

# Walter Benjamin

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# Berlin Childhood around 1900

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## Final Version

O brown-baked column of victory,  
With winter sugar of childhood days.

In 1932, when I was abroad,<sup>1</sup> 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.

Several times in my inner life, I had already experienced the process of inoculation as something salutary. In this situation, too, I resolved to follow suit, and 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. I sought to limit its effect through insight into the irretrievability—not the contingent biographical but the necessary social irretrievability—of the past.

This has meant that certain biographical features, which stand out more readily in the continuity of experience than in its depths, altogether recede in the present undertaking. And with them go the physiognomies—those of my family and comrades alike. On the other hand, I have made an effort to get hold of the *images* in which the experience of the big city is precipitated in a child of the middle class.

I believe it possible that a fate expressly theirs is held in reserve for such images. No customary forms await them yet, like those that, over the course of centuries, and in obedience to a feeling for nature, answer to remembrances of a childhood spent in the country. But, then, the images of my metropolitan childhood perhaps are capable, at their core, of preforming later historical experience. I hope they will at least suggest how thoroughly the person spoken of here would later dispense with the security allotted his childhood.

~~though regretting its willingness to help. If the train nevertheless sometimes tarried before these courtyards, it was because, just prior to our arrival in the station, a signal had temporarily barred the way. The slower the train's progress down this last section of tracks, the quicker the extinction of my hopes, which had been concentrated on finding, behind firewalls,<sup>59</sup> a refuge from the parental dwelling that soon would receive me. Yet those few spare minutes preceding our exit from the train are still before my eyes. Many a gaze has perhaps touched on them, as if from those windows which look out of dilapidated walls in courtyards and in which a lamp is burning.~~

### ~~Tardy Arrival~~

### ~~Winter Morning~~

### ~~At the Corner of Steglitzer and Genthiner~~

### The Larder

My hand slipped through the crack of the barely opened cupboard as a lover slips through the night. Once at home in the darkness, it felt around for candy or almonds, raisins or preserves. And just as the lover first embraces his beloved before giving her a kiss, the sense of touch had a rendezvous with all these things before the tongue came to taste their sweetness. With what endearments the honey, the little heaps of currants, and even the rice gave themselves to my hand! How passionate this meeting of two who had at last escaped the spoon! Grateful and impetuous, like a girl borne away from her father's house, the strawberry marmalade let itself be enjoyed here without a roll and, as it were, under the stars; and even the butter tenderly requited the boldness of a suitor who found entry into its humble quarters. Before long, the hand—that juvenile Don Juan—had made its way into every nook and cranny, behind oozing layers and streaming heaps: virginity renewed without complaint.

### ~~Awakening of Sexuality~~

### ~~News of a Death~~

~~The phenomenon of *déjà vu* has often been described. Is the term really apt? Shouldn't we rather speak of events which affect us like an echo—one awakened by a sound that seems to have issued from somewhere in the darkness of past life? By the same token, the shock with which a moment enters our consciousness as if already lived through tends to strike us in the form of a sound. It is a word, a rustling or knocking, that is endowed with~~

~~the power to call us unexpectedly into the cool sepulcher of the past, from whose vault the present seems to resound only as an echo. Strange that no one has yet inquired into the counterpart of this transport—namely, the shock with which a word makes us pull up short, like a muff that someone has forgotten in our room. Just as the latter points us to a stranger who was on the premises, so there are words or pauses pointing us to that invisible stranger—the future—which forgot them at our place.<sup>60</sup> I may have been five years old at the time. One evening I was already in bed—my father appeared. Presumably to say good night to me. It was half against his will, I believe, that he told me the news of a cousin's death. This cousin was an older man who meant nothing to me. But my father embellished his account with all the particulars. He explained, on my asking, what a heart attack was, and went into detail. I did not absorb much of what he said. But I did take special note, that evening, of my room and my bed, just as a person pays closer attention to a place when he has a presentiment that, one day, he will have to retrieve from it something forgotten. Only after many years did I learn what that something was. In this room, my father had kept from me part of the news: my cousin had died of syphilis.~~

~~Markthalle Magdeburger Platz~~

~~Hiding Places~~

~~Two Enigmas~~

~~The Otter~~

~~Blumeshof 12~~

**The Mummerehlen**

There is an old nursery rhyme that tells of Muhme Rehlen. Because the word *Muhme* meant nothing to me, this creature became for me a spirit: the mummerehlen.<sup>61</sup> The misunderstanding disarranged the world for me. But in a good way: it lit up paths to the world's interior. The cue could come from anywhere.

Thus, on one occasion, chance willed that *Kupferstichen* [copperplate engravings] were discussed in my presence. The next day, I stuck my head out from under a chair; that was a *Kopf-verstich* [a head-stickout]. If, in this way, I distorted both myself and the word, I did only what I had to do to gain a foothold in life. Early on, I learned to disguise myself in words, which really were clouds. The gift of perceiving similarities is, in fact, nothing but a weak remnant of the old compulsion to become similar and to be-



Walter Benjamin (left) and his brother Georg, ca. 1902. Carte de visite photo by Atelier Gillert. Reproduced with the permission of Carl Hanser Verlag, Munich.

have mimetically.<sup>62</sup> In me, however, this compulsion acted through words. Not those that made me similar to models of good breeding, but those that made me similar to dwelling places, furniture, clothes.

