

**Walter Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood around 1900*,
Translated by Howard Eiland,**

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2006.**

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For a writer with a predilection to employ a discontinuous, epigrammatic style of composition, there is more than a little irony in the labours of Walter Benjamin's editors to impose a definitive sequence on his recollections of growing up in Berlin. This is the eleventh time that some or all of these vignettes have appeared in German or English book form, and one wonders whether the latest publication might have prompted Benjamin, had he still been alive, to smile wryly, doubly so given the notoriously fragmentary nature of childhood memory and the fact that *Berlin Childhood around 1900* remains a work in progress. Nonetheless, this 2006 release – based on a recently discovered textual arrangement by Benjamin himself – will delight and inspire readers, further contributing to debates on urbanity, autobiography and the processes of remembering.

This is a memoir of exile. 'In 1932, when I was abroad', Benjamin commences, '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'. With the dark clouds of German Nazism gathering, Berlin was rapidly becoming no place for a left-wing Jewish intellectual. Thus *Berlin Childhood* represents a textual time capsule, an attempt to archive memories and re-imagine situations pregnant with alternative possibilities. Like Benjamin's beloved loggias – outward facing spaces of transition, encapsulating, he says, a lingering spirit of Sunday contentment – the author hoped German society might yet maintain its openness and not foreclose possibilities for peace.

Many of Benjamin's reminiscences are highly sensory. He recalls the fragrance of his mother's shawl, the texture of foodstuffs enjoyed illicitly in the

larder and the devastating alarm signal of the telephone which ‘menaced not only my parents’ midday nap but the historical era that underwrote and enveloped this siesta’. The author’s obsession with the surface effects of light and shadow parallels the luminosity of his descriptions. His is a world in which objects acquire personalities. Strawberry marmalade lets itself be consumed and a school library book shares the darkness of a satchel with other belongings, each waiting patiently for the onset of the next day’s proceedings. As Benjamin contended in a 1933 essay (found in volume 2 of his *Selected Writings*), ‘childhood chains us to things... indeed, it may be that in childhood we wander through the world of things like the stations of a journey of whose extent we can form no conception’. Here this line of thought finds further expression, Benjamin longing, in exile, for his reading box – seeking in it his entire childhood – and perceiving the echoes of the nineteenth century not in the momentous sounds of field artillery but in the more everyday noise of coal falling through the scuttle. Memory is conceived as a palimpsest, Benjamin peeling away the layers of subsequent history to expose foundational traces of his early life, the residue of times past.

Benjamin’s childhood experiences are at once particular and universal. On first impression the author’s frustrations regarding his upbringing appear trivial: his, after all, was a materially-privileged existence, a life located in prestigious Berlin suburbs or else at one of a number of salubrious holiday residences. Girls, moreover, enjoyed far less autonomy than boys such as the young Benjamin in accessing city spaces. Nevertheless, the premature desire for freedom from parental influence and a love of collecting found objects are common impulses in children, and doubtless many readers will sympathise with Benjamin’s desire to explore fringe areas (underused rooms, the garden’s edge, an overlooked portion of the Zoo) and to conquer new territories by setting foot, or better still finding some keepsake, in them. In Benjamin’s desire to stray topographically, to enter, for example, Berlin’s Krumme Strasse (Crooked Street), we can also read a yearning to transgress the boundaries of class. Certainly Benjamin was ill at ease with his upper middle-class surroundings, although it is surely only with hindsight that he can claim the realisation that: ‘During my childhood I was a prisoner of Berlin’s Old

West and New West. My clan... dwelt there in a frame of mind compounded of obstinacy and self-satisfaction, an attitude that transformed these neighbourhoods into a ghetto (which they regarded as their fiefdom)'. Incipient stirrings of rebellion – indifference at being too late to gain entry to the synagogue, discomfort as mother fusses over a loose shirt button – are indications of a subsequent rejection of bourgeois sentiment, but also reflect a dislike of authority peculiar to no single childhood.

The relationship of Benjamin to his parents in this memoir is intriguing. Father is a figure largely removed, whilst Benjamin's mother appears only on special occasions, such as outings, or when the young Walter is sick. Even then, the bond is tenuous, mediated by objects including a brooch worn on 'Society' evenings and the medicine spoon, 'whose edge', Benjamin notes memorably, 'was colonized by the prayers of my mother'. At other times the shadow of the nursemaid casts itself each morning over the child's bed, and the 'Fräulein', or governess, intervenes before Benjamin's adventures in Berlin's Tiergarten can be fully realised. Other children are also notable by their absence; little wonder, then, that the imagination of the child protagonist was prone to such flights of fancy or that objects appear here as actors.

Although Benjamin is disappointed constantly by the metropolitan experience (a sentiment expressed even more forcefully in his 'Berlin Chronicle'), he still yearns for the exciting alternatives that city life offers. Surveyed from a vantage point sixty years on from the final defeat of Nazism at the Battle of Berlin, one can perceive in the undertaking of Benjamin to revisit remembered scenes in his early life a conception of German history which encompasses far more than the ongoing obsession with the Third Reich. Furthermore, as Graeme Gilloch has argued, for Benjamin the figure of the child in the city is so significant because it generates dreams of utopia; hence recollections of childhood recall 'buried utopian impulses which must be recovered and realised'. Hope lies in the past, in spaces of play and imagination where nothing seems impossible. Within *Berlin Childhood around 1900* readers will encounter whimsy, melancholy, exuberance and nostalgia, but perhaps most importantly they will come face to face with their own childhoods and re-

embrace once-cherished objects, faded dreams and a view of the world untrammelled by diminutive stature.

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