

## Translator's Foreword

I'd like to write something that comes from things the way wine comes from grapes.

—Walter Benjamin, *On Hashish* (protocol of March 7, 1931)

Walter Benjamin's *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, a portrait of his childhood in a wealthy, assimilated Jewish household in the West End of Berlin at the turn of the century, evolved out of his unfinished *Berlin Chronicle*. The latter, which he had contracted to provide in four installments for the Berlin weekly *Die Literarische Welt*, and which he began writing in early 1932, was conceived as the history of his relationship with Berlin. He worked on the *Berlin Chronicle* during his first stay on the island of Ibiza, from mid-April to mid-July 1932, making use of the "small form" which he had developed in *One-Way Street* (published 1928) and which he claimed was dictated by his materially precarious circumstances, before abandoning the commissioned work to concentrate on the new project that had grown out of it. (Neither would be published during his lifetime.) Begun in Poveromo, Italy, where Benjamin stayed from August to November, *Berlin Childhood around 1900* likewise comprises a sequence of vignettes, but in place of the loose chronicle

format, which to be sure was already highly meditative, Benjamin constructed a suite of tonally and thematically unified short pieces, reflections in imagery of the type he resorted to increasingly in his later years, and which he liked to call *Denkbilder*, "thought figures." It was part of his general gravitation, after *One-Way Street*, toward the dialectical method of montage, with its simultaneous isolation and assemblage of materials.

But the reworking of the *Berlin Chronicle* into the philosophic-poetic mode of the *Berlin Childhood*, where persons and events yield to places and things, bespeaks something more than a methodological imperative. There was also a historical imperative—namely, the immi-  
nence of exile and the need for a certain inoculation:

In 1932, when I was abroad, it began to be clear to me that I would soon have to bid a long, perhaps lasting farewell to the city of my birth. . . . In this situation . . . I deliberately called to mind those images which, in exile, are most apt to waken homesickness: images of childhood. My assumption was that the feeling of longing would no more gain mastery over my spirit than a vaccine does over a healthy body.

So begins the introductory section of *Berlin Childhood*, which Benjamin first composed in 1938, after a radical

revision and abridgment of the rest of the text. Between the summer of 1932 and the spring of 1938, at least four different manuscript versions of this text came into being, as Benjamin repeatedly failed in his attempt to publish it as a book in Germany and Switzerland.

Many of the individual pieces, however, appeared in the newspapers: twenty-six pieces from December 1932 through September 1935, mainly in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* and the *Vossische Zeitung*, and usually under a pseudonym after May 1933; and seven in 1938, in Thomas Mann's journal *Maß und Wert*. The different manuscript versions, as well as statements in letters, indicate varying plans for the organization of the pieces into a book. Originally, Benjamin envisioned a sequence of thirty pieces; later it was thirty-four, then thirty-six. The first book publication of *Berliner Kindheit um Neunzehnhundert*, which Theodor W. Adorno arranged in 1950 on the basis of printed copies and manuscripts of individual pieces, contained thirty-seven sections; when incorporated into Benjamin's *Schriften* of 1955, it contained thirty-four. The 1972 Adorno-Rexroth edition of the work in Volume 4 of Benjamin's *Gesammelte Schriften*, which had greater access to manuscript materials, contains forty-one pieces. The texts in these posthumous book publications were arranged by the respec-

tive editors. Only with the discovery in 1982, in Paris, of the manuscript of the 1938 revision, the so-called Final Version ("Fassung letzter Hand"), edited and published in Volume 7 of the *Gesammelte Schriften* in 1989, do we have a textual arrangement by the author himself. (The recently accessible "Gießen Version," published in 2000 by Suhrkamp Verlag and dated December 1932–January 1933, also contains, it would appear, Benjamin's own arrangement of the pieces, which, allowing for the absence of pieces composed after January 1933, and for the pieces later cut, is quite close in sequence to the 1938 arrangement.)

In revising the text in 1938, Benjamin returned to the original scheme of thirty sections, although the manuscript contains two additional pieces at the end which are not listed in his accompanying table of contents, indicating some uncertainty on his part concerning the final disposition of the material. Throughout he made the prose crisper and more compact, less discursive, more concentrated on the imagery. By contrast, the 1932–1934 text has a luxuriant digressive quality palpably different from the laconism of Benjamin's late style. Beyond the new introductory section, there were other, smaller additions. But ruthlessly excised from the earlier version were nine complete sections having a more autobiographical

accent (including such gems as "The Larder" and "Society") and more than a third of the remaining text, including passages of rare beauty (such as the legend of the Chinese painter in "The Mummerehlen" and the dream of apocalypse in "The Moon"). This alone—the fact of Benjamin's drastic reduction of his text—would seem to preclude consideration of the Final Version as the definitive version. In default of any resolution of this question by a critical edition, the present translation (as first published in Volume 3 of Benjamin's *Selected Writings*) supplements the 1938 text, presented in its entirety, with the nine deleted sections from 1932–1934 and with additional passages struck from the earlier version. \* Like other writings from the period of Benjamin's exile, *Berlin Childhood around 1900* remains a work in progress. This has never prevented its being regarded as a masterpiece of twentieth-century prose writing.

