

The Writing of Asja Lacis

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In 1971, the chief editor of the Berlin journal *Alternative* Hildegard Brenner wrote that: “[t]he name of Asja Lacis should have been mentioned two decades ago by those who knew of the historical connections. This did not happen. The 1955 publication of Benjamin’s *Schriften* saw the removal of the dedication of *One-Way Street* to his ‘girl-friend in Riga’; the name of Lacis as co-author of the ‘Naples’ essay was also stricken.”¹ Another three decades have passed, and Lacis has yet to receive the recognition she deserves. Credit given her as co-author of “Naples” in Benjamin’s 1978 collection of essays, *Reflections*, linked her name irrevocably with Benjamin’s.² She would now seem to be firmly ensconced in Benjamin studies as the *femme fatale* responsible for seducing him with Marxist materialism away from his Jewish heritage and faithful wife. The blurb on the back of the 1986 English translation of Benjamin’s *Moscow Diary* offers a succinct summation of this myth:

Perhaps the primary reason for this trip was his affection for Asja Lacis, a Latvian Bolshevik who would remain an important intellectual and erotic influence on him throughout the twenties and thirties.³

1. Hildegard Brenner, “Nachwort,” Asja Lacis, *Revolutionär im Beruf: Berichte über proletarisches Theater, über Meyerhold, Brecht, Benjamin und Piscator*, ed. Hildegard Brenner (Munich: Rogner & Bernhard, 1971, 1976) 113. All quotations from Lacis’s work are my own.

2. Walter Benjamin and Asja Lacis, “Naples,” *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Peter Demetz, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken Books, 1978) 163-73.

3. Walter Benjamin, *Moscow Diary*, ed. Gary Smith, trans. Richard Sieburth (Cambridge & London: Harvard UP, 1986).

It goes on to hail the diary as:

on one level, the account of his masochistic love affair with this elusive – and rather unsympathetic – object of desire. On another level, it is the story of a failed romance with the Russian Revolution.

The parallelism in this passage between Benjamin's romance with both Lacis and the revolution suggests that the former has been fashioned to fit the narrative of a "failed romance." The forces behind the creation of this "elusive – and rather unsympathetic – object of desire" remain unexplored. An obituary and a book review represent the extent of the interest Lacis has thus far generated in English.⁴ The purpose of this article is to make known the story immersed under the weight of stereotypical references to this "Latvian Bolshevik." It argues that the way "Asja Lacis" figures in Benjaminiana is the product of very specific linguistic, ideological and industrial forces, and it shows how rewriting practices have formed, informed and deformed our view of Benjamin.⁵

One need not look far to uncover the elements of Benjamin's life story that made it ripe for cultification. "If it were a photograph," Linda Haverty Rugg has written, "the story of Walter Benjamin's life would be in the sepia tones of nineteenth-century images, imbued with the color we have come to associate with nostalgia and regret."⁶ Michael André Bernstein has further noted that:

Curiously, Benjamin's compulsion to act against his own interests, and sometimes even against his chances for survival, has only enhanced the glamor of his posthumous canonization. His life and

4. Heinz Uwe Haus, "In Memoriam Asja Lacis," *The Brecht Yearbook* 12 (1983): 141-47; and Patty Lee Parmalee, Review of "Revolutionär im Beruf," *New German Critique* 2 (1975): 163-66. In German, Fritz Mierau's *Russen in Berlin: Literatur, Malerei, Theater, Film, 1918-1933* (Leipzig: Reclam, 1991) and Hans Mayer's *Der Zeitgenosse Walter Benjamin* (Frankfurt: Jüdischer Verlag, 1992) engage with her in a less than stereotypical fashion, akin to Susan Buck-Morss's. The standard monograph on Lacis is in Latvian: M. Miglane, et al., *Anna Lacis* (Riga: Liesma, 1973). Also of interest is the "Mommy Dearest" memoir by her daughter Dagmara Kimele, *Asja: Režisores Annas Laces dekaina dzīve* (Riga: Liktenstasti, 1996).

5. I intend the term "rewriting" as André Lefevere does in *Translation, Rewriting and the Manipulation of Literary Fame* (London & New York: Routledge, 1992) to include the many practices influencing reception and canonization, such as translation, anthologization, historiography, criticism and editing.

6. Linda Haverty Rugg, *Picturing Ourselves: Photography and Autobiography* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1997) 162.

his works have acquired the aura of a legend, and the decisive turning-points in his career, from his semi-deliberate failure to secure the Habilitation certification required for teaching at a German university, to his suicide after crossing the Pyrenees and reaching Port Bou in Spain in September 1940, have been described so often and with such reverence that they begin to seem like set-pieces from an orthodox hagiography.⁷

