin's assertion that the "method" of his project is "literary montage" and that he "needn't *say* anything. Merely show" (*AP* 460 N1a,8), might well be read in Bloom's terms as "*askesis*"—an assertion of a desired, but never wholly achieved disinterestedness respecting past writers. In regard to Surrealism, Benjamin is indeed "a philosophical Fortinbras" (*Correspondence* 342): a strange foil and parallel to Aragon's Hamlet, who, of course, in Shakespeare's play, is responsible for the death of his father, Fortinbras senior. Benjamin takes the stage among the corpses strewn by Hamlet's strife to replay Hamlet's Oedipal role.

In all of these dynamics, quotation takes on a new formal significance. It is the symptom *par excellence* of belatedness. Read in this way, the *Arcades Project* becomes a literary work that has laid bare its own anxious skeleton, struggling on a basic level with what has already been written. All that remains of the literary here are the fragments left behind and an anxiety to produce the new. I believe it is this "post-literary" status of the project that is so useful to contemporary poets and artists looking for a mode of writing adequate to their own sense of lateness.

A major question remains: why, if Benjamin was trying to deny Aragon's role, did he explicitly place Aragon at the beginning of his project in the 1935 letter to Adorno? The dominant critical interpretation of Benjamin's debt to Aragon (the only interpretation besides Benjamin's provided in the English edition of the *Arcades Project*) holds that it was initially great, but ultimately overshadowed by his work's philosophical and Marxist agenda.¹⁹

Rolf Tiedemann lays this out as a historical progression. To begin with (late 1927) Benjamin was enchanted by Aragon's work, and by the surrealist theory of dreams. After meeting with Adorno and Horkheimer in September and October 1929, however, Benjamin became convinced that the "rhapsodic naiveté" and "illicit 'poetic'" formulation of the early work were "irreconcilable with a book that was to have 'our generation's decisive historical interests as its object'" (qtd. in Tiedemann 937). Instead, it would be necessary to study aspects of Hegelian philosophy and *Capital*, "recasting" the work in the frame of dialectical materialism (937).

This is more-or-less convincing as a biography of the *Passagen-Werk* as the notebook gestalt of an unfinished *magnum-opus*—and it has the virtue of being largely supported by Benjamin's own later assertions of his plans. Yet as an analysis of Aragon's position in the *Passagen-Werk* as we read it in its incompleteness, this attempt at genealogy is unsatisfactory, preferring to push *Le Paysan de Paris* and

Benjamin's poetic experimentation into the background (behind Adorno), rather than acknowledge it as a constitutive and powerful element of the composition process itself. And what, after all, is the *Arcades Project* if not an act of composition? It also fails to take account of the Hegelian philosophy and implicit Marxism already present in *Le Paysan de Paris* and in Benjamin's earlier work — and the fact that if anything, Aragon was precisely who led Benjamin out of the style of the *Ursprung* and towards dialectical materialism in the first place. Although Tiedemann is probably right to identify a break in late 1929, he is wrong to call it a break between “two completely different floor plans” (932) since one grew out of the other. A remarkable feature of Benjamin's career is that although he often came to life-changing “sudden decisions,”²⁰ he never left anything behind as completely as he may have wished.

In place of Tiedemann's stress on a break in 1929 arising from Benjamin's conversations with Adorno and Horkheimer, I therefore emphasize the continuity of a breaking process. Rather than one moment of division between Benjamin and his early surrealist influenced ideas, the *sprung* or rift between Benjamin and Aragon continued to be a source of inspiration throughout his composition. As testimony we might look at fragment N3a,4, from the famous convolut outlining Benjamin's epistemology and theory of progress. This fragment begins by quoting Aragon:

“If I insist on this mechanism of contradiction in the biography of a writer . . . , it is because his train of thought cannot bypass certain facts which have a logic different from that of his thought by itself. It is because there is no idea he adheres to that truly holds up . . . in the face of certain very simple, elemental facts: that workers are staring down the barrels of cannons aimed at them by police, that war is threatening, and that fascism is already enthroned. . . . It behooves a man for the sake of his dignity, to submit his ideas to these facts, and not to bend these facts, by some conjuring trick, to his ideas, however ingenious.” Aragon, “D'Alfred de Vigny à Avdeenko,” *Commune*, 2 (April 20, 1935), pp. 808–809. (*AP* 464 N3a,4; ellipses original)

Aragon exhorts contemporary writers to face the contradictions involved with literary production, and to face up to the bare facts of the day: fascism rising, workers threatened, war looming. He renounces the imaginative or mythological in favor of material realities. Indeed, he does much the same thing that Benjamin asserted for history in the *Passagen-Werk*, hence his own commitment to the Communist Party. Continuing the fragment, however, Benjamin flips the meaning around to himself:

But it is entirely possible that, in contradicting my past, I will establish a continuity with that of another, which he in turn, as a communist, will contradict. In this case, with the past of Louis Aragon, who in this same essay disavows his *Paysan de Paris*: “And, like most of my friends, I was partial to the failures, to what is monstrous and cannot survive, cannot succeed. . . . I was like them: I preferred error to its opposite.” (*AP* 464 N3a,4)

Benjamin appears at first to be avoiding Aragon's call to sincerity through precisely the means that Aragon abhors—sophistry. But despite his glibness, this is a crucial moment of admission in the *Passagen-Werk*. Here Benjamin confesses that Aragon's position and his own are connected, like two sides of a Möbius strip. If Benjamin has, as I claim, heretofore regarded Aragon's book as the secret father of his own, here he accepts this disidentification with *Le Paysan de Paris* as contradictory, and explicitly aligns himself with that book.

