

A Constellation of Childhood

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Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) is a rather enigmatic figure in the history of Western Marxism, literary criticism, and aesthetic theory more broadly. Caught rather precariously between a historical materialist interpretation of history and Jewish mysticism, Benjamin's work refuses to sit clearly in any one particular philosophical camp. It is precisely the tension which results from this combination that—at its best—fuels the dialectical force of Benjamin's thought and has made it relevant for many contemporary philosophers. While the debates concerning Benjamin's unusual method—both in terms of form and content—have provided much room for critique and analysis (including the now infamous exchange of letters between Benjamin and Theodor Adorno), Benjamin's comments on childhood have received little attention from scholars working in critical and literary theory. This is particularly surprising considering that between 1929 and 1933 Benjamin wrote a series of radio scripts for children, revealing a very intimate interest in the meaning and significance of childhood. Thus, I have collected a rather small yet highly provocative set of childhood images to start this much belated discussion.

It is in the simple activities of childhood that Benjamin finds paradigmatic instances of dialectical thinking and aesthetic theory. Thus reflections on childhood reveal naïve and intuitive moments of complex conceptual operations that are later lost to adults stuck in a one-dimensional world of production and consumption. An autobiography of childhood is not reducible to a series of Oedipal dramas that haunt the conscious self. The archeology of memory is first and foremost a methodology for philosophical thinking through which philosophy and experience reunite in the figure of the child at play in his or her surroundings. While not supplying us with a full philosophy of childhood, Benjamin nevertheless presents the reader with a complex constellation of images which suggest, when read together, that childhood—mediated through the intellectual activity and experience of the adult—is a potent resource for philosophical practice. In the phenomenology of childhood—in the seemingly inconsequential and smallest details of childlike play—the very idea of the world is to once again be rekindled for the adult. Thus these images excavated from Benjamin's memory, ripped from their original context by the passing of historical time, become integrated into a new constellation of meanings through the process of autobiographical reflection.



For instance, in the second excerpt entitled “The Stocking,” Benjamin provides a powerful allegory for thinking dialectically. Here the fist that probes the stocking becomes the embodiment of thinking in which subject and object, content and form interpenetrate one another. Through the analysis of content, form emerges and vanishes. The two cannot be clearly separated from one another but are rather locked in a perpetual back and forth movement. It is the “surprise” of the moment of reversal or turning that represents the shock of dialectical thinking as it pole-vaults from one point to the next. The moment of wrestling with the sock and its hidden treasure also suggests that thinking dialectically is never a complete apprehension but is rather a process of continual inversions where truth becomes untruth or as the case might be, “the veil and what it hides are one and the same.”

In the next aphorism, Benjamin explores the implications of childish play with trash as an allegory for aesthetic theory. Children, playing with the discarded remnants of adult work unleash a utopian dimension buried within the forgotten. They bring together disparate and unrelated or partial objects into a quasi-sensual constellation (a bricolage) which allegorically represents a world lost to the time of labor-production inherent in adult life. The notion of the renewal of the old world is further explored in the next selection which describes a collector’s relationship to his or her books. Again the hopes and aspirations of the collector are found in their nascent state in childish play (which as we have seen is uniquely linked to trash and ephemera). It is in the model of childhood that Benjamin finds the closest approximation to the oddly utopian desires of the book collector to save the world through the care and the tenderness given to old and dusty volumes. As such, the figure of the child combines the hope of the new with its dialectical foil: care for the old and the discarded. Perhaps both that which is forgotten and that which has newly arrived share one trait in common in that they are poised on the edge of social use-value and exchange-value. They are in other words inside yet outside the sphere of social relations defining the commodified adult world.

Overall the allegory of childhood for Benjamin is an attempt to renew a world that is fragmented and meaningless. It is a resource that Benjamin’s melancholic dialectic employs to think against the present and thus to revitalize the promise of a future deferred.