The way Benjamin has come to be constructed as “the last German-Jewish intellectual,”⁸ “a wanderer who buried himself in books,”⁹ “an archetypal Old World intellectual... an outsider for all times – including our own,”¹⁰ and “an intellectual cult figure, a philosophical saint... [who] sixty years after his suicide... seems poised to become a pop-culture icon”¹¹ has certainly resonated in the Anglo-American cultural imagination. One could point to such cultifying spinoffs as Jay Parini’s fictional *Benjamin’s Crossing* and Larry McMurtry’s autobiographical musings in *Walter Benjamin at the Dairy Queen*, to *Shadowtime*, an opera based on Benjamin’s life and writings,¹² or to *Trilectic*, a record by Jewlia Eisenberg, the lyrics of which are based on Benjamin’s writings. As this study of Asja Lacis demonstrates, the mythological parameters of the ironic hero that have contributed to the rise in Benjamin’s popularity have also substantially influenced the fashioning of his supporting cast. The first section of this article introduces Lacis as she was introduced to scholars west of the Iron Curtain in the heady days of the ’68ers, while a second section queries the canonical view of her as it takes shape in Benjamin’s *Moscow Diary* and its inter-texts. A final section then offers an alternate view of Lacis based on material hitherto unaddressed in what Mark Kingwall has described as “one of those weird confluences of the popular and the scholarly that our culture produces

7. Michael André Bernstein, “One-Way Street,” *New Republic* 217.23 (8 Dec. 1997) accessed via the internet database Academic Search Elite.

8. Gene Shaw, “Book Reviews: Arts & Humanities,” *Library Journal* 124.10 (1 Jun. 1999): 111.

9. Fred Inglis, “A Wanderer who Buried Himself in Books,” *Times Higher Education Supplement* 1430 (7 Apr. 2000): 24-25.

10. On the dustcover of Jay Parini, *Benjamin’s Crossing* (New York: Henry Holt, 1997).

11. Mark Kingwall, “Arcadian Adventures: Walter Benjamin, the Connoisseur of Everyday Life,” *Harper’s* 300.1798 (Mar. 2000): 70.

12. See Charles Bernstein, “11 Interrogations from *Shadowtime*,” *boundary 2* 27.2 (Summer 2000): 73-81.

now and then,"¹³ that is, the Benjamin industry.

Eschewing the typical biographical sketch, "Born on a country estate in Latvia in 1891, Anna Ernestovna Lacis was the only daughter of tradesfolk," let me introduce Lacis as Hildegard Brenner did. Brenner had contacted Lacis in Riga for information about Benjamin and the result, a long, detailed letter, was printed in *Alternative*.¹⁴ It begins: "Dear Dr. Hildegard Brenner – All of Benjamin's letters are kaput. I can only offer you some observations," which she then proceeds to do.¹⁵ This letter was followed up with Lacis's reminiscences of building a children's theater in Orel in 1918 and Benjamin's "Program for a Proletarian Children's Theater,"¹⁶ which appeared in the theater journal *Performance*, in 1973, the only time anything of Lacis's has ever been published in English.¹⁷ One has the impression that Brenner was pleasantly surprised to have come across such a wide-ranging source of information. Her initial request resulted not only in the *Alternative* selections but also in a volume of memoirs, *Revolutionär im Beruf*, which was published in 1971 to coincide with Lacis's eightieth birthday, and which includes an afterword by Brenner enumerating Lacis's accomplishments and relevance. For Brenner, Lacis was an important link in reconstructing the circumstances of intellectual life in the Weimar Republic in general and of the proletarian worker's movement in particular. The subtitle of the volume, *Reports on Proletarian Theater, on Meyerhold, Brecht, Benjamin and Piscator*, is indicative of Brenner's interest. Lacis concentrates on what she was able to add to knowledge about well-known, left-leaning, male

13. Kingwall 70.

14. Asja Lacis, "Brief an Hildegard Brenner," *Alternative* 56-57 (Oct.-Dec. 1967): 211-14.

15. The ending of the letter is also of interest as it draws attention to the responsive nature of Lacis's writing in German: "Of course I had a strong political influence on W.B. and he became more involved in the study of Marxism. But my influence only had an effect because the ground had already been laid. I tried to be a similar influence on Werner Kraus but I failed: he remained the reactionary he was. Rolf Tiedemann's assertion is ridiculous. I could write an entire book about Benjamin – but I'll close now – perhaps you don't need such material at all. Respectfully yours, Anna Lazis (called Asja); 14/XI/67 Riga. ps/ WB visited me and Bernhard Reich in Moscow (approx. 1927), he wrote on Goethe for the Great Soviet Encyclopedia and also some newspaper articles. A.L."

16. Lacis, "Das 'Programm eines proletarischen Kindertheaters': Erinnerungen beim Wiederlesen," *Alternative* 59-60 (Apr.-June 1968): 64-67. Further reminiscences, which formed the basis of her memoir, were published as "Städte und Menschen. Erinnerungen," *Sinn und Form* 21 (1969): 1326-57.

17. Lacis & Benjamin, "Building a Children's Theater. 2 Documents," trans. Jack Zipes & Susan Buck-Morss, *Performance* 1 (1973): 22-32.

personalities. Both Lacis's personal circumstances and her theatrical connections are downplayed, for example, in glosses: "A decisive stage for me was working in Riga. (Personal circumstances had brought me back)."¹⁸ When the volume was reprinted in 1976, scaled back by ten pages, it was these areas – the childhood reminiscences, descriptions of relatives and a translated excerpt from her Russian book on *Revolutionary Theater in Germany* – which were shortened, necessitating changing the title of the first chapter from "Latvia: In the Village/Riga" to "St. Petersburg, Moscow, 1913/17," which had originally been the title of chapter two. Thus it was in the guise of an impersonal Marxist functionary that Lacis was first introduced into scholarship in the West.

