In his famous essay “Literaturgeschichte und Literaturwissenschaft” (Literary History and the Study of Literature) (1931), Walter Benjamin describes the methods of contemporary literary historians as akin to the clumsy acts of a platoon of mercenaries, who, entering into a beautiful house full of treasures and claiming to admire its spectacular contents, in fact “do not give a damn for the order and inventory of the house. They have moved in because it is strategically situated and because it is a convenient vantage point from which to bombard a railway or bridgehead whose defense is important in the civil war” (Benjamin, Selected Writings 2: 461–62). As David Bathrick, Jeffrey Grossman, and Detlev Schöttker (“Walter Benjamin und seine Rezeption”) have shown, the historiography of Benjamin studies could be described in similar terms. Bathrick and Grossman chart the opportunistic intrusion on the corpus of Benjamin’s publications and surviving manuscripts by various scholars, beginning with Theodor W. Adorno and Gershom Scholem and extending up into GDR/DDR-based struggles and deconstructive receptions, respectively. The battle lines they describe are as clear as they are everywhere debated: the early versus the late Benjamin, the messianic-theological versus the Marxist-materialist Benjamin, a “reader’s” Benjamin versus the “historical” Benjamin (Nägele 8–9), and so on. Schöttker argues that the proliferation of these often opposing receptions is the natural result of the nearly impossibly varied genres of those of Benjamin’s writings that were published during his lifetime—literary and cultural criticism,
academic writing and book reviews, translations, and much more. The fragmentary state of much of the posthumously published work, and especially of the “torso” of the Arcades Project (Wolin xl), has provoked similar contests over its meaning.

Benjamin’s Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels (The Origin of the German Tragic Drama) has been subjected by cultural, intellectual, and literary historians, critics, and theorists to any number of occupations over the years in ways not unlike those that have characterized the reception of his entire oeuvre. The Tragic Drama book has been variously seen as the “tragic” beginning of the end of the possibility of an academic career (Lindner, “Habilitationsakte Benjamin”; Brodersen, Spinne im eigenen Netz), as an early articulation of Benjamin’s “avant garde theory” and of his “micrological” thinking and “messianic” philosophy of history (Jäger, K any, and Pizer), and, finally, as a performance of his theories of allegory (Menninghaus) and “constructivism” (Schöttker, Konstruktiver Fragmentarismus). The Tragic Drama book has nevertheless seldom been read—even by scholars who call for an investigation of its “complex intellectual debts to [a] rich network of competing intellectual traditions” in the early twentieth century, among them Neoplatonism, neo-Kantianism, Surrealism, Marxism (Richter 23), and Schmittian “construction[s] of sovereignty” (Koepnick 280)—for the purchase the book provides on the vexed politico-historiographic status of the Baroque, the period and concept whose texts are Benjamin’s direct object of concern there.

The title of the Tragic Drama book, with the mysterious “mourning play,” or tragic drama (Trauerspiel), at its center, refers not to the genre of tragedy writ large, for example, but to a very specific corpus of German-language drama by the authors known as the Second Silesian school (Zweite Schlesische Schule) of the seventeenth century; theirs were the plays that were the textual objects with which Benjamin—either “for opportunistic reasons” or not (Briefe 1: 304)—was primarily concerned when he undertook his postdoctoral thesis, or Habilitation. He probably read many of these plays, as well as the numerous other Baroque texts from which he quotes, in the Prussian State Library on Unter den Linden in Berlin. It was there that he copied onto note cards the “600 citations,” all “well organized for getting an overview” (Gesammelte Schriften 1.3: 875), that he then took with him to the island of Capri in 1924 to draft the thesis there. At the time, however, the sometimes scandalous and always extravagant historical plays of the Second Silesian school were not “dusty volumes of plays long unread,” or “bastardized” texts of a lost period that had deservedly “long been consigned to the dusty attic of literary failures” (Gilloch 63 and 15). Rather, they belonged to a complex network

