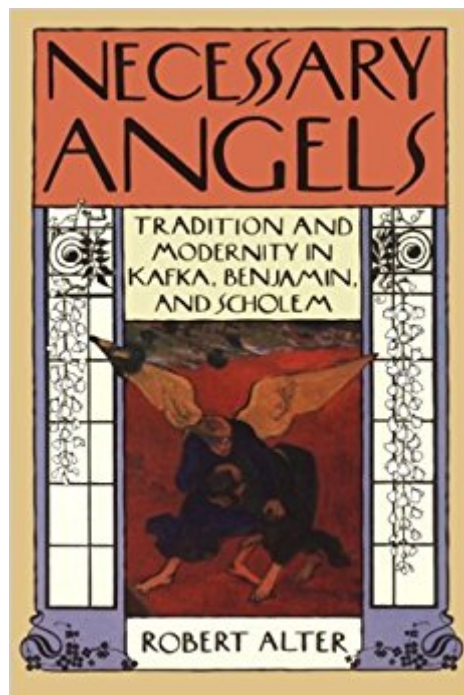




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Necessary Angels: Tradition And Modernity In Kafka, Benjamin, And Scholem



Synopsis

In four elegant chapters, Robert Alter explains the prismlike radiance created by the association of three modern masters, Franz Kafka, Walter Benjamin, and Gershom Scholem. The volume pinpoints the intersections of these divergent witnesses to the modern condition of doubt, the no-man's-land between traditional religion and modern secular culture. Scholem, the devoted Zionist and master historian of Jewish mysticism, and Benjamin, the Marxist cultural critic, dedicated much of their thought and correspondence to Kafka, the explorer in fiction of radical alienation. Kafka's sense of spiritual complexities was an inspiration to both thinkers in their resistance to the murderous simplification of totalitarian ideology. In *Necessary Angels* Alter uncovers a moment when the future of modernism is revealed in its preoccupation with the past. The angel of the title is first Kafka's: on June 25, 1914, the writer recorded in his diary a dream vision of an angel that turned into the painted wooden figurehead of a ship. In 1940, at the end of his life, Walter Benjamin devoted the ninth of his *Theses on the Philosophy of History* to a meditation on an angel by the artist Paul Klee, first quoting a poem he had written on that painting. In Benjamin's vision, the figure from Klee becomes an angel of history, sucked into the future by the storm of progress, his face looking back to Eden. Benjamin bequeathed the Klee oil painting to Scholem; it hung in the living room of Scholem's home on Abarbanel Street in Jerusalem until 1989, when his widow placed it in the Israel Museum. Alter's focus on the epiphanic force of memory on these three great modernists shows with sometimes startling, sometimes prophetic clarity that a complete break with tradition is not essential to modernism. *Necessary Angels* itself continues the necessary discovery of the future in the past.

Book Information

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This is a rather low-key, patient kind of work, rather than one given to grandiose pronouncements (of the kind that Benjamin himself is sometimes wont to make); still, the effect of it builds as it goes, and Alter's project gains sharper contours with each chapter, and the short book ends up leaving a strong impression in the memory and a genuinely useful clarification of a fascinating cultural moment in the mind. Alter formulates a paradox in order to set about elucidating it: literary Modernism seems for the most part unreligious, even anti-religious (one thinks of the long Hell sermon in Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist*), yet Kafka, and perhaps Benjamin in the realm of criticism, are prototypical Modernists whose thought revolves around identifiably religious, specifically Jewish, categories and concerns. Tradition is clearly the polar opposite of modernity; Judaism is essentially traditional--so how can the most modern of Modernists be so clearly stamped by their Judaism? Several answers are proposed. Modernism springs from alienation (Eliot, Pound, Stein and Joyce, for example, were all exiles or expats); German (and Austrian) Jews experienced alienation in a particularly profound way, and so become Modernist archetypes. This alienation affected:--their identity (Kafka, Benjamin and Scholem, like the second-generation Pakistani Muslim immigrants in England in *My Son The Fanatic*, all rejected their parents' assimilation into the German-speaking bourgeoisie for a more pungent sense of self and experience), --the language they used (this became--as everything does in a Modernist context--a problem: German or Hebrew--or maybe Yiddish?--and if German, what kind of German? How does one write it without sacrificing one's Jewishness?

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