In a letter of September 26, 1932, from Poveromo, announcing the new work to his friend Gershom Scholem, Benjamin notes that "these childhood memories . . . are

\*The 1938 text is a translation of Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 7 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1989), pp. 385–433. The 1932–1934 text is a translation of *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 4 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1972), pp. 245–246, 250, 251–252, 260–263, 264–267, 268–269, 276–278, 280–282, 283–288, 300–302.

not narratives in the form of a chronicle but . . . individual expeditions into the depths of memory." At issue here is an ontological rather than psychological memory; not first of all a faculty but an element—the oceanic medium of what has been. As such, memory forms the horizon of perception. What is called remembrance is for Benjamin a matter of the actualization of a vanished moment in its manifold depth. As he says in his 1929 essay "On the Image of Proust," "A remembered event is infinite, because it is merely a key to everything that happened before it and after it." The recollection of childhood days is thus an excavation of deeply buried strata. To cite a passage from the *Berlin Chronicle* that Benjamin adapted circa 1932 into a short piece, "Excavation and Memory": "Memory is not an instrument for surveying the past but its theater. It is the medium of past experience [*Medium des Erlebten*], just as the earth is the medium in which dead cities lie buried. He who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging." What is unearthed in the operations of remembrance, as it delves to "ever-deeper layers" of the past, is a treasure-trove of images.

Accordingly, the presentation of Benjamin's Berlin childhood involves a method of superimposition or composite imagery that reflects the palimpsest character of

memory. (See the section entitled "The Palimpsest" toward the end of Baudelaire's *Artificial Paradises*, which Benjamin first read in 1919; before this, he would have found a similar conception, along with a critique of the instrumental concept of memory as recorder and storehouse, in Bergson's *Matter and Memory*.) A good example of this use of overlays is found in the vignette "Boys' Books," which assembles images of the child reading—that is, imbibing stories—at different stages of his young life and in different places: in the school library, by the table that was much too high, at the window in a snowstorm, and in the "weather corner" of a cabinet of books in a dream. Each of the moments evoked communicates with and subtly overlaps with the others, as multiply exposed images in a film bleed into one another in a composite transparency. Elsewhere in the text—in passages concerned with stations in the child's day, with his experience of the seasons and of holidays, of grand soirées at home and of visits to relatives, of illness and of travel—different points in time, remembered sensations, form constellations in the horizontal and vertical montage (the "depths of the image"), amid the constantly shifting topography. By the same token, the text as a whole continually superposes the author's present day on his past, so that everywhere a dead and resurrected world of play

is framed in the perspective of exile, and everywhere the man is felt to be prefigured in the child. In this way the text fully realizes the idea of "intertwined time" adduced in the Proust essay.

The child is collector, flâneur, and allegorist in one. He lives in an antiquity of the everyday; for him everything is natural and therefore endowed with chthonic force. His relation to things is wholly mimetic. That is, he enters into the world of things (*Dingwelt*) with all his senses, as the Chinese painter in "The Mummehlen" enters into the landscape of his painting. With his gift for dawdling and waiting around, the child insinuates himself into the keeping of things, mimics the things and masks himself with them, above all with pieces of furniture in his household, seeing from out of their midst. The household for him is an "arsenal of masks." Everything is alive, full of eyes and ears, as in the animistic world of fairy tales. Just as a spinning wheel, slipper, or mirror sets up a force field in the tale, drawing characters and events into a pattern, so the child is initiated into the secret life of ordinary objects, often the most minuscule. He derives fugitive knowledge from the rattling of the rolled-up window blinds or the rustling of branches that brush up against the house. He mingles with the iridescent colors of a soap bubble rising to the ceiling, or with

the band of blue running around the upper part of two porcelain basins deceptively illuminated by the moonlight in his bedroom. The child builds his nest in the depths of the everyday, secure and hidden in the fragile magic of the "home."

It is precisely this security that the author has relinquished in growing up, as he tells us in the introductory section. The world of his childhood, as he puts it, is socially irretrievable. By means of the text's framing devices, the child's mythology is dissolved into the space of history. Nevertheless the author's philosophic immersion compares to the rapturous immersion of the child as the waking world to the dream: in Benjamin's schema (going back to his student days and the essay "Metaphysics of Youth"), one truly awakens only by appropriating the "unmeasured energies" of the dream—which is to say, by penetrating to its most obscure recesses. This applies in the first instance to what Benjamin, in *The Arcades Project*, calls the dream of the past. *Berlin Childhood around 1900* pivots on the threshold between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, memorializing a world that was about to disappear, not without marking its complicity with the unending brutality of the "victor," while glancing simultaneously backward to the heyday of the bourgeoisie and forward to the global crisis.

This dialectical consciousness, both detached and engaged, conditions the distinctive tonality of the work, which is at once sunny and melancholy. As a book, *Berlin Childhood* stands apart in Benjamin's oeuvre, being for all its imagistic objectivity the most personal and lyrical of his longer works, and surely the culmination of his effort to attain a higher concreteness in thinking.

## Hope in the Past

ON WALTER BENJAMIN

Peter Szondi

Translated by Harvey Mendelsohn

Walter Benjamin begins his reminiscences, *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, with the following passage:

Not to find one's way around a city does not mean much. But to lose one's way in a city, as one loses one's way in a forest, requires some schooling. Street names must speak to the urban wanderer like the snapping of dry twigs, and little streets in the heart of the city must reflect the times of day, for him, as clearly as a mountain valley. This art I acquired rather late in life; it fulfilled

From *Satz und Gegensatz* (Frankfurt: Insel, 1964). This essay was written in 1961 and first published in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* of October 8, 1961, under the title, "Hoffnung im Vergangenen: Über Walter Benjamin." Peter Szondi was professor of comparative literature at the Free University of Berlin at the time of his death in 1971. His works include *Theorie des modernen Dramas* (1956) and *Versuch über das Tragische* (1961). Harvey Mendelsohn is the principal translator of the fourteen-volume *Dictionary of Scientific Biography*.

In the case of works by Benjamin, Proust, and Adorno, source notes have been changed to refer to English translations.

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