Excerpt from *Berlin Chronicle*



Language shows clearly that memory is not an instrument for exploring the past but its theater. It is the medium of past experience as the ground is the medium in which dead cities lie interred. He who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging. This confers the tone and bearing of genuine reminiscences. He must not be afraid to return again and again to the same matter; to scatter it as one scatters earth, to turn it over as one turns over soil. For the matter itself is only a deposit, a stratum, which yields only to the most meticulous examination what constitutes the real treasure hidden within the earth: the images, severed from all earlier associations, that stand—like precious fragments or torsos in a collector’s gallery—in the prosaic rooms of our later understanding. True, for successful excavation a plan is needed. Yet no less indispensable is the cautious probing of the spade in the dark loam, and it is to cheat oneself of the richest prize to preserve as a record merely the inventory of one’s discoveries, and not this dark joy of the place of the finding itself. Fruitless searching is as much a part of this as succeeding; and consequently remembrance must not proceed in the manner of a narrative or still less that of a report, but must, in the strictest epic and rhapsodic manner, assay its spade in ever-new places, and in the old ones delve to ever-deeper layers....

....I was often seized—I seem to remember—by revulsion at being hemmed in by this multitude, and again, as on those walks in the city with my mother, solitude appeared to me as the only fit state of man. Very understandably, for such a mob of school children is among the most formless and ignoble of all masses, and betrays its bourgeois origin in representing, like every assembly of that class, the most rudimentary organizational form that its individual members can give their reciprocal relationships. The corridors, and the classrooms that finally came into view, are among the horrors that have embedded themselves most ineradicably in me, that is to say, in my dreams; and these have taken revenge on the monotony, the cold torpor that overcame me at each crossing of the classroom thresholds, by turning themselves into the arena of the most extravagant events. The backdrop was often the fear of having to take the Aabitur again (under more unfavorable conditions), a position in which I had been placed by my own recklessness and folly. Undoubtedly, these rooms lend themselves to dreamlike representation; there is something nightmarish even in the sober recollection of the damp odor of sweat secreted by the stone steps that I had to hasten up five times or more each day. The school, outwardly in good repair, was in its architecture and situation among the most desolate. It matched its emblem, a plaster statue of the Emperor Fredrick, which had been deposited in a remote corner of the playground (admittedly one favored by hordes engaged in martial games), puny and pitiful against a fire wall. According to a school legend it was, if I am not mistaken, a donation. This



monument, unlike the classrooms, was never washed, and had acquired in the course of years an admirable coat of dirt and soot. It still stands today in its appointed place. But soot descends upon it daily from the passing municipal railway. It is far from impossible that my uncommon aversion to this railway dates from this time, since all the people sitting at their windows seemed enviable to me. They could afford to ignore the school clock that held sway above our heads, and quite unawares they cut through the invisible bars of our timetable cage. They could only be seen, incidentally, during the breaks, for the lower panes of the classroom windows were of frosted glass. “Vagabond clouds, sailors of the skies” had for us the absolute precision that the verse holds for prisoners. Moreover, little about the actual classrooms has remained in my memory except these exact emblems of imprisonment: the frosted windows and the infamous carved wooden battlements over the doors. It would not surprise me to hear that the cupboards, too, were crowned with such adornments, not to mention the pictures of the Kaiser on the walls. Heraldic and chivalrous obtuseness shone forth wherever possible. In the great hall, however, it was most ceremoniously united with *art nouveau*....All the same, one of these occasions is perhaps noteworthy for the effect it had on me for years afterward. It was the leave-taking ceremony for those who had graduated. Here, as in several other places, I find in my memory rigidly fixed words, expressions, verses that, like the malleable mass that has later cooled and hardened, preserved in me the imprint of the collisions between a larger collective and myself. Just as a certain kind of significant dream survives awakening in the form of words when all the rest of the dream content has vanished, here isolated words have remained in place as marks of catastrophic encounters. Among them is one in which for me the whole atmosphere of the school is condensed; I heard it when, having hitherto received only private tutoring, I was sent for my first morning, on a trial basis, to what was later to become the Kaiser Friedrich School, but at the time was still situated on Passauerstrasse. This word that still adheres in my mind to a phlegmatic, fat, unbecoming figure of a boy is the following: ringleader. Nothing else is left of this earliest school experience. It was re-enacted in similar form, however some six years later, when I spent my first day in alien and threatening circumstances in Haubinda and was asked by a tall, hostile-seeming lout who played a prominent part in the class whether my “old man” had already left. This common piece of schoolboy parlance was entirely unfamiliar to me. An abyss opened before me, which I sought to bridge with a laconic protest. Here in the great hall it was the verses with which the school choir began the farewell song to the leaver—“Brother now may we/ your companions be/ in the world so wide”—followed by something containing the words “loyally by your side”; at any rate these were the verses that enabled my year by year to take the measure of my own weakness. For no matter



