

credit karma as part of Etta's actions, Gold concludes that in the final analysis, all these are possible due to America's scientific progress. What this reviewer finds in this book is the same old refrain of American exceptionalism. Only here, American exceptionalism is contrasted in a positive light to Gold's American non-experiential understanding of Vasubandhu's philosophy.

The depth of this book can be summarised by quoting Gold himself: 'All that we need is to know the rock we kick with our foot is empty space' (221). All that we need to know of this book is that it is bereft of coherence and meaning.

Subhasis Chattopadhyay



Illuminations

Walter Benjamin

Bodley Head, Penguin Random House, 20 Vauxhall Bridge Road, London, SW1V 2SA. UK. Website: <https://www.penguin.co.uk/>. 2015. 272 pp. £16.99. PB. ISBN 9781847923868.

The mysterious Monsieur Chouchani, as it were, fashioned the thinking of Emmanuel Levinas among others. The less mysterious, but for Hannah Arendt's intervention, Walter Benjamin now exerts an influence over us that is more pervasive but this reviewer finds that our understanding of Benjamin has been narrow in scope. We tend to slot him as an atheist whose Marxism is akin to Max Horkheimer's and Theodor Adorno's rabid anti-populist rants. The book under review, which is part of the 'Bloomsbury Revelations' series, includes Benjamin's essay 'The Storyteller'. Unless Benjamin is quoted at some length, his difference from other atheistic existentialists will not be clear:

The earliest symptom of a process whose end is the decline of storytelling is the rise of the novel at the beginning of modern times. ... The storyteller takes what he tells from experience—his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale. The novelist has isolated himself. The birthplace of the novel is the solitary individual, who is no longer able to express himself by giving examples of his most important concerns, is himself uncounseled, and

cannot counsel others. To write a novel means to carry the incommensurable to extremes in the representation of human life. In the midst of life's fullness, and through the representation of this fullness, the novel gives evidence of the profound perplexity of the living. Even the first great book of the genre, *Don Quixote*, teaches how the spiritual greatness, the boldness, the helpfulness of one of the noblest of men, Don Quixote, are completely devoid of counsel and do not contain the slightest scintilla of wisdom. If now and then, in the course of the centuries, efforts have been made ... to implant instruction in the novel, these attempts have always amounted to a modification of the novel form (87).

Benjamin's implicit yearning for 'spiritual greatness' and 'wisdom' is precisely what according to Benjamin is missing from *Don Quixote*. Like Simone Weil and the popular Jacques Derrida of aporias and of eternal *différences*, Benjamin yearns for the spiritual within 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (211–44). It is a different matter that this seminal and oft-quoted essay has influenced thinkers ranging from Marshall McLuhan to Jean Baudrillard. Baudrillard's contempt of popular culture as simulacra is informed by Benjamin's rejection of the popular; of the cultural perversity of the masses:

The growing proletarianization of modern man and the increasing formation of masses are two aspects of the same process. Fascism attempts to organize the newly created proletarian masses without affecting the property structure which the masses strive to eliminate. Fascism sees its salvation in giving these masses not their right, but instead a chance to express themselves. The masses have a right to change property relations; Fascism seeks to give them an expression while preserving property. The logical result of Fascism is the introduction of aesthetics into political life. The violation of the masses, whom Fascism, with its Führer cult, forces to their knees, has its counterpart in the violation of an apparatus which is pressed into the production of ritual values (234).