Never to my own image, though. And that explains why I was at such a loss when someone demanded of me similarity to myself. This would happen at the photographer's studio. Wherever I looked, I saw myself surrounded by folding screens, cushions, and pedestals which craved my image much as the shades of Hades craved the blood of the sacrificial animal. In

the end, I was offered up to a crudely painted prospect of the Alps, and my right hand, which had to brandish a kidskin hat, cast its shadow on the clouds and snowfields of the backdrop. But the tortured smile on the lips of the little mountaineer is not as disturbing as the look I take in now from the child's face, which lies in the shadow of a potted palm. The latter comes from one of those studios which—with their footstools and tripods, tapestries and easels—put you in mind of both a boudoir and a torture chamber. I am standing there bareheaded, my left hand holding a giant sombrero which I dangle with studied grace. My right hand is occupied with a walking stick, whose curved handle can be seen in the foreground while its tip remains hidden in a cluster of ostrich feathers spilling from a garden table. Over to the side, near the curtained doorway, my mother stands motionless in her tight bodice. As though attending to a tailor's dummy, she scrutinizes my velvet suit, which for its part is laden with braid and other trimming and looks like something out of a fashion magazine. I, however, am distorted by similarity to all that surrounds me here. Thus, like a mollusk in its shell, I had my abode in the nineteenth century, which now lies hollow before me like an empty shell. I hold it to my ear.

What do I hear? Not the noise of field artillery or of dance music à la Offenbach, or the howling of factory sirens, or the cries that resound through the Stock Exchange at midday—not even the stamping of horses on the cobblestones, or march music announcing the changing of the guard. No, what I hear is the brief clatter of the anthracite as it falls from the coal scuttle into a cast-iron stove, the dull pop of the flame as it ignites in the gas mantle, and the clinking of the lampshade on its brass ring when a vehicle passes by on the street. And other sounds as well, like the jingling of the basket of keys, or the ringing of the two bells at the front and back steps. And, finally, there is a little nursery rhyme. "Listen to my tale of the mummerehlen."

The line is distorted—yet it contains the whole distorted world of childhood. Muhme Rehlen, who used to have her place in the line, was already gone when I heard it recited for the first time. But it was even harder to find a trace of the mummerehlen. Sometimes I suspected it was lurking in the monkey that swam in the steam of barley groats or tapioca at the bottom of my dish. I ate the soup to bring out the mummerehlen's image. It was at home, one might think, in the Mummelsee,<sup>63</sup> whose sluggish waters enveloped it like a gray cape. Whatever stories used to be told about it—or whatever someone may have only wished to tell me—I do not know. Mute, porous, flaky, it formed a cloud at the core of things, like the snow flurry in a glass paperweight. From time to time, I was whirled around in it. This would happen as I sat painting with watercolors. The colors I mixed would color me. Even before I applied them to the drawing, I found myself dis-

guised by them.<sup>64</sup> When wet, they flowed together on the palette; I would take them warily onto my brush, as though they were clouds about to dissipate.

But of all the things I used to mimic, my favorite was the Chinese porcelain. A mottled crust overspread those vases, bowls, plates, and boxes, which, to be sure, were merely cheap export articles. I was nonetheless captivated by them, just as if I already knew the story which, after so many years, leads me back again to the work of the mummerehlen. The story comes from China, and tells of an old painter who invited friends to see his newest picture. This picture showed a park and a narrow footpath that ran along a stream and through a grove of trees, culminating at the door of a little cottage in the background. When the painter's friends, however, looked around for the painter, they saw that he had left them—that he was in the picture. There, he followed the little path that led to the door, paused before it quite still, turned, smiled, and disappeared through the narrow opening. In the same way, I too, when occupied with my paintpots and brushes, would be suddenly displaced into the picture.<sup>65</sup> I would resemble the porcelain which I had entered in a cloud of colors.

## Colors

## Society

My mother had an oval-shaped piece of jewelry. It was too large to be worn on the bodice, and so, whenever she chose to adorn herself with it, it appeared on her belt. She wore it in the evening when she went out into “society,” but at home she wore it only when we ourselves entertained. At its center was a large, sparkling yellow gem encircled by some even larger stones of various colors—green, blue, yellow, pink, purple. Every time I saw it, this piece of jewelry delighted me. For in the thousand tiny flames that flashed from its edges, I clearly perceived dance music. The solemn moment when my mother took it out of the jewelry case sufficed to manifest its dual power. To me, it represented that society whose true emblem was my mother's ceremonial sash; but it was also the talisman which protected her especially from anything that could threaten from without. Under its guardianship, I too was safe.