This guise was not to improve primarily due to the fact that, four years after this second edition, and 53 years after the fact, Walter Benjamin's *Moskauer Tagebuch* appeared with Suhrkamp. In the afterword to the 1986 English translation (but notably not in the original "Editorische Notiz"), editor Gary Smith informs us that the diary had not been published earlier, "for two reasons. First, the publishing house decided not to issue the diary during the lifetime of Asja Lacis (she died in 1979). Secondly, the diary was scheduled for publication in the sixth volume of Benjamin's *Gesammelte Schriften*, which contains all of his extant autobiographical writings and fragments, other than those of the *Paris Arcades Project*."¹⁹ It is unfortunate that Lacis was thus deprived of the opportunity to respond to Benjamin's portrayal of her. As pointed out in both Gershom Scholem's preface and Gary Smith's afterword (both of which I will discuss after a brief reading of the diary itself), Lacis is integral to the diary's narrative and thematic structures. The diary begins with Benjamin's arrival in Moscow, on December 6, 1926, where he is met by, and immediately displaces, Asja's husband, Bernhard Reich:

Then, as I was making my way out of the Belorussian-Baltic railway station, Reich appeared . . . We loaded ourselves and the two suitcases into a sleigh. A thaw had set in that day, it was warm. We had only been underway a few minutes, driving down the broad Tverskaia with its gleam of snow and mud, when Asja

18. These circumstances involved a harrowing trip across civil-war-torn Latvia to be with her dying mother, who died shortly before she could get there. Lacis, *Revolutionär im Beruf* 32.

19. Gary Smith, "Afterword," *Moscow Diary* 145. All quotations from Benjamin's diary are taken from Sieburth's translation, hereafter cited parenthetically within the text.

waved to us from the side of the street, Reich got out and walked the short remaining distance to the hotel, we took the sleigh. (9)

When Benjamin leaves Moscow on February 1, the narrative breaks off not with his actual departure from the city but with his final farewell from Asja, and one will note the symmetry with his arrival, one of many examples of the diary's immaculate construction:

I asked her to hail a sleigh. As I was about to get in, having said good-bye to her one more time, I invited her to ride to the corner of Tverskaia with me. I dropped her off there, and as the sleigh was already pulling away, I once again drew her hand to my lips, right in the middle of the street. She stood there a long time, waving. I waved back from the sleigh. At first she seemed to turn around as she walked away, then I lost sight of her. Holding my large suitcase on my knees, I rode through the twilight streets to the station in tears. (121)²⁰

In addition, most of the initial entries begin with a reference to Asja. December 8: "Asja dropped by in the morning" (12); December 9: "Asja again came by in the morning" (14); December 10: "We go see Asja in the morning" (16); December 12: "Reich took a walk with Asja in the morning" (19); December 14 (written on the 15th): "I shall not see Asja today" (21); December 15: "Reich stepped out briefly after he got up and I hoped I would be able to greet Asja in private. But she didn't turn up" (25); December 16: "I was writing my diary and had given up hope that Asja would stop by. Then she knocked. As she entered the room, I wanted to kiss her. As usual, it proved unsuccessful" (27). There can be no "perhaps" about Lacis being the primary reason for Benjamin's coming to Moscow, as indicated on the back of the English translation; nor does the visit appear to have gone very well. After the first three mornings, their visits seem to have dropped off somewhat, while Benjamin seems to have remained cocooned in considerations of whether *he* would really want a relationship with *her*, ignoring her feelings on the matter, not to mention the very awkward position his attentions put her in, not to mention the fact that she was

20. In the original, the final word is "Bahnhof": "Mit dem großen Koffer auf meinem Schoße fuhr ich weinend durch die dämmernden Straßen zum Bahnhof," which, given the Northern German expression, "ich verstehe nur Bahnhof" [I don't understand anything], proves a poignant summation of Benjamin's difficulties in the Russian capital.

not well and had been hospitalized for a serious neural disorder (and not, as her German memoir indicates, a nervous breakdown, a point on which I elaborate in the concluding section). Benjamin does not seem to have had much sympathy for the state of Laci's health or for the difficulties of her situation. As her stay in the sanatorium approaches an end, Benjamin invites Reich for a cup of coffee and recounts their conversation in the entry for December 26 as follows:

He spoke of Asja's chronic bouts of anxiety, which for the most part were focused on Daga, and he went into the whole story of her Moscow residence once again. I had often marveled at the patience he showed in dealing with her. And even now he was not showing the slightest traces of ill humor or bitterness, only the tension that this talk with me was releasing. He lamented the fact that Asja's 'egoism' was failing her precisely now that everything depended on taking it easy and letting things follow their course. Her anxiety about where to live next, the thought that it would most probably entail moving, greatly tormented her.... As a matter of fact, I had not noticed her anxiety. It would only strike me the following day. (45)