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distributed various items, shown against their names, to needy people: **Aalo**: 102 blankets on 1 April and 528 shirts, 361 trousers, 229 jackets, and 361 sweaters on 5 and 12 May. **Bagda**: 3,520 shirts, 530 trousers, 1,000 tops, and 2,000 sweaters from 7 February to 29 March. **Baranagar Mission**: 10 saris, 100 bedsheets, 100 mosquito-nets, 10 plates, 10 bowls, 10 tumblers, 164 phials of hair oil, 164 packets of washing powder, 164 tubes of toothpaste, and 164 toothbrushes on 7 May. **Barisha**: 1,000 shirts, 300 tops, and 75 blankets from 16 February to 29 March. **Belgharia**: 2,407 shirts, 1,907 trousers, 200 tops, and 3,061 sweaters from 3 to 20 March. **Contai**: 1,300 shirts, 800 trousers, and 500 tops from 18 to 27 March. **Cooch Behar**: 3,000 shirts, 475 jackets, and 25 sweaters on 17 March. **Dehradun**: 222 jackets from 21 January to 18 March. **Jalpaiguri**: 10,007 shirts, 9,967 trousers, and 6,000 sweaters from 28 January to 29 March. **Katihar**: 958 shirts, 190 trousers, 151 jackets, 237 sweaters, and 609 sweatshirts from 28 February to 16 March. **Khetri**: 1,460 shirts, 638 T-shirts, 780 trousers, 14 blazers, 104 jackets, 2,381 sweaters, 185 sweatshirts, and 37 blankets from 20 February to 18 March. **Koyilandy**: 22 tarpaulins, 24 solar lamps, and 22 blankets on 18 May. **Mayavati**: 1,780 shirts, 1,876 trousers, and 7,071 sweaters from 9 December to 4 March. **Muzaffarpur**: 1,528 T-shirts, 1,495 trousers, and 2,611 sweaters from 27 May to 31 March. **Ponnampet**: 1,000 sweaters from 31 December to 31 March. **Purulia**: 535 shirts, 535 trousers, 2,400 jackets, and 300 blankets from 20 December to 25 February. **Rajarhat Bishnupur**: 8 shirts, 10 trousers, 22 saris, 9 raincoats, 9 aprons, 7 sweaters, 3 shawls, and a coat from 21 to 24 March. **RKMVERI, Belur**: 1,787 shirts, 842 trousers, 1,407 tops, 1,521 sweaters, 681 sweatshirts, 563 assorted ladies' garments, 68 blankets, and 222 school bags from 7 March 2018 to 11 March

2019. **Sikra-Kulingram**: 95 saris, 100 dhotis, 100 *uttariyas* or upper-body wrappers, 200 shirts, and 100 sweaters from 1 January to 26 February. **Swamiji's Ancestral House**: 1,720 shirts, 435 T-shirts, and 845 trousers on 29 March. **Vrindaban**: 450 kg rice, 450 kg flour, 112 kg dal, 112 kg cooking oil, 225 kg salt, 56 kg sugar, 45 kg tea leaves, 56 kg milk powder, and 225 bars of washing soap on 7 May. 

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This reviewer, without trying to commit either any intentional or affective fallacies, agrees with Benjamin and therefore, with Arendt's powerful 'Introduction' (7–58) to this volume of Benjamin's essays. Arendt says of Benjamin that the 'trouble with everything Benjamin wrote was that it always turned out to be *sui generis*' (9), and this reviewer has to add that the trouble with Benjamin will be that everything he wrote will turn out to be prescient and thus dangerous. The danger posed by *Illuminations* is the danger that marks the thoughts of Azar Nafisi. In a certain sense, knowing Chouchani, Benjamin, Arendt, and Nafisi is unsettling and dangerous in these times when the barbarian has arrived at academia, dumbing down everything for the consumption of the masses.

After all, we live in an era of binge viewing and social media acceptance/isolation. The beast that began crouching towards Bethlehem is born, and we ignore Benjamin at our peril. Eichmanns and Goebbels have again begun providing 'salvation ... [to the] masses ... [and] a chance to express themselves' by 'the introduction of aesthetics into political life'. We only have to see the vast number of literary festivals and seminars globally to know how the erstwhile opaque aesthetic object has become conflated with mass hysterics and incomprehensible comprehension.

Illuminations is not for the faint-hearted; it is not the Modernist manifesto it is made out to be. It is a theological call to action by a man who loved quotations (9). *Illuminations*, ironically, is one of the greatest repositories of quotable quotes.

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