Yet it could not prevent my having to go to bed, even on those rare evenings in which it made an appearance. This was doubly dismaying when we were the ones hosting the party. Nevertheless, society made its way across the threshold of my room, and my rapport with it was established on a lasting basis as soon as the doorbell began to ring. For a while, the sound of the bell worried the hallway almost incessantly; its ring was no less alarming

for being briefer and more precise than on other days. I could not fail to notice that this ringing conveyed a demand that exceeded any it might have made on a different occasion. And it was in keeping with this demand that, for the time being, the door was opened immediately and quietly. Then came the moment when the party, though it had barely got underway, seemed on the point of breaking up. In reality, it had merely withdrawn into the more distant rooms, in order there, in the bubbling and sedimentation of many footsteps and conversations, to disappear like a monster which has just washed up on the tide and seeks refuge in the damp mud of the shore. What now filled the rooms I felt to be impalpable, slippery, and ready at any instant to strangle those around whom it played. The mirror-bright dress shirt my father was wearing that evening appeared to me now like a breast-plate, and in the look which he had cast over the still-empty chairs an hour before, I now saw a man armed for battle.

Meanwhile, a subtle murmur had reached me: the Invisible had gained in strength and was conferring with itself in each of its members.<sup>66</sup> It gave ear to its own muffled whispering, as one gives ear to a shell; it deliberated with itself like foliage in the wind, crackled like logs on a fire, and then sank back noiselessly into itself. Now the time had come when I regretted having cleared a way, some hours earlier, for the unforeseeable. I had done this by pulling a handle which opened up the dining room table, revealing underneath a leaf which, when put in place, served to bridge the distance between the two halves of the table, so that all the guests could be accommodated. Then I had been given permission to help set the table. In doing so, not only was I honored by having utensils like lobster forks and oyster knives pass through my hands; but even the familiar everyday utensils called into service—the long-stemmed green wine glasses, the fine-cut little glasses for port, the filigreed champagne glasses, the silver saltcellars shaped like little tubs, the heavy metal carafe-stoppers in the form of gnomes or animals—all had a festive air about them. Finally, I was allowed to position, on one of the many glasses at each place setting, the card which announced where that particular guest was to sit. With this little card I crowned the work; and when at last I made an admiring tour around the entire table—which now lacked only the chairs—I was suddenly touched to the quick by the small sign of peace that beckoned to me from all the plates. It was the pattern of little cornflowers that adorned the set of flawless white porcelain—a sign of peace whose sweetness could be appreciated only by a gaze accustomed to the sign of war I had before me on all other days.

I'm thinking of the blue onion pattern. How often I had appealed to it for aid in the course of battles that raged round this table which now looked so radiant to me! Countless times I gave myself up to its branches and filaments, its blossoms and volutes—more devotedly than to the most beautiful picture. Never had anyone sought the friendship of another person as unre-



servedly as I sought the friendship of the blue onion pattern. I would gladly have had it as an ally in the unequal struggle which so often embittered the midday meal. But that was not to be. For this pattern was as venal as a Chinese general brought up at the expense of the state. The honors my mother would shower on it, the parades to which she summoned the soldiery, the lamentations that resounded from the kitchen for every fallen member of the regiment, rendered my courtship altogether useless. Cold and servile, the onion pattern withstood the onslaught of my gazes, and would not have offered the least of its layers to cover me.

The festive appearance of the table liberated me from that fatal pattern, and this alone would have been enough to fill me with delight. The closer the evening approached, however, the more veiled became that blissful, luminous something it had promised me around noontime. And when my mother—although she was staying at home this evening—came in haste to say goodnight to me, I felt more keenly than ever the gift she laid on my bedspread every evening at this time: the knowledge of those hours which the day still held in store for her, and which I, consoled, took with me into sleep, like the rag doll of old. It was those hours which, secretly, and without her being aware of it, fell into the folds of the coverlet she arranged for me—those hours which, even on evenings when she had to go out, comforted me with their touch, in the form of the black lace of the shawl which she already had over her head. I loved this nearness and the fragrance it bestowed on me. The brief time I had in the shadow of this shawl, and in the company of the yellow gemstone, gladdened me more than the bonbons she promised me, with a kiss, for next morning. When my father then called to her from outside my room, I felt only very proud, as she departed, to be sending her thus arrayed into society. And without quite realizing it, I grasped there in my bed, shortly before falling asleep, the truth of a little enigma: “The later the hour, the lovelier the guests.”

### ~~The Reading Box~~

~~We can never entirely recover what has been forgotten. And this is perhaps a good thing. The shock of repossession would be so devastating that we would immediately cease to understand our longing. But we do understand it, and the more deeply what has been forgotten lies buried within us, the better we understand this longing. Just as the lost word that was on the tip of our tongue would have triggered flights of eloquence worthy of Demosthenes, so what is forgotten seems to us laden with all the lived life it promises us. It may be that what makes the forgotten so weighty and so pregnant is nothing but the trace of misplaced habits in which we could no longer find ourselves. Perhaps the mingling of the forgotten with the dust of our vanished dwellings is the secret of its survival. However that may be,~~