"Asja" was not a person for Benjamin in whom one noted such emotions as anxiety. Rather, she was like Moscow, an "almost impregnable fortress" (34), there for the conquering, or the impregnating.²¹ On December 20, for instance, he describes the frustrations he faces as:

so many bastions, and it is only the total impossibility of advancing any further, only the fact that Asja's illness, or at least her weakness, pushes our personal affairs into the background that keeps me from becoming completely depressed by all this. (35)

Nor is Moscow the only city Benjamin feminizes in his work; in his autobiographical "A Berlin Chronicle" he describes the middle period of his life in Berlin "extending from the whole of my later childhood to my entrance to the university: [as] a period of impotence before the city."²²

21. In the original, Benjamin writes of finding himself facing "eine fast uneinnehmbare Festung" (50). Sieburth's translation echoes a comment by Scholem in the preface: "Sie bleibt nur als Empfängerin seiner Berichte," (14), [she is there only to receive his reports; to note is that "empfangen" also means "to conceive a child"] as well as Benjamin's own comment later in the passage that, "Today I told her that I now wanted to have a child by her" (35, italics added). Her response to this comment goes conspicuously unnoted.

22. Benjamin, *Reflections* 4.

Situating himself in such hostile, potentially fatal(e) urban terrain, Benjamin figures himself as a not particularly hardy but nonetheless battle-ready David facing one icily forbidding, disorienting and draining Goliath after another. As Michael André Bernstein has pointed out, we would do well to be wary of such self-serving self-representation:

Like any author, Benjamin confronted rejection and indifference; but compared, say, to Adorno's early work, Benjamin's commanded considerably more attention and respect. Even his immensely difficult book on German tragic drama was favorably reviewed in many of his country's relevant periodicals, as well as in important journals in Hungary, France, Austria, and England. And yet it is the image of Benjamin as a marginal, disregarded genius whose radical insights only posterity has been able to appreciate that has become part of our own repertoire of received ideas, fixed so securely that, perhaps, no factual counter-evidence will ever quite dislodge it.²³

As his *Moscow Diary* makes clear, this image of Benjamin as a "marginal, disregarded" figure is one of his own making, and one in need of a particular supporting cast, which both he and his rewriters then provided.

It is in Scholem's preface to *Moscow Diary* that the vilifying of Lacis is most blatant. Scholem is not likely to have been kindly disposed to the person he considered his main competitor in the battle played out between Judaism and Marxism in the second half of the 1920s for Benjamin's allegiance, the person he held responsible for interfering with the arrangements he had made for Benjamin to receive a stipend which was to bring him to Jerusalem to study Hebrew.²⁴ The shading Scholem is interested in giving Benjamin's relation to Russia, and his Marxist tendencies in general, can be seen in the emphasis in the preface on the "sharp contrast between the optimistic expectations that Benjamin initially harbored concerning the shape his relations with the Moscow literary milieu might take and the bitter disappointments that awaited him there in reality"

23. Bernstein, accessed via the internet database Academic Search Elite.

24. For their correspondence on Benjamin's proposed trip to Palestine, see Benjamin, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin, 1910-1940*, eds. Gershom Scholem & Theodor W. Adorno, trans. Manfred R. Jacobson & Evelyn M. Jacobson (Chicago & London: U of Chicago P, 1994) esp. 339, 346, 359, 364-65. Given that Scholem was also closely acquainted with Benjamin's wife, Dora, and that he received her accounting of the entire divorce process, it is understandable that he would blame Lacis for having arbitrated over and severed what he saw as Benjamin's life-line to his Judaic tradition.

(6).²⁵ Scholem undermines the reputedly “powerful intellectual influence that she [Lacis] exercised over him” (7) by pointing out that “the diary leaves us without insight into or understanding of precisely this intellectual dimension of the woman he loved” (7-8). For Scholem, the “absence of any convincing evocation of her intellectual profile” (8, a point, one will note, he takes care to restate) is not a reflection of his friend’s ambivalent attitude towards the relationship but rather of Lacis’s perfidy. It is “*her* continual rejections, and finally even the erotic cynicism that *she* displays to no uncertain extent” (8, italics added) which is to blame for the “infinitely problematic” (7) nature of the relationship, and not the fact that Benjamin was chasing a woman very much together with another man, one, moreover, who had already successfully adapted to life in Soviet Russia. Scholem prefers to leave matters enigmatic and closes his preface with the hyperbolic statement:

This [absence of any convincing evocation of her intellectual profile] is borne out by *everybody* who witnessed Benjamin together with Asja Lacis: in conveying their impressions to me, they were *all* bewildered by these two lovers who did *nothing* but quarrel. And this was in 1929 and 1930, when she came to Berlin and Frankfurt and Benjamin was getting divorced on her account! Part of the puzzle therefore remains unsolved, which is in fact entirely appropriate to a life such as Walter Benjamin’s. (8, italics added)

There are several points to be noted here. First, Lacis did not come to Berlin to see Benjamin but rather because she had been ordered to do so by her Soviet bosses. Nor was her trip to Frankfurt motivated by personal considerations – she went there in order to seek medical treatment and Benjamin, in fact, refused to accompany her. Third is the matter of Benjamin’s divorce, which I will have reason to discuss presently. I will only note here that Reich and Daga came to visit Lacis in Berlin and stayed for a month, so there can be no doubt that Benjamin knew she and Reich were still very much together. This construction of

25. In his *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*, Scholem speaks candidly of his differences with Benjamin over communism in the chapter entitled “Trust from a Distance: 1924-1926”: “To me, communism in its Marxist form constituted the diametrically opposite position to the anarchistic convictions that Benjamin and I hitherto had shared politically. This was the beginning of a split in Benjamin” (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1975), here cited in Harry Zohn’s translation, *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*, (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1981) 123.

