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*Walter Benjamin*

*NLB*

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*One-Way Street*  
*and*  
*Other Writings*

Translators

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# Introduction

Susan Sontag

In most of the portrait photographs he is looking down, his right hand to his face. The earliest one I know shows him in 1927—he is thirty-five—with dark curly hair over a high forehead, moustache above a full lower lip: youthful, almost handsome. With his head lowered, his jacketed shoulders seem to start behind his ears; his thumb leans against his jaw; the rest of the hand, cigarette between bent index and third fingers, covers his chin; the downward look through his glasses—the soft, day-dreamer’s gaze of the myopic—seems to float off to the lower left of the photograph.

In a picture from the late 1930s, the curly hair has hardly receded, but there is no trace of youth or handsomeness; the face has widened and the upper torso seems not just high but blocky, huge. The thicker moustache and the pudgy folded hand with thumb tucked under cover his mouth. The look is opaque, or just more inward: he could be thinking—or listening. (“He who listens hard doesn’t see,” Benjamin wrote in his essay on Kafka.) There are books behind his head.

In a photograph taken in the summer of 1938, on the last of several visits he made to Brecht in exile in Denmark after 1933, he is standing in front of Brecht’s house, an old man at forty-six, in white shirt, tie, trousers with watch chain: a slack, corpulent figure, looking truculently at the camera.

Another picture, from 1937, shows Benjamin in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. Two men, neither of whose faces can be seen, share a table some distance behind him. Benjamin sits in the right

foreground, probably taking notes for the book on Baudelaire and nineteenth-century Paris he had been writing for a decade. He is consulting a volume he holds open on the table with his left hand—his eyes can't be seen—looking, as it were, into the lower right edge of the photograph.

His close friend Gershom Scholem has described his first glimpse of Benjamin in Berlin in 1913, at a joint meeting of a Zionist youth group and Jewish members of the Free German Student Association, of which the twenty-one-year-old Benjamin was a leader. He spoke “extempore without so much as a glance at his audience, staring with a fixed gaze at a remote corner of the ceiling which he harangued with much intensity, in a style incidentally that was, as far as I remember, ready for print.”<sup>1</sup>

He was what the French call *un triste*. In his youth he seemed marked by “a profound sadness”, Scholem wrote. He thought of himself as a melancholic, disdaining modern psychological labels and invoking the traditional astrological one: “I came into the world under the sign of Saturn—the star of the slowest revolution, the planet of detours and delays. . . .”<sup>2</sup> His major projects, the book published in 1928 on the German baroque drama (the *Trauerspiel*; literally, sorrow-play) and his never completed *Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century*, cannot be fully understood unless one grasps how much they rely on a theory of melancholy.

Benjamin projected himself, his temperament, into all his major subjects, and his temperament determined what he chose to write about. It was what he saw in subjects, such as the seven-

<sup>1</sup> Gershom Scholem, “Walter Benjamin”, in *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis* (Schocken, 1976). Scholem, five years younger than Benjamin, relates that they did not actually meet until 1915, during Scholem's first term at the University of Munich, which Benjamin attended after leaving the University of Berlin. Unless otherwise indicated, the Scholem quotations come from this essay, written in 1964, or from “Walter Benjamin and His Angel”, written in 1972, in the same volume.

<sup>2</sup> In “Agesilaus Santander”, a short text that Benjamin wrote in Ibiza in August 1933, found in his notebooks and first published by Scholem in “Walter Benjamin and His Angel”.

teenth-century baroque plays (which dramatize different facets of “Saturnine acedia”) and the writers about whose work he wrote most brilliantly—Baudelaire, Proust, Kafka, Karl Kraus. He even found the Saturnine element in Goethe.<sup>3</sup> For, despite the polemic in his great (still untranslated) essay on Goethe’s *Elective Affinities* against interpreting a writer’s work by his life, he did make selective use of the life in his deepest meditations on texts: information that disclosed the melancholic, the solitary. (Thus, he describes Proust’s “loneliness which pulls the world down into its vortex”; explains how Kafka, like Klee, was “essentially solitary”; cites Robert Walser’s “horror of success in life”.) One cannot use the life to interpret the work. But one can use the work to interpret the life.