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1. The names of some of the most well-known German Baroque playwrights and poets are nevertheless for the most part less well-known today than in Benjamin’s time. Among them are the Silesians, Martin Opitz (1597–1639), Andreas Gryphius (1616–64), Daniel Casper von Lohenstein (1635–83), and Johann Christian Hallmann (c. 1640–1704), as well as other authors curiously included by Benjamin in this tradition, such as the Viennese Josef Anton Stranitzky (c. 1676–1726) and the Nuremberg poets Georg Philipp Harsdörffer (1607–58), Sigmund von Birken (1626–81), and Johann K laj (1616–56).
of texts and ideological positions associated with a period very much at the center of contemporary debates about nationalism and modernity. We need to know at least as much as Benjamin did about these texts—or be able to contextualize their place in the debates about the Baroque being conducted before and as he began his work—if we want to understand the dense book he wrote about them as a historical document written at a specific moment and in a specific place. Lutz Koepnick usefully interrogates the ways in which the Tragic Drama book “projects onto the seventeenth century a political matrix deeply rooted in the cultural climate after the end of [the] World War,” suggesting that Benjamin “simultaneously reads the baroque through the lenses of Weimar and mirrors Weimar in the baroque” (281–82). Benjamin’s Library takes such quasi-mimetic claims one step further in the direction of historical specificity by engaging with the construction of the Baroque as the origin of a peculiarly German modernity both before and during the Weimar years. When he embarked on his study of the Baroque, Benjamin stepped onto a hazardous ideological minefield, in other words. Rather than providing readings of historically Baroque texts, my purpose here is to reconstruct the debates about the Baroque that raged around the author of the Tragic Drama book as he wrote it, debates that can thus be understood as constituting the book’s “enabling conditions.”

Put somewhat differently, this is a book about Benjamin’s “libraries,” the holdings of which we can study as a way of understanding the often heavily overdetermined vocabularies in which he embeds his reflections on the nation’s modernity in discussions of a wide range of Baroque texts. Benjamin himself of course “resisted all attempts . . . to annex him and his writings for a cause” (Jennings, Dialectical Images 91). His thinking was opposed to any “theoretical and political attempts to usurp it” (Brodersen, Walter Benjamin 31) for a specific end. Schöttker is thus correct to declare “Benjamin” a “phenomenon of reception history” (“Walter Benjamin und seine Rezeption” 268), a Foucauldian “author function” rather than an author in the traditional sense. Grossman agrees, arguing somewhat more modestly that the man and his writings operate as “signs which various discourses attempt to rewrite according to their own model” (414). In all of these cases, “Benjamin” emerges as a thinker and writer who is constructed anew each time his work is “filtered” (Gilloch 235) by a new microcommunity of scholars, each of which is engaged in legacy management of some kind. Ironically, the greatest cultural capital seems to have been gained from stabilizing one particularly dark version of his work and life, namely Benjamin’s role as a martyred German-Jewish intellectual and academic outsider. The efficacy of this particular “myth” (Jennings, Dialectical Images 1; Schöttker, Konstruktiver Fragmentarismus 126–29) is obvious in the sheer number of positions it has buttressed over the years.

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2. I am indebted to one of the anonymous readers of this book for Cornell University Press for the phrase “enabling conditions,” which accurately captures the nature of the textual and historical contexts in which Benjamin produced his book and that I assemble here.
on the fraught ideological battlefields of an academy that Benjamin never joined. When myth, or the sign, is used in this way, it works opportunistically, as Roland Barthes explained already some years ago, “abolishing the complexity of human acts” in order to create “a world which is without contradictions because it is without depth” (143). Such a “draining out” of the complexities of history from myth only opens the myth up to further appropriations, according to Barthes (118–19), and thus continues to ignore (to return to Benjamin’s original image) the abundant and, in the case of Benjamin’s own oeuvre, nearly impossibly cluttered and incongruous inventory of the house overrun by the various groups in the first place. In the case of the Tragic Drama book, this “house” was originally furnished in elaborate fashion with early twentieth-century period pieces testifying to the earnestness with which discussions about the Baroque were pursued. These are the discussions I investigate here.