Benjamin's life as enigmatic, an unsolved puzzle, is designed by Scholem to fit the version of Benjamin that he wanted to establish, that is, a Jewish Benjamin who had "superimposed Marxism upon a religious, and ultimately mystical, imagination."²⁶ Scholem assumes that for the reader of Lacis's German memoirs, Benjamin's *Moscow Diary* "will come as an unpleasant and depressing surprise" (7). He even goes so far as to call Benjamin's diary "the narrative of a courtship" (8). If there is anything that is unpleasant and depressing, though not much of a surprise, it is his, and Benjamin's, inability to treat Lacis as anything more than an object of undisputed erotic cynicism.

Gary Smith is more astute than Scholem in recognizing the dynamics of Benjamin's relationship with "Mother Russia." While Scholem considers Benjamin's relationship with Bernhard Reich as "more important to [Benjamin's] activities in Moscow and intellectually more instructive than was his relationship with Asja Lacis" (7), Smith emphasizes in his afterword that the relationship between the two men is "anything but transparent: they share a passion for the same woman, live under the strain of daily contact, and have competitive journalistic aims" (139). If Smith tells the story of a triangle, it is not between Benjamin, Lacis and Reich, but rather between Benjamin, Brecht and the Soviet Union, for which Lacis served as conduit.²⁷ Nevertheless, his observation that "[j]ust as Benjamin could identify different Cyrillic characters while being unable to discern their meanings, he could observe a performance or discussion and not understand its import" (138) captures both the spirit of Benjamin's almost two months in Moscow, as well as his relationship with Lacis.

Given Smith's balanced, prominently placed accounting of Lacis's influence on Benjamin in the afterword to the 1986 translation, the brazen, sensationalist portraiture of her in the 1991 *Benjaminiana: Eine biografische Recherche*, which he put together with Hans Puttnies, comes as something of a let-down.²⁸ Puttnies and Smith devote the fourth chapter of five to Benjamin's marriage and the person of his

26. David Stern, "The Man with Qualities," *New Republic* 212.15 (10 Apr. 1995): accessed via the internet database Academic Search Elite.

27. In *Walter Benjamin und Bertold Brecht: Ansätze zu einer dialektischen Ästhetik in den dreißiger Jahren* (St. Ingbert: Werner J. Röhrig, 1993), Inez Müller covers the same territory in greater detail with but a paltry reference to Lacis in the introduction.

28. Hans Puttnies and Gary Smith's *Benjaminiana: Eine Biografische Recherche* (Giessen: Anabas, 1991) has not yet, to my knowledge, been translated into English. All translations from it are my own.

ex-wife: “Ehetacheles: Ein Leben mit Dora Benjamin” (“Marriage Goings-on: A Life with Dora Benjamin”). While Dora is not portrayed in a particularly sympathetic manner – she is introduced as an “Alma Mahler *en miniature*” (135, italics in original) and referred to as “eine Sprech-maschine” (“a windbag,” 156), the divorce is recounted from her perspective, from which Lacis appears a monster responsible for reducing her “poor Walter” to a creature who, as Dora writes Scholem, “consists only of head and sexual organs, everything else has been completely shut off, and you know, or can imagine, that in such cases it doesn’t last long until the head is also switched off” (145). According to Dora, Lacis is “the only real calamity” (144) the marriage is unable to withstand, and Puttnies and Smith, in their text connecting these documents, assume Dora’s attitude. They denigrate Lacis’s work in Berlin: “she ended up in November 1928 in an unimportant position with the Russian trade mission in Berlin” (144), and misrepresent her presence in Capri, implying that she has fled there from Moscow to escape the restructuring of the Soviet economy: “Asja Lacis . . . had managed to flee from the New Economic Plan in Moscow” (144). Any reader of Lacis’s German memoir, which Smith obviously was as he quotes from it in the afterword to *Moscow Diary*, would know that Lacis did not go to Capri from Moscow but rather from Munich and not for economic reasons but on account of her daughter’s poor health. The passage in *A Revolutionary by Profession* reads: “We spent the spring and summer with Reich in Italy – (Daga, my young daughter, had come down with pneumonia and the doctors had urgently recommended Capri)” (41). Publishing Dora’s letters to Scholem may serve scholarship well in offering evidence of the decidedly disadvantageous position of a woman in divorce proceedings in the Germany of the 1920s. One can well imagine what an ordeal the whole process must have been for her and how frustrating it must have been to have supported Benjamin for so long only to have him publicly flaunt another relationship. It is a sad irony that the exposing of Dora’s distress had to be at another woman’s expense, but one certainly in keeping with the image of Lacis in the West as Benjamin’s cynical communist girlfriend.