Two short books of reminiscences of his Berlin childhood and student years, written in the early 1930s and unpublished in his lifetime, contain Benjamin’s most explicit self-portrait. To the nascent melancholic, in school and on walks with his mother, “solitude appeared to me as the only fit state of man.” Benjamin does not mean solitude in a room—he was often sick as a child—but solitude in the great metropolis, the busyness of the idle stroller, free to daydream, observe, ponder, cruise. The mind who was to attach much of the nineteenth century’s sensibility to the figure of the *flâneur*, personified by that superbly self-aware melancholic Baudelaire, spun much of his own sensibility out of his phantasmagorical, shrewd, subtle relation to cities. The street, the passage, the arcade, the labyrinth are recurrent themes in his literary essays and, notably, in the projected book on nineteenth-century Paris, as well as in his travel pieces and reminiscences. (Robert Walser, for whom walking was the centre of his reclusive life and marvellous books, is a writer to whom one particularly wishes Benjamin had devoted a longer essay.)<sup>4</sup> The only book of a dis-

<sup>3</sup> The long Goethe essay was written in 1922 and appeared in two parts in 1924–1925 in the *Neue Deutsche Beiträge*, a magazine published in Vienna and edited by Hugo von Hofmannsthal. In 1937 Benjamin excerpted the section about Goethe’s Saturnine character and published it in French translation in *Les Cahiers du Sud* as “L’angoisse mythique chez Goethe.”

<sup>4</sup> Benjamin’s brief essay “Robert Walser” was first published in *Das Tagebuch* in 1929; it is still untranslated.



creetly autobiographical nature published in his lifetime was titled *One-Way Street*. Reminiscences of self are reminiscences of a place, and how he positions himself in it, navigates around it.

“Not to find one’s way about in a city is of little interest,” begins his still untranslated *A Berlin Childhood Around the Turn of the Century*. “But to lose one’s way in a city, as one loses one’s way in a forest, requires practice. . . . I learned this art late in life: it fulfilled the dreams whose first traces were the labyrinths on the blotters of my exercise books.” This passage also occurs in *A Berlin Chronicle*, after Benjamin suggests how much practice it took to get lost, given an original sense of “impotence before the city”. His goal is to be a competent street-map reader who knows how to stray. And to locate himself, with imaginary maps. Elsewhere in *Berlin Chronicle* Benjamin relates that for years he had played with the idea of mapping his life. For this map, which he imagined as grey, he had devised a colourful system of signs that “clearly marked in the houses of my friends and girl friends, the assembly halls of various collectives, from the ‘debating chambers’ of the Youth Movement to the gathering places of the Communist youth, the hotel and brothel rooms that I knew for one night, the decisive benches in the Tiergarten, the ways to different schools and the graves that I saw filled, the sites of prestigious cafés whose long-forgotten names daily crossed our lips.” Once, waiting for someone in the Café des Deux Magots in Paris, he relates, he managed to draw a diagram of his life: it was like a labyrinth, in which each important relationship figures as “an entrance to the maze”.

The recurrent metaphors of maps and diagrams, memories and dreams, labyrinths and arcades, vistas and panoramas, evoke a certain vision of cities as well as a certain kind of life. Paris, Benjamin writes, “taught me the art of straying”. The revelation of the city’s true nature came not in Berlin but in Paris, where he stayed frequently throughout the Weimar years, and lived as a refugee from 1933 until his suicide while trying to escape from France in 1940—more exactly, the Paris re-imagined in the Surrealist narratives (Breton’s *Nadja*, Aragon’s *Le Paysan de Paris*). With these metaphors, he is indicating a general problem about orientation,

and erecting a standard of difficulty and complexity. (A labyrinth is a place where one gets lost.) He is also suggesting a notion about the forbidden, and how to gain access to it: through an act of the mind that is the same as a physical act. "Whole networks of streets were opened up under the auspices of prostitution," he writes in *Berlin Chronicle*, which begins by invoking an Ariadne, the whore who leads this son of rich parents for the first time across "the threshold of class." The metaphor of the labyrinth also suggests Benjamin's idea of obstacles thrown up by his own temperament.