how palpably the abominable goings-on at school were daily before my eyes, the melody of this song seemed to surround the departure from this hell with infinite melancholy. But by the time it was addressed to me and my class it must have made little impression, for I remember nothing of it. More remarkable are some other verses that I heard once in the gymnasium dressing room after the lesson, and never forgot. Why? Perhaps because “Schulze”—as the imprudent boy who knew the lines was called—was rather pretty, perhaps because I thought them true, but most probably because the situation in which they were spoken, one of frenetic, military hyperactivity, was so utterly appropriate. “Loitering at the rear/ you never need fear/ neurasthenia.”

“The Stocking” from *Berlin Childhood*

The first cabinet that opened when I wanted to was the bureau. I had only to pull on the knob and the door clicked open for me. Among the underclothing stored there was the thing that mad the bureau an adventure. I had to make a path to the farthest corner; there I found my stockings piled, rolled up in the old-fashioned way. Each pair looked like a small pouch. Nothing gave me more pleasure than plunging my hand as deep as possible into the inside of the pouch. I did not do so for the sake of warmth. It was “the Dowry,” which I held in my hand in the rolled up interior, that drew me into its depths. When I had got my hand around it and confirmed my possession of the soft wollen mass to the best of my ability, the second part of the game, which brought the revelation, began. For now I began working “the Dowry” out of its wollen pouch. I drew it closer and closer to me until the amazing event occurred: I had extracted “the Dowry,” but “the Pouch” in which it had lain no longer existed. I could not test this process often enough. It taught me that form and content, the veil and what it hides, are one and the same. It led me to extricate the truth from literature as cautiously as the child’s hand brought the stocking out of “the Pouch.” (416-17)

“Construction Site” from *One Way Street*

Pedantic brooding over the production of objects—visual aids, toys, or books—that are supposed to be suitable for children is folly. Since the Enlightenment this has been one of the mustiest speculations of the pedagogues. Their infatuation with psychology keeps them from perceiving that the world is full of the most unrivaled objects for childish attention and use. And the most specific. For children are particularly fond of haunting any site where



things are being visibly worked upon. They are irresistibly drawn by the detritus generated by building, gardening, housework, tailoring, or carpentry. In waste products they recognize the face of that the world of things turns directly and solely to them. In using these things they do not so much imitate the works of adults as bring together, in the artifact produced in play, materials of widely differing kinds in a new, intuitive relationship. Children thus produce their own small world of things within the greater one. The norms of this small world must be kept in mind if one wished to create things specially for children, rather than let one's adult activity, through its requisites and instruments, find its own way to them.

“Unpacking My Library”

I am not exaggerating when I say that to a true collector the acquisition of an old book is its rebirth. This is the childlike element which a collector mingles with the element of old age. For children can accomplish the renewal of existence in a hundred unfailing ways. Among children, collecting is only one process of renewal; other processes are the painting of objects, the cutting out of figures, the application of decals—the whole range of childlike modes of acquisition, from touching things to giving them names. To renew the old world—that is the collector's deepest desire when he is driven to acquire new things, and that is why a collector of older books is closer to the wellsprings of collecting than the acquirer of luxury editions. How do books cross the threshold of a collection and become the property of a collector? The history of their acquisition is the subject of the following remarks.

Bibliographical References

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