Mythologization has also led to the peculiar position Benjamin occupies in a number of periodization schemes, most of which likewise characteristically disappear from view the very Baroque that was one of his main orientation points. I return in the introduction to the issue of periodization studies and its relevance for writing a book about the Baroque in the early twentieth century, as Benjamin did, as well as for reading my book about it in the twenty-first century. Here, I need only note the impact that Benjamin’s induction into the pantheon of postmodern thinkers, alongside Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man, for example, has had on the (in)visibility of his own period claims. (It is interesting that the grand récit created by collocating this particular band of “anticlassical” brothers is not unlike those used in the mid- to late 1920s to celebrate the Baroque, one of the more heterodox periods of German literary history, as integral to the national “spirit.”) Unlike their postmodernizing fellows, scholars such as Susan Buck-Morss, Michael Jennings, and Richard Wolin have devoted welcome attention to Benjamin’s position within a narrative of modernity (rather than of the postmodern). Yet they too find Benjamin’s stance on the modern “nihilistic,” suggesting that his work is characteristically prescient about the catastrophe that was to come. Common to both receptions is thus the absence of the early modern period, which is so much at the center of

3. This myth has also functioned as an organizing trope around which to market any number of “extracurricular” cultural events, such as art installations and concerts as well as film series. See the 2004–5 exhibit at Haus am Waldsee, Berlin, Germany, and associated film and performance events at the 2006 “NOW — Das Jetzt der Erkennbarkeit: Orte Walter Benjamins in Kultur, Kunst und Wissenschaft” (JETZT — The Now of Recognizability: Sites of Engagement; Walter Benjamin in the History of Culture, the Arts, and Sciences), a “festival” organized by the Zentrum für Literaturforschung, Berlin.


5. Benjamin of course himself claimed to be skeptical of such progressive historiographies in general; his “conception of history” was, as he wrote in 1931, decisively “against the possibility of an evolutionary and universal[izing] component in history” (Gesammelte Schriften 6: 442–43)
the Tragic Drama book that even its author could not overlook the traces it had left there. “In the meantime what surprises me above all,” Benjamin wrote to Scholem in December 1924, “is that, if you will, what I have written is composed almost entirely of citations” (Gesammelte Schriften 1.3: 881). As I show here, many of these citations derive from Baroque texts and from the debates about the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that were central in defining the origins of a uniquely German modernity at the time.

For Benjamin and his age, literal citation of a tradition of specifically German Baroque texts was not difficult. It was a literary-historical period that was materially present in and to the early twentieth century in numerous ways. Some of these belonged to the realm of technical academic practice, such as the production of critical editions of Baroque plays by individual seventeenth-century playwrights, including Andreas Gryphius and Daniel Casper von Lohenstein, from which Benjamin quotes; many of the editions he used were based on ideologically loaded text-editing principles, as I explain. Benjamin also read and cites plays after versions contained in anthologies of a longer history of German-language theater, anthologies full of equally as pointed messages about the continuities of a “national” culture. The “German” Baroque was also present to Benjamin in other, more figurative ways, as in his discussion of works by originally non-German playwrights of the same period, among them Shakespeare and Calderón. The apparently odd presence of English and Spanish drama in a book about the German tradition is nevertheless not all that surprising, because, for one thing, it is clear from his notes that Benjamin read the English and Spanish plays in German-language translations heavy with politically inflected commentary of a particular sort. By the early twentieth century, there was, moreover, a well-developed German-language school of Shakespeare criticism that identified the Bard not only as German, but also as Baroque. Benjamin was familiar with this scholarship, and his understanding in the Tragic Drama book of Shakespeare’s role in the German cultural and political imaginary can be read as at least partially based on it.