The influence of Saturn makes people "apathetic, indecisive, slow", he writes in *The Origin of German Trauerspiel*.<sup>\*</sup> Slowness is one characteristic of the melancholic temperament. Blundering is another, from noticing too many possibilities, from not noticing one's lack of practical sense. And stubbornness, from the longing to be superior—on one's own terms. Benjamin recalls his stubbornness during childhood walks with his mother, who would turn insignificant items of conduct into tests of his aptitude for practical life, thereby reinforcing what was inept ("my inability even today to make a cup of coffee") and dreamily recalcitrant in his nature. "My habit of seeming slower, more maladroit, more stupid than I am, had its origin in such walks, and has the great attendant danger of making me think myself quicker, more dexterous, and shrewder than I am." And from this stubbornness comes, "above all, a gaze that appears to see not a third of what it takes in."

*One-Way Street* distills the experiences of the writer and lover (it is dedicated to Asja Lacis, who "cut it through the author"),<sup>5</sup>

<sup>\*</sup> *Der Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (1928). Benjamin's study of the Baroque *Trauerspiel* is published in English as *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne, London/NLB, 1977.

<sup>5</sup> Asja Lacis and Benjamin met in Capri in the summer of 1924. She was a Latvian communist revolutionary and theatre director, assistant to Brecht and to Piscator, with whom Benjamin wrote "Naples" in 1925 (pp. 167–76 below) and for whom he wrote "Programme for a Proletarian Children's Theatre" in 1928 (translated in *Performance*, No. 5, March/April 1973). It was Lacis who got Benjamin an invitation to Moscow in the winter of 1926–1927 and who introduced him to Brecht in 1929. Benjamin hoped to marry her when he and his wife were finally divorced in 1930. But she returned to Riga and later spent ten years in a Soviet camp.

experiences that can be guessed at in the opening words on the writer's situation, which sound the theme of revolutionary moralism, and the final "To the Planetarium", a paean to the technological wooing of nature and to sexual ecstasy. Benjamin could write about himself more directly when he started from memories, not contemporary experiences; when he writes about himself as a child. At that distance, childhood, he can survey his life as a space that can be mapped. The candour and the surge of painful feelings in *Berlin Childhood* and *Berlin Chronicle* become possible precisely because Benjamin has adopted a completely digested, analytical way of relating the past. It evokes events for the reactions to the events, places for the emotions one has deposited in the places, other people for the encounter with oneself, feelings and behaviour for intimations of future passions and failures contained in them.<sup>6</sup> Fantasies of monsters loose in the large apartment while his parents entertain their friends prefigure his revulsion against his class; the dream of being allowed to sleep as long as he wants, instead of having to get up early to go to school, will be fulfilled when—after his book on the *Trauerspiel* failed to qualify him for a university lectureship—he realizes that "his hopes of a position and a secure livelihood had always been in vain"; his way of walking with his mother, "with pedantic care" keeping one step behind her, prefigures his "sabotage of real social existence."

Benjamin regards everything he chooses to recall in his past as prophetic of the future, because the work of memory (reading oneself backward, he called it) collapses time. There is no chronological ordering of his reminiscences, for which he disavows the name of autobiography, because time is irrelevant. ("Autobiography has to do with time, with sequence and what makes up the continuous flow of life," he writes in *Berlin Chronicle*. "Here, I am talking of a space, of moments and discontinuities.") Benjamin, the translator of Proust, wrote fragments of an opus that could be

<sup>6</sup> For an excellent essay, written in 1961, on *Berlin Childhood* as a reading of the past for omens of the future, see Peter Szondi, "Hope in the Past: Walter Benjamin", translated in *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 4, No. 3, Spring 1978.

called *A la recherche des espaces perdues*. Memory, the staging of the past, turns the flow of events into tableaux. Benjamin is not trying to recover his past, but to understand it: to condense it into its spatial forms, its premonitory structures.

For the baroque dramatists, he writes in *The Origin of German Trauerspiel*, "chronological movement is grasped and analysed in a spatial image." The book on the *Trauerspiel* is not only Benjamin's first account of what it means to convert time into space; it is where he explains most clearly what feeling underlies this move. Awash in melancholic awareness of "the disconsolate chronicle of world history", a process of incessant decay, the baroque dramatists seek to escape from history and restore the "timelessness" of paradise. The seventeenth-century baroque sensibility had a "panoramic" conception of history: "history merges into the setting." In *Berlin Childhood* and *Berlin Chronicle*, Benjamin merges his life into a setting. The successor to the baroque stage set is the Surrealist city: the metaphysical landscape in whose dreamlike spaces people have "a brief, shadowy existence", like the nineteen-year-old poet whose suicide, the great sorrow of Benjamin's student years, is condensed in the memory of rooms that the dead friend inhabited.

