

Author contributions

Both authors contributed equally to the study design and writing of this article.

Declaration of interest

None.

ICMJE forms are in the supplementary material, available online at <https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.2020.149>.

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psychiatry in literature

An almost preventable suicide: Walter Benjamin (15 July 1892–26 September 1940)

George Ikkos 

Walter Benjamin was a radically innovative cultural theorist and a German Jewish Marxist, securing refuge in France in 1933. Following the 1940 Nazi invasion he fled France, bound for the USA. However, on the mountainous approach to the French–Spanish border he realised dictator Franco had suddenly blocked transit. Benjamin was in ill health and struggling to carry a briefcase with a heavy manuscript, which he declared more precious than his life. Sadly, he completed suicide: there was family history on his father’s side.

Benjamin maintained a fiercely productive focus on his intellectual mission throughout his life, despite repeatedly complaining of ‘grand-scale defeats’ and lows. After his request for divorce from Dora Pollak was granted in 1932, he suffered 10 paralysing days during which he seriously prepared suicide. Suicidal thoughts endured. He was an elegant, cultivated man who oozed old-world charm, exerting attraction on women but not always enough to marry him. Asja Lacic, the Latvian Communist Director of Children’s Theatre in the USSR, twice refused, as did later lover Anna Maria Blaupot ten Cate. Lacic suffered relapsing mental illness and was hospitalised with hallucinations when Benjamin rushed to Moscow in 1926, at the brink of Stalinisation. His luminous *Moscow Diary* records his frustrating two-month experience.

Benjamin’s luscious *Berlin Childhood around 1900* recalls his experience of the city’s material culture as a boy. His family was commercially successful but relations with his parents and sister were poor, although he had a better relationship with his younger brother, who died in a concentration camp. His bleak verdict on school life contrasted with that of his schoolmate Gershom Scholem, who became Professor of Jewish Mysticism at the newly established Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Benjamin impressed some as reserved, discreet and modest, others as oversensitive and uncompromising.

He maintained a life-long friendship with Scholem. A feature of Benjamin’s unorthodox Marxism was his attempt to invest it with the passions of Messianic Jewish mysticism. He was also friends with Theodor Adorno, a critical social theory pioneer who was deeply influenced by Benjamin and helped preserve his legacy. Adorno remarked that Benjamin’s work had ‘settled at the cross-roads between magic and positivism. That place is bewitched’.

Benjamin revolutionised text, image and film criticism. His essay ‘Hashish in Marseilles’ confirms that he experimented with drugs (‘under medical supervision’). He argued that reawakening the long-forgotten dreams of childhood could help recover the betrayed potential of technological progress, in the service of humanity’s ‘redemption’ in this life. He collected children’s books and recorded attentively the development of his son Stefan like his contemporary Piaget, especially sensation, imitation, gestures and spontaneity. This is from his celebrated modernist short pieces collection *One Way Street*:

‘A child in his nightshirt cannot be prevailed upon to greet a visitor. Those present, invoking a higher moral standpoint, admonish him in vain to overcome his prudery. A few minutes later he reappears, now stark naked, before the visitor. In the meantime, he has washed’.

The precious manuscript was lost together with Benjamin’s life. Shortly thereafter, Franco reopened the border and collaborationist Vichy French authorities rescinded deportation orders to Germany. I share this tragic story of almost preventable loss with suicidal patients; and it has made a difference.

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