Even though important work has been done on the centrality of Benjamin’s “philological work” (Jennings, Dialectical Images 92–93; see also Weigel) in his theorization of the “natural history” of a text, the political and ideological agendas behind the actual philological products he used also need to be considered, especially in conversations regarding the Tragic Drama book that see the Baroque as having an “affinity . . . with the immediate post-war period.”6 That such conversations have not yet occurred is due, I suspect, to the reputation that philology has gained in the contemporary division of scholarly labor, which for the most part bans such technical issues from the realm of “high theory” with which Benjamin is commonly

6. See Koepnick 281–82 and 282 n. 29, where he refers to Buck-Morss. In both cases, the Baroque nevertheless merely “mirrors” what are assumed to be Benjamin’s actual interests, rather than being understood as his primary concern.
said to have been concerned. Roger Chartier famously counters this trend by noting that in “the order of books,” “meanings are dependent upon the forms through which they are received and appropriated by their readers (or hearers).” “Forms” are understood here to refer not to “abstract or ideal texts detached from all materiality,” but to “objects” (3); “to read is to read something” (5), Chartier explains. Understanding which versions of the German Baroque were quite literally available to Benjamin in the books that he read, and what their material nature reveals about the various narratives of the “modern” German nation in which they were implicated, are thus crucial next steps.7

One last observation: associating the figure and work of Walter Benjamin with the interrogation of the Baroque as implicated in the narration of nation and modernity may seem counterintuitive, even perverse, to some. After all, he died as a result of persecution by a National Socialist regime hugely invested in the production of thoroughly rationalizing scripts of all kinds, including one of a continuous history of Ur-German literary and cultural periods culminating in a present-day “Third Reich,” which I discuss in the conclusion. It thus seems implausible that Benjamin would have been concerned with how the “modern” German nation got to be what it had so tragically become. And yet the question of which version of Germany’s identity was the true one was of ongoing concern to him, and at no time so urgently as during the volatile wartime and immediate post–World War I years. In the very midst of writing the Tragic Drama book, the severe nature of the political and economic circumstances that had engulfed the nation caused Benjamin to reflect at length on the history and nature of the crises afflicting the “present situation of Germanness” (gegenwärtige Lage des D eutschtums) in a letter to Florens Christian Rang in 1925 (Briefe 1: 309–13). As late as 1936, in his book Deutsche Menschen (German Men and Women), Benjamin was still trying to understand the nature of a German tradition worth defending, even as the project of that nation took its dismal turn for the worst. It must thus have seemed quite logical to him to undertake a full genealogy of the German literary and cultural tradition somewhat earlier, during and immediately after the Great War, when the bewildering

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7. It may well be the case that the way the Tragic Drama book has entered Chartier’s “order” has made it difficult for professional students of Benjamin to see the importance of the German Baroque in the text. In the commentary volume (1.3) of the Frankfurt edition of Benjamin’s works, published by Suhrkamp, on which most scholars rely, for example, the editors have included a huge variety of useful materials. Even notes, such as those that Benjamin jotted down on the back of the “narrow slips of paper” that were the book checkout slips from the State Library (1.3: 919–20), are included. Yet evidence that he actually read either the Silesian plays or any other Baroque texts, not to mention contemporary scholarship on them, is left out—even when it exists. The editors write, for example: “Finally, a handwritten page has survived that contains the schematic listing of the appearance of a variety of motifs from the Baroque tragic drama” (920). Yet, “we have decided against reproducing this list” (920). Such elisions offer unbidden support to Benjamin’s odd claim that the materials that he must have had before him on the tables of the State Library were “remote,” “very [sic] missing” (sehr verschollen), and even “unlocatable,” as he writes to Scholem in December 1924 and February 1925 (883, 881). A access to Benjamin’s Baroque is in any case blocked here.
tangle of what Martin Jay calls the “desperate hope and looming catastrophe, [the] experimental ebullience and cynical disillusionment” of the intellectual class, showcased the weaknesses of the modern nation in ways that made those weaknesses just as visible (if not more visible) as they were to become just a few years hence (vii). It may not have been by chance, in other words, that the focus of what Beatrice Hanssen calls Benjamin’s “German period” (26), beginning “after the Treaty of Versailles” (nach dem Friedensschluß) and extending up through his work on the Tragic Drama book, concerned the origins of a “modern” German tradition that—as Benjamin himself points out in one of the last versions of his curriculum vitae (1939–40) that survives (Gesammelte Schriften 6: 226)—was to be celebrated, but also feared, not because it had “fail[ed] to live up to the possibilities it ha[d] made available” (Koepnick 278, emphasis added), but rather, precisely because it had lived up to them in spades.