Benjamin's recurrent themes are, characteristically, means of spatializing the world: for example, his notion of ideas and experiences as ruins. To understand something is to understand its topography, to know how to chart it. And to know how to get lost.

For the character born under the sign of Saturn, time is the medium of constraint, inadequacy, repetition, mere fulfilment. In time, one is only what one is: what one has always been. In space, one can be another person. Benjamin's poor sense of direction and inability to read a street map become his love of travel and his mastery of the art of straying. Time does not give one much leeway: it thrusts us forward from behind, blows us through the narrow funnel of the present into the future. But space is broad, teeming with possibilities, positions, intersections, passages, detours, U-turns, dead ends, one-way streets. Too many possibilities, indeed. Since the Saturnine temperament is slow, prone to indecisiveness,

sometimes one has to cut one's way through with a knife. Sometimes one ends by turning the knife against oneself.

The mark of the Saturnine temperament is the self-conscious and unforgiving relation to the self, which can never be taken for granted. The self is a text—it has to be deciphered. (Hence, this is an apt temperament for intellectuals.) The self is a project, something to be built. (Hence, this is an apt temperament for artists and martyrs, those who court “the purity and beauty of a failure”, as Benjamin says of Kafka.) And the process of building a self and its works is always too slow. One is always in arrears to oneself.

Things appear at a distance, come forward slowly. In *Berlin Childhood*, he speaks of his “propensity for seeing everything I care about approach me from far away”—the way, often ill as a child, he imagined the hours approaching his sickbed. “This is perhaps the origin of what others call patience in me, but which in truth does not resemble any virtue.” (Of course, others did experience it as patience, as a virtue. Scholem has described him as “the most patient human being I ever came to know.”)<sup>7</sup>

But something like patience is needed for the melancholic's labours of decipherment. Proust, as Benjamin notes, was excited by “the secret language of the salons”; Benjamin was drawn to more compact codes. He collected emblem books, liked to make up anagrams, played with pseudonyms. His taste for pseudonyms well antedates his need as a German-Jewish refugee, who from 1933 to 1936 continued to publish reviews in German magazines under the name of Detlev Holz, the name he used to sign the last book to

<sup>7</sup> Scholem continues: “And to deal with Benjamin one had to have the greatest patience oneself. Only very patient people could gain deeper contact with him.” Scholem cites the testimony of someone who was with Benjamin during his internment in a camp near Paris and in Nevers in the autumn of 1939, that he made an indelible impression on his fellow prisoners “by his infinite and stoic patience, which he demonstrated without any ostentation whatever and under the most difficult conditions.

appear in his lifetime, *Deutsche Menschen*, published in Switzerland in 1936. In the amazing text recently published by Scholem, "Agesilaus Santander", Benjamin speaks of his fantasy of having a secret name; the name of this text—which turns on the figure in the Klee drawing he owned, "Angelus Novus"—is, as Scholem has pointed out, an anagram of The Angel Satan (*Der Angelus Satanas*). He was an "uncanny" graphologist, Scholem reports, though "later on he tended to conceal this gift". (Benjamin discusses handwriting in "On the Mimetic Faculty".)

Dissimulation, secretiveness appear a necessity to the melancholic. He has complex, often veiled relations with others. These feelings of superiority, of inadequacy, of baffled feeling, of not being able to get what one wants, or even name it properly (or consistently) to oneself—these can be, it is felt they ought to be, masked by friendliness, or the most scrupulous manipulation. Using a word that was also applied to Kafka by those who knew him, Scholem speaks of "the almost Chinese courtesy" that characterized Benjamin's relations with people. But one is not surprised to learn, of the man who could justify Proust's "invectives against friendship", that Benjamin could also drop friends brutally, as he did his comrades from the Youth Movement, when they no longer interested him.<sup>8</sup> Nor is one surprised to learn that this fastidious, intransigent, fiercely serious man could also flatter people he probably did not think his equals, that he could let himself be "baited" (his own word) and condescended to by Brecht on his visits to Denmark. This prince of the intellectual life could also be a courtier.