What a Difference a Language Makes: Russian vs. German

The final part of this article will go beyond the German-language based image of “Asja Lacis” and turn now to “Anna Ernestovna

Lacis.”²⁹ *A Revolutionary by Profession* was not Lacis’s only memoir. In 1984, five years after her death, *Krasnaya Gvozdika* [*The Red Carnation*] was published in Soviet Riga.³⁰ *The Red Carnation* is Lacis’s story as she chose to rewrite, and expand upon, the German version and it diverges from Brenner’s assemblage in key respects resulting in a much more personable perception of her. The only review of the German memoir to appear in English criticizes Lacis for her impersonal approach:

But if it is her sex that condemns her to obscurity, she seems to have been an accomplice in the plot: she has a sort of ‘female’ modesty almost to a fault She describes Brecht’s and Benjamin’s homes, habits, dress in detail but never mentions her relationship with Bernhard Reich or who was the father of her daughter Daga. She reports the ideas of everyone involved in proletarian theater except (with a few exceptions) her own.³¹

The Red Carnation cannot be accused of “female modesty” or of withholding personal details. In *A Revolutionary by Profession* the only reference to Lacis’s first husband was removed from the second edition:

I married Julijs Lacis in a civil ceremony; for my mother only the church wedding mattered. She regarded the union with Lacis as a public annoyance and a serious breach of decorum. She took the ‘disgrace’ very much to heart. She fell ill. The doctor told me, ‘Your mother has a serious heart condition. She mustn’t be upset. Medication is of no use in this case. One must eliminate the cause of the problem.’ I had to comply and have a church wedding. Later I paid for it. Getting divorced from Lacis was hard on the nerves.³²

The Red Carnation, on the contrary, offers a reasonably full accounting of their story, beginning with how they got involved – “Of all my friends, Mama preferred a student at the technical college, Julijs Lacis.

29. The hegemony of the German text can be gauged by the fact that the only translation of a Lacis memoir thus far published in a Western language is: *Profession: Révolutionnaire. Sur le théâtre prolétarien: Meyerhold, Brecht, Benjamin, Piscator*, trans. & intro. Philippe Ivernel, afterword by Hildegard Brenner (Grenoble: Presses Universitaires de Grenoble, 1989).

30. Lacis, *Krasnaya Gvozdika, Vospominanya* (Riga: Liecma, 1984).

31. Parmalee 164.

32. Lacis, *Revolutionär im Beruf* 11.

He was a well-built, handsome young man with wavy hair and large gray eyes. Quiet, even-tempered, he was very pleasing to me too,”³³ and ending with the reasons for their divorce. On her way out the door to face a commission from Moscow, Julijs is reported as saying: “It would be really wonderful if they’d finally throw you out of the theater!”

I stared at Julijs: before my eyes there stood a stranger. We had been growing alienated from one another for a long time; drop by drop, the hurt and disappointment had collected. And now it was as if an invisible curtain had been lowered between us. I felt completely alone.³⁴

The Red Carnation also includes the stories of Lacis’s “close friend”³⁵ and Brecht’s chief assistant, Elisabeth Hauptman, the stories of her youthful experiences as a governess and tutor in Warsaw, her revolutionary adventures in Latvia where she was arrested and imprisoned, and, as already mentioned, her unsuccessful attempt to be with her dying mother. Primarily, though, *The Red Carnation* is a love story, and a work of mourning. Lacis began work on it after Reich’s death in 1972. She dedicated it to him – the dedication reads: “*moemu drugu,*” (which, although it means “to my friend,” would likely be translated these days as “to my partner”), and at times it descends rather drippily into the elegiac:

Reich had already earned a Ph.D. in philosophy in Vienna, but in order to work in Moscow it was necessary to requalify. He began studying at the Communist Academy and completed a doctoral program which usually takes six years in two. The professors at RAN-ION (Russian Association of Scientific Research Institutes of General Science) valued Reich’s knowledge of philosophy, his erudition and intelligence. They recommended him for a responsible position: he became the Academic Secretary of the theater division of the Communist Academy, and for some time – the deputy director of GITIS (The State Institute of Theater Arts), and he lectured on the Marxist-Leninist theory of art. . . . He lectured without notes, and didn’t even bring any with him from his office for citations. Why? Because he could quote whole pages from memory.³⁶

33. Lacis, *Krasnaya Gvozdika* 27.

34. Lacis, *Krasnaya Gvozdika* 49.

35. Lacis, *Krasnaya Gvozdika* 80.

However, in the process of revealing her love for Reich, and for her many friends, Lacis becomes for the reader of *The Red Carnation* a very sympathetic, very human figure, a far cry from the party functionary and cynical temptress she would appear to be in German.