What I mean by this is the following: Benjamin’s interest in early modernity signals his awareness that the “origin” of the “pathogenesis of the modern age” lay in the Baroque era, as Koepnick suggests (278). But we must remember that it was also a specifically German version of this early modernity that Benjamin took as his theme. It is surely no accident, for example, that the legacy of Lutheranism looms large in the Tragic Drama book. Indeed, if Benjamin sought to understand the relationship of the German nation to a secular “European” modernity that, following Jacob Burckhardt, had its beginning in the Renaissance in Italy, he must surely have contemplated the consequences of Germany having had the Reformation instead of a Renaissance. Could Germany be modern, he might well have asked? If so, what was the role of the peculiar modernity of the Protestant Baroque about which he wrote in the production of the “cultural and political predicament” that Germany was in (Koepnick 278)? What was the relation not merely of spirituality in the abstract, in other words, but of the historically confessionalized religions in Germany to the “modern” situation the nation faced? Such questions were not idle ones in a book “conceptualized,” as Benjamin famously writes on the dedicatory page, in 1916, at the low point of a war fought under the banner of the Lutheran “war theology” (Kriegstheologie) that I discuss in chapter 3, and “completed” in 1925 on the heels of the hunger years following Germany’s resounding defeat in 1918.  

8. In a much later letter to Scholem, Benjamin emphasizes the specifically German context of his interest in the Baroque: “Just as the tragic drama book interrogated the seventeenth century from the point of view of Germany, so [will the Arcades book] consider the nineteenth century from the point of view of France” (Briefe 2: 654).

9. Ernst Troeltsch, for example, thought not. See his Protestantism and Progress: The Significance of Protestantism for the Rise of the Modern World (1912), in which he writes, not too much before Benjamin began interrogating these very same issues, that unlike Calvinism, Lutheranism was “favorable to absolutism” and thus “essentially conservative” (qtd. in Brady, “Confessionalization” 3).

10. Although it is not the subject of this book, the analogues between these Germany-specific questions about nationalism, and the particularist-nationalist versus humanist-universalist debates about early Zionism in circles with which Benjamin was familiar, should not be overlooked. See Piterberg 3.
They are no less pressing in our own time, when the terms of political theology are being upended. Whereas it was once self-understood that “all significant concepts of the modern theory of state [were] secularized theological concepts” (Schmitt 36), now it is sacred logics and timetables that are said to govern the actions of a not insignificant number of established states and aspiring world-political actors.

In Benjamin’s Library, I argue that Benjamin’s work on the Baroque emerged out of and in conversation with some of the dominant narratives of German literary and cultural history circulating at the time, narratives that had fundamental questions about modernity and the nation at their core. The Tragic Drama book intersects with and documents debates such as these as much as it intersects with and documents other, now perhaps better-known discussions. I am by no means proposing that these other debates and their representatives, including Theodor W. Adorno, Hermann Cohen, Martin Heidegger, Franz Rosenzweig, and Gerhard Scholem, were not important in the formation of Benjamin’s ideas about the Baroque, nor in fact that they were unrelated to them. Rather, I suggest that The Origin of the German Tragic Drama represents more than a series of fragmentary claims of relevance to everything other than the Baroque, by showing the ways in which it offers a complex theorization of that period as a moment of (re)birth for the German nation. Reading the Tragic Drama book as a witness to the ideologically inflected ways in which period logic circulated in the early twentieth century helps shed some clarifying light on the arguments made in this most difficult of texts.