Benjamin analysed both parts in *The Origin of German Trauerspiel* by the theory of melancholy. One characteristic of the Saturnine temperament is slowness: "The tyrant falls on account of the

<sup>8</sup> See H. W. Belmore, "Some Recollections of Walter Benjamin", in *German Life and Letters*, Volume XXVIII, No. 2, January 1975. This spiteful and unadmiring portrait of Benjamin is a document of the unquenchable bitterness about being dropped still felt, sixty years later, by one of these friends. Herbert Belmore was a Gymnasium classmate of Benjamin; the earliest letters (Nos. 1–10) in the two-volume Suhrkamp edition of Benjamin's letters are written to him.

sluggishness of his emotions.” “Another trait of the predominance of Saturn,” says Benjamin, is “faithlessness.” This is represented by the character of the courtier in baroque drama, whose mind is “fluctuation itself”. The manipulativeness of the courtier is partly a “lack of character”; partly it “reflects an inconsolable, despondent surrender to an impenetrable conjunction of baleful constellations [that] seem to have taken on a massive, almost thing-like cast.” Only someone identifying with this sense of historical catastrophe, this degree of despondency, would have explained why the courtier is not to be despised. His faithlessness to his fellow men, Benjamin says, corresponds to the “deeper, more contemplative faith” he keeps with material emblems.

What Benjamin describes could be understood as simple pathology: the tendency of the melancholic temperament to project its inner torpor outward, as the immutability of misfortune, which is experienced as “massive, almost thinglike”. But his argument is more daring: he perceives that the deep transactions between the melancholic and the world always take place with things (rather than with people); and that these are genuine transactions, which reveal meaning. Precisely because the melancholy character is haunted by death, it is melancholics who best know how to read the world. Or, rather, it is the world which yields itself to the melancholic’s scrutiny, as it does to no one else’s. The more lifeless things are, the more potent and ingenious can be the mind which contemplates them.

If this melancholy temperament is faithless to people, it has good reason to be faithful to things. Fidelity lies in accumulating things—which appear, mostly, in the form of fragments or ruins. (“It is common practice in baroque literature to pile up fragments incessantly”, Benjamin writes.) Both the baroque and Surrealism, sensibilities with which Benjamin profoundly identified, see reality as things. Benjamin describes the baroque as a world of things (emblems, ruins) and spatialized ideas (“allegories are, in the realm of thought, what ruins are in the realm of things”). The genius of Surrealism was to generalize with ebullient candour the baroque cult of ruins; to perceive that the nihilistic energies of the

modern era make everything a ruin or fragment—and therefore collectible. A world whose past has become (by definition) obsolete, and whose present churns out instant antiques, invites custodians, decoders, and collectors.

As one kind of collector himself, Benjamin remained faithful to things—as things. According to Scholem, building his library, which included many first editions and rare books, was “his most enduring personal passion”. Inert in the face of thing-like disaster, the melancholy temperament is galvanized by the passions aroused by privileged objects. Benjamin’s books were not only for use, professional tools; they were contemplative objects, stimuli for reverie. His library evokes “memories of the cities in which I found so many things: Riga, Naples, Munich, Danzig, Moscow, Florence, Basel, Paris, . . . memories of the rooms where these books had been housed. . . .” Book-hunting, like the sexual hunt, adds to the geography of pleasure—another reason for strolling about in the world. In collecting, Benjamin experienced what in himself was clever, successful, shrewd, unabashedly passionate. “Collectors are people with a tactical instinct”—like courtiers.

Apart from first editions and baroque emblem books, Benjamin specialized in children’s books and books written by the mad. “The great works which meant so much to him,” reports Scholem, “were placed in bizarre patterns next to the most out-of-the-way writings and oddities.” The odd arrangement of the library is like the strategy of Benjamin’s work, in which a Surrealist-inspired eye for the treasures of meaning in the ephemeral, discredited, and neglected worked in tandem with his loyalty to the traditional canon of learned taste.

He liked finding things where nobody was looking. He drew from the obscure, disdained German baroque drama elements of the modern (that is to say, his own) sensibility: the taste for allegory, Surrealist shock effects, discontinuous utterance, the sense of historical catastrophe. “These stones were the bread of my imagination,” he wrote about Marseilles—the most recalcitrant of cities to that imagination, even when helped by a dose of hashish. Many expected references are absent in Benjamin’s



work—he didn't like to read what everybody was reading. He preferred the doctrine of the four temperaments as a psychological theory to Freud. He preferred being a communist, or trying to be one, without reading Marx. This man who read virtually everything, and had spent fifteen years sympathizing with revolutionary communism, had barely looked into Marx until the late 1930s. (He was reading *Capital* on his visit to Brecht in Denmark in the summer of 1938.)