This fragment is one of the few we can date with any accuracy. Benjamin photocopied his work in progress twice during its development—once in June 1935 and once in December 1937. Looking at the copy from June 1935, we notice that Fragment N3a,4 is the last fragment of convolut N (a convolut which Benjamin worked on throughout his composition). This means that it was almost certainly written very shortly before June 1935: unsurprisingly, perhaps, within a few days of the letter to Adorno with which this essay began.²¹ Hence, in that letter he frankly admits the inspirational role of *Le Paysan de Paris*.

Mid-way through the *Passagen-Werk*, Benjamin realizes a fresh opposition between himself and Aragon, which allows him to describe the influence of literature over critique as dialectical, exposing the *Passagen-Werk's* hitherto contradictory bases. He acknowledges a point of agreement with *Le Paysan de Paris*: a point Aragon himself has left behind and left available. By aligning himself with, rather than against, the “literary” qualities of the *Paysan de Paris* in 1935, Benjamin looks to an old avant-garde in the face of contemporary problems. Aragon's turn to militant communism on the other hand, requires a renunciation of the work.

What could be more appropriate than this strange image of Benjamin and Aragon crossing paths as a symbol of Aragon's role in Benjamin's book? Successively denied and then reappropriated, the *Arcades Project* engages in a complex and anxious dance with the *Paris Peasant*. It is this Bloomian awareness of its own ambivalently literary dependence that allows Benjamin's masterpiece to continue to evade being signed-up to any one cause or another. That is, it evades Peter Bürger's trap of reification or completion, extending the critical power of Surrealism a decade after Benjamin himself declared the end of its “heroic phase.” No mere epigone, the *Passagen-Werk* is the unruly, librarian child of those heroes and heir to their art.

Notes

1. “To Theodor Adorno,” 31 May 1935 (Benjamin, *Correspondence* 438).
2. See e.g. Rob Fitterman's *Sprawl*, a poem about a shopping mall made up of online customer reviews of different stores, or Kenneth Goldsmith's New York “trilogy,” three books describing the city by quoting its weather, traffic, and sports reports. Goldsmith is currently working on a project titled *Capital*, which he describes as an Arcades-size collection of quotations about New York organized under convolut headings such as “Robert Mapplethorpe” or the “Statue of Liberty” (Goldsmith, “Rewriting Walter Benjamin's ‘The Arcades Project’”).

3. See Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* 87 C2a,9 (quoted below), 103 D1a,2 (on dust), 494 O2a,1 (Rites of Passage: "How mankind loves to remain transfixed," says Aragon, "at the very doors of the imagination"), and 538 R2,1 (On the light that reigns in the arcades).
4. See e.g. *AP* 492, O1a,3 and *AP* 538 R2,1.
5. See *AP* 82 C1,3 (The father of Surrealism was Dada; its mother was an arcade . . .); 374 J84,1 (where Aragon is mentioned through Benjamin's quotation of his own essay on Surrealism); and 458 N1,9 (Benjamin's debunking of Aragon's understanding of mythology).
6. See *AP* 464 N3a,4 and 790 k1a2, both of which quote Aragon's 1935 text "D'Alfred de Vigny à Avdeenko," *Commune*, 2 (20 April 1935).
7. See Benjamin, *Das Passagen-Werk* 1042.
8. Although not Benjamin's first title, Benjamin increasingly referred to his book as the "Passagenarbeit," starting in a letter to Scholem from 24 May 1928. See Benjamin, *Das Passagen-Werk* 1086.
9. "But if nostalgia as a political form is most frequently associated with Fascism, there is no reason why a nostalgia conscious of itself, a lucid and remorseless satisfaction with the present on the grounds of some remembered plenitude, cannot furnish as adequate a revolutionary stimulus as any other: the example of Benjamin is there to prove it" (Jameson 82).
10. See Perloff 1–23 and 24–49. See also the discussion of Montaigne's comparable creative development of citation from Mediaeval models and its relation to emblems in *Compagnon* 250–349.
11. "The amount of source material [Benjamin] copies so exceeds anything he might conceivably need to adduce as documentary evidence in an eventual book that one can only conclude that this ritual of transcription is less a rehearsal for his *livre à venir* than its most central *rite de passage*" (Sieburth 17).
12. As Susan Buck-Morss notes, "whereas the Baroque dramas were melancholy reflections on the inevitability of decay and disintegration, in the *Passagen-Werk* the devaluation of (new) nature and its status as ruin becomes instructive politically" (170).
13. Professor Hans Cornelis dubbed it an "incomprehensible morass," and hence unacceptable as a habilitation thesis. Qtd. in Steiner, Introduction. *Origin of the German Tragic Drama*, 11. Benjamin described the need for a radical departure in a letter to Scholem on 19 Feb. 1925: "this project marks the end for me—I would not have it be the beginning for any money in the world" (Benjamin, *Correspondence* 261).
14. In his 1928 essay on Surrealism, Benjamin uses Aragon to separate his materialist light from the traditional bourgeois tendency to put things into a 'symbolic light.' See Benjamin, "Surrealism" 213.
15. See Benjamin, *Correspondence* 304
16. Benjamin's letters to Scholem indicate that he began to collect these aphorisms as early as 1924. On 18 September 1926 he wrote that they were complete (Benjamin, *Correspondence* 306).
17. This argument is common in introductions to Benjamin. See e.g. Ferris 76.
18. See Benjamin, "The Crisis of the Novel" 301.
19. See Tiedemann 929–945. His essay "Dialectics at a Standstill" is appended to the *Arcades* as a general guide.
20. See e.g. the 18 Sept. 1926 letter Scholem referred to above (Benjamin, *Correspondence* 304).
21. A table showing the contents of each photocopy can be found in Buck-Morss 50–51.

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