A second factor contributing to the emergence of a more sympathetic portrait of Lacis in her Russian memoir is the manner in which her ill health is depicted. In the German text, she writes: "Im September bekam ich einen Nervenzusammenbruch und mußte ins Hospital" [*In September I got a nervous breakdown and had to be hospitalized*].³⁷ Lacis's knowledge of German was clearly less than perfect, and her editor here made no attempt to correct the impression that she had undergone some kind of psychic and not physical collapse. In Russian, this type of misunderstanding has no chance to arise because Lacis supplies more context:

It was soon autumn, the camps were closing. On the final day, the children put on the play which they had written themselves, and danced, and recited, and sang. And then it was over, we went our separate ways. But when I got home, I wasn't feeling well: my body listed to one side, I saw everything double, I lost my balance. So I first went to the hospital, and then to a sanitarium. Reich wrote Benjamin that I was seriously ill, and Walter hurried to Moscow from Berlin.³⁸

The second time she mentions suffering such an attack is during her stay in Berlin. Once again symptoms are included in the Russian text:

Bernhard and Daga left and I fell ill: my coordination of movement became disturbed. Benjamin took me to the famous neural surgeon, Kurt Goldstein. 'I can't diagnose you in just a few minutes,' Goldstein said and invited me to come to his sanitarium in Frankfurt am Main for treatment.³⁹

While it is clear in Russian that she is being sent to a medical doctor for a neural condition, the German text is more telegraphic and ambiguous concerning the matter:

36. Lacis, *Krasnaya Gvozdika* 111-13.

37. Lacis, *Revolutionär im Beruf* 54.

38. Lacis, *Krasnaya Gvozdika* 117.

39. Lacis, *Krasnaya Gvozdika* 136.

When I fell ill in Berlin, Benjamin took me to the famous Professor Kurt Goldstein, who happened to be in Berlin. Goldstein said that he couldn't cure me in a five minute visit. I should come to his small, private sanatorium in Frankfurt am Main for treatment.⁴⁰

No reference is made here to the kind of doctor Benjamin took her to, nor to the nature of her illness. Again, there is nothing to counteract the negative impression that she is mentally unstable.

A final notable difference between Lacis's Russian and German memoirs relevant to the present discussion is the way Lacis portrays her relationship with Benjamin. The editorial priorities of *A Revolutionary by Profession: Reports on Proletarian Theater, on Meyerhold, Brecht, Benjamin and Piscator* (and not Reich) are unmistakable. When Lacis mentions that "Reich, Benjamin and I often went for walks" during her convalescence in Moscow, it is not Reich who is the subject of discussion next but: "Benjamin was relatively calm, he wrote an enthusiastic description of majestic St. Basil's."⁴¹ When Lacis writes, "At the end of October we [i.e., she and Reich] returned to Germany. We lived in Berlin," the text again offers no details of their relations, her life or work there but rather continues "In Berlin I often met up with Benjamin."⁴² When after the war, she regains contact with Brecht: "Brecht replied immediately, and when he went to Moscow he invited Reich and me to come and meet him there," their first subject of discussion is related as "I asked about Benjamin, he answered: Benjamin is dead."⁴³ That these German priorities are not Lacis's own can be seen by turning to *The Red Carnation*, where Benjamin is but one of many intellectuals with whom Lacis was involved over the course of her long and varied life. As Arvids Grigulis, the grand poobah of Soviet Latvian letters, points out in his hagiographic introduction to *The Red Carnation*:

Its originality is explained by a rare gift characteristic of its author – the ability to strike up an acquaintance with exceptional people. Whether in Berlin or in Paris, not to mention Riga, Anna Lacis was always able to get to know those whose work best expressed the essence of the cultural life of their times. It is possible, of course, to

40. Lacis, *Revolutionär im Beruf* 64.

41. Lacis, *Revolutionär im Beruf* 54.

42. Lacis, *Revolutionär im Beruf* 48.

43. Lacis, *Revolutionär im Beruf* 77.

explain this by many factors. Anna Lacis was a well-educated woman, with a degree from the Bekhterev Institute for Psycho-neurology, who had studied at F. Komisarjevsky's theater studio, and gained not a little experience in the aesthetic education of children; she was a well-read, interesting conversationalist, with an excellent knowledge of Russian, German and French literature, a sharp wit and at the same time a purely feminine sensibility. One of the best books of love lyrics in Latvian literature was dedicated to her – the 'Ho-Tai' cycle of poems by Linards Laicens.

In the Russian memoir, Benjamin is a mere substitute: "When Reich once again returned to Germany, my guide became Walter;"⁴⁴ in German, Reich never reappears in Italy after Benjamin arrives on the scene. In the Russian text, Lacis's interest in Benjamin is primarily didactic. She is happy to do whatever she can to help him fulfill his political, and not personal, desires:

When Walter came to visit me in the sanatorium, he would say with great feeling, 'Do you know how badly I want to live and work in Moscow! Not even the chaotic living conditions put me off.' The only thing he wanted to bring with him to Moscow was -- his library. Several years later, after Benjamin had emigrated to Paris, I received a letter from him. He once again spoke of his desire to come to Moscow, to live and work in the first capital in the world with a socialist government.⁴⁵

In the Russian memoir, it is Benjamin who is influenced by Lacis: "It turned out that our conversations and debates had not been ineffectual. When we met up again later, in Berlin, Walter said that he was reading Marx, Engels, Lenin, Plechanov."⁴⁶ The emphasis in the German text, on the other hand, is on what Lacis learned from Benjamin: "Back then, in Capri, I didn't properly comprehend the connection between allegory and modern poetics. In retrospect, I now understand how clearly Walter Benjamin saw through the modern problematics of form."⁴⁷ The German text concentrates on Benjamin's own independent intellectual development: "I would like to note that the dedication of *One-Way*

44. Lacis, *Krasnaya Gvozdika* 88.

45. Lacis, *Krasnaya Gvozdika* 118.

46. Lacis, *Krasnaya Gvozdika* 86-87.

47. Lacis, *Revolutionär im Beruf* 44.

Street . . . points to a very important change in world-view that Walter Benjamin experienced, that *he* found the ONE street.”⁴⁸ In the Russian memoir, on the other hand, Benjamin is not only completely dependent on his guides but also influenced by them:

Benjamin knew how Reich had lived before his arrival in Moscow, and was astonished that Bernhard, pampered since childhood and brought up in ideal conditions, had given up all but the bare essentials, that’s how it seemed to him; he may have worked a great deal but was content. Later Benjamin understood that for Reich the main thing was – faith in his ideas, for the sake of which he sacrificed his personal comfort and truly forgot himself. Reich’s obsessiveness was contagious, even Benjamin caught it.⁴⁹

The special treatment Benjamin receives in the German text seems exaggerated when compared with its Russian counterpart. In German, for example:

Reich was writing at the time for the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia*. He introduced Benjamin to the heads of its literary section. Benjamin made an *unusually good* impression on the editors. They gave him the *extremely important* assignment of writing on Goethe. He wrote an *in-depth* essay [Brenner’s footnote: parts of which appeared in the *Literarische Welt* of 7 Dec. 1928, also in *Alternative*, 56/57 (1967): 221ff. Benjamin’s article for the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia* underwent editorial revision; besides Benjamin, two further authors are listed for the article]. The *Vechernaya Moskva* (the Moscow evening newspaper) ran Benjamin’s article on a *distinguished* German writer not at all known abroad – I don’t remember which . . . perhaps Hölderlin or Lichtenberg.⁵⁰

In Russian, there is no mention of any “unusually good impression,” of how “extremely important” the assignment on Goethe was, that his essay was “in-depth,” or that Hölderlin is “distinguished.” The Russian passage reads simply:

Bernhard introduced Benjamin to the editors of the *Great Soviet*

48. Lacis, *Revolutionär im Beruf* 71 (italics added).

49. Lacis, *Krasnaya Gvozhdika* 117-18.

50. Lacis, *Revolutionär im Beruf* 55 (italics added).

Encyclopedia, and they gave him the assignment on Goethe, which was later printed. And Benjamin published an article in *Vechernaya Moskva* on F. Hölderlin.⁵¹

To conclude, consideration of Lacis's Russian memoir serves to highlight the agenda of its German version and its aggrandisement of Benjamin. In looking first at Lacis's German memoir and the conditions of its production, and then turning to how she has been represented by Benjamin and his rewriters, we saw the emergence of an unsympathetic, cynically erotic Party functionary, who in turn inflects our view of Benjamin as a marginal, wrongly disregarded genius. In the final section, we saw how consideration of even one additional text can act to counterbalance the myth-making of previous rewriters. Michael André Bernstein finds "something distastefully self-flattering in the zeal with which Benjamin's legend has been embraced and amplified by his more clamorous admirers," continuing that:

It is our 'enormous condescension' to the intellectual world that Benjamin inhabited that lets us recycle such thin narratives as the myth that he uniquely embodied European culture's 'redemptive' hopes, and it is the scarcely disguised wish to be acclaimed as his successor that prompts literary critics whose circumstances are so utterly different from his to announce their identification with Benjamin's struggles... [and their preference] instead to focus entirely on the story of Benjamin's final years as an exile in Paris, and on his futile, too-long-delayed decision to make use of the American visa that Horkheimer had secured for him.

In addition to their intrinsic value and the use they could be in helping to locate shifts in ideology and gender that continue to traverse the terrain of what is now the former Eastern Bloc and that are increasingly the attention of transnational feminist academic practices, the two volumes of Lacis's memoirs call attention to the myth-making inherent in Benjaminiana and encourage a revisiting and revaluing of the way Lacis's relationship with Benjamin has thus far been represented. Anna Lacis was a remarkable woman, as Benjamin was well aware, one worthy of the same words with which Toril Moi concludes her intellectual biography of Simone de Beauvoir:

51. Lacis, *Krasnaya Gvozhdika* 118.

Reading her autobiography, I am struck at once by her strength, energy and vitality, and by her helplessness and fragility. When I realize how hard it was for her to gain a sense of autonomy and independence, I find her achievements all the more admirable. To admire, however, is not to worship. We do not need to be perfect, Simone de Beauvoir teaches us, we simply need never to give up. To me, that is both a comforting and an utterly daunting project.⁵²

52. Toril Moi, *Simone de Beauvoir: The Making of an Intellectual Woman* (Oxford & Cambridge: Blackwell, 1994) 257.