His sense of strategy was one of his points of identification with Kafka, a kindred would-be tactician, who "took precautions against the interpretation of his writing". The whole point of the Kafka stories, Benjamin argues, is that they have *no* definite, symbolic meaning. And he was fascinated by the very different, un-Jewish sense of ruse practised by Brecht, the anti-Kafka of his imagination. (Predictably, Brecht disliked Benjamin's great essay on Kafka intensely.) Brecht, with the little wooden donkey near his desk from whose neck hung the sign "I, too, must understand it", represented for Benjamin, an admirer of esoteric religious texts, the possibly more potent ruse of reducing complexity, of making everything clear. Benjamin's "masochistic" (the word is Siegfried Kracauer's) relation to Brecht, which most of his friends deplored, shows the extent to which he was fascinated by this possibility.

Benjamin's propensity is to go against the usual interpretation. "All the decisive blows are struck left-handed", as he says in *One-Way Street*. Precisely because he saw that "all human knowledge takes the form of interpretation",<sup>9</sup> he understood the importance of being against interpretation wherever it is obvious. His most common strategy is to drain symbolism out of some things, like the Kafka stories or Goethe's *Elective Affinities* (texts where everybody agrees it is there), and pour it into others, where nobody suspects its existence (such as the German baroque plays, which he reads as

<sup>9</sup> Letter to Christian Florens Rang (No. 126 in the Suhrkamp *Briefe*), December 9, 1923.

allegories of historical pessimism).<sup>10</sup> Each book is a tactic, he wrote. In a letter to a friend, he claimed for his writings, only partly facetiously, forty-nine levels of meaning. For moderns as much as for cabalists, nothing is straightforward. Everything is—at the least—difficult. “Ambiguity displaces authenticity in all things”, he wrote in *One-Way Street*. What is most foreign to Benjamin is anything like ingenuousness: “the ‘unclouded’, ‘innocent’ eye has become a lie”.

Much of the originality of Benjamin’s arguments owes to his microscopic gaze (as his friend and disciple Theodor Adorno called it), combined with his indefatigable command over theoretical perspectives. “It was the small things that attracted him most”, writes Scholem. He loved old toys, postage stamps, picture postcards, and such playful miniaturizations of reality as the winter world inside a glass globe that snows when it is shaken. His own handwriting was almost microscopic, and his never realized ambition, Scholem reports, was to get a hundred lines on a sheet of paper. (The ambition was realized by Robert Walser, who used to transcribe the manuscripts of his stories and novels as micrograms, in a truly microscopic script.) Scholem relates that when he visited Benjamin in Paris in August 1927 (the first time the two friends had seen each other since Scholem emigrated to Palestine in 1923), Benjamin dragged him to an exhibit of Jewish ritual objects at the Musée Cluny to show him “two grains of wheat on which a kindred soul had inscribed the complete Shema Israel”.<sup>10</sup>

To miniaturize is to make portable—the ideal form of possessing things for a wanderer, or a refugee. Benjamin, of course, was both a

<sup>10</sup> Scholem tells the story in “Walter Benjamin”. But see Benjamin’s letter to Scholem from Paris (No. 156 in the *Briefe*) of May 29, 1926, a long letter toward the end of which he writes: “I couldn’t build a Lilliputian state with this, as it were, Marxist letter. But let me tell you that in the Jewish section of the Musée Cluny I have discovered the Book of Esther written on a page a little more than half the size of this one. That should perhaps speed your visit to Paris.”

Scholem argues that Benjamin’s love for the miniature underlies his taste for brief literary utterances, evident in *One-Way Street*. Perhaps; but books of this sort were common in the 1920s, and it was in a specifically Surrealist montage style that

wanderer, on the move, and a collector, weighed down by things; that is, passions. To miniaturize is to conceal. Benjamin was drawn to the extremely small as he was to whatever had to be deciphered: emblems, anagrams, handwriting. To miniaturize means to make useless. For what is so grotesquely reduced is, in a sense, liberated from its meaning—its tininess being the outstanding thing about it. It is both a whole (that is, complete) and a fragment (so tiny, the wrