

BOOK REVIEW

Walter Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood Around 1900*. Trans. Howard Eiland. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006. xvi + 192 pp. 7 halftone illustrations. Pbk. \$14.95. ISBN 0-674-0222-x.

English editions of Walter Benjamin's work often cast him as a literary critic, and he has become a cult figure in that field since the translation of *Illuminations* in 1968. But Benjamin should also be read as writing a kind of political theology. Traces of his thinking resurface in figures ranging from Arendt to Žižek, from Taubes to Metz to Habermas. That influence should be extended and deepened by the spare, radiant constellation of memories translated as *Berlin Childhood Around 1900*. While the notes and introduction again frame the book for literary criticism, the text opens readily to a political theology that is materialist, post-secular, and infused with eschatological hope.

Berlin Childhood assembles a montage of memories from Benjamin's growing up as part of a prosperous, middle-class, assimilated Jewish family in Berlin's West End in the decades before the First World War. Like the loggias described in the first fragment, Benjamin's memories are both attached to the stable structures of fact and open to powers not made by human hands. Morning comes first to the loggia; it has always already come before Benjamin arrives. And somehow, he writes, the open-air loggia holds something of Sunday the whole week long. The memories in *Berlin Childhood* display similar qualities. Even as—and precisely because—they are firmly attached to the material world, they shine with morning light and speak of Sunday rest.

Benjamin remembers the everyday life of his childhood in all its dreamy concreteness. Memories revolve around things like cabinets, doors, city streets, a sewing box, a telephone, and even a rolled-up sock. Such memories do not translate easily into academic discourse. Benjamin's more frankly theoretical works—even cryptic meditations like "On the Concept of History"—feel ready-made for academic appropriation. The materialist memories of *Berlin Childhood* are somehow both more accessible and more elusive. They are no less significant. Like Benjamin's masterpiece, the bushels of clippings and observations collected as *The Arcades Project*, they do more to perform than to describe his main ideas. But *Berlin Childhood* is much shorter and far more polished than that sprawling work. It is a more welcoming path that leads no less deeply into the labyrinth of Benjamin's thought.

Benjamin diagnosed the irrationality of thinking completely emancipated and estranged from its origin in bodies, things, spaces, smells, speech—all the stuff of creaturely life. *Berlin Childhood* shows thinking restored to but not quite lost in the

material world. Benjamin remembers a child's world in which material objects become personal and persons become material. A clock face can wear "an injured look" (57). Bicycle handlebars develop a will of their own. A wardrobe wants to be opened. And all of this transpires under the watchful eyes of caryatids. Even as material things display personality, Benjamin finds himself "enveloped in the world of matter." Words and concepts do not come between him and the world he would know. It is "speechlessly near." Hiding behind a door, "he is himself the door" (99). This is the fairy-tale world of servants turned into candles and kettles that now sing to welcome the princess who will set them free. It is hope for a redemption that makes the trees of the field clap their hands. It is a vision of paradise in which humans are reconciled with the world of things.

Benjamin remembers the enchanted world of his childhood without pretending to reconstruct it. He began the book in Poveromo, Italy in 1932, and worked on it off and on throughout the 1930s. He saw, sooner than most, that the rise of the Nazis would destroy the world of his childhood. The book begins with full consciousness of the irretrievability—"not the contingent biographical but the necessary social irretrievability—of the past" (37). But the very lost-ness of the past allows Benjamin to visit it without fear of being overpowered by it. He ingests a trace amount of the old, irretrievable magic to "inoculate" himself against the terrible new magic already beginning to exert its powers. This is no easy re-enchantment of the world. Benjamin offers instead a critical enchantment, an enchanted critique.

Simply naming the moments of his childhood as both wondrous and irretrievable performs a powerful critique of narratives of supersession in which nothing of value gets lost. Benjamin is resisting the narratives of progress he attributes to both Nazis and Social Democrats, narratives in which teleology overwhelms tragedy. He also resists the easy consolations offered by narratives of decline. As Benjamin wrote to his friend Gershom Scholem, "these childhood memories...are not narratives in the form of a chronicle but...individual expeditions into the depths of memory" (xi–xii). The memories are continuous neither with one another, nor with the time of writing, nor with the time of reading. They are certainly not continuous with the time of fulfillment for which they hope. Instead they take the form of montage, or constellation—an assemblage of short, bright flashes that play off of one another to gesture towards something of another order, something far greater than the next item in a sequence.

The constellation form embodies the eschatological shape of Benjamin's hope. In ways that anticipate and inspire cultural studies, Benjamin sees how the stuff of everyday life bears the wishes and dreams of an age. The sturdy, timeless furniture of a bourgeois home dreams of life without death. But the world in which that furniture made sense no longer exists, and so the hopes of the bourgeois interior no longer have any future in an ordinary, historicist sense. They do not even exist in the present—except as eschatological memories, as "traces of what was to have come" (79). Denied a future, separated from the present by a cataclysm, these outmoded things and practices bear witness to a hope that has become more than a simple extension of history, more even than we who are formed by that history

can hope on our own. The lost past becomes a repository of radical, eschatological hope.

That hope depends on some originating power, some “unfathomable reserve” (52) that lives in everyday things and that is released when those things are left behind by the historical narrative that once gave them sense. The bourgeois interior begins to testify as it becomes obsolete. Words begin to sing out their unfathomable reserve when they are worn out, slurred, or taken too literally—when they lose the ability to make sense in ordinary ways. To a child’s ears *Markt-Halle* becomes *Mark Thalle*, and a market hall becomes not a place for buying and selling scarce goods, but a temple of almost frightening fecundity (69–71). Benjamin’s hope depends on the presence of this unfathomable reserve, and over his career he gave conflicting and unsatisfactory accounts of its source. While these gaps and overlaps are frustrating for scholars who want to know what Benjamin thought, they can also be generative for thinkers with a wide range of commitments. It is as if Benjamin left his work open for citation in projects he did not intend and could not foresee.

The structure of Benjamin’s hope seems especially suited to our own times. The utopian visions of liberal and democratic societies feel worn out. Undermined by positivism, ideological criticism, and internal contradictions, notions like universal human rights too often survive by hollowing themselves out and presenting themselves as useful fictions. The great, emancipatory hopes of Enlightenment get whittled down to plans for good management. At the same time, many kinds of toxic magic ascend to new power and influence. Fundamentalisms of religion, market, nation-state—and even liberalism itself— attract followers, build institutions, and enchant slices of our shared life. In *Berlin Childhood* Walter Benjamin traces the contours of a critical utopianism that can respond to these contradictory crises. He offers a hope that leaps beyond the goods of management without slipping back into mere ideology. It is the shape of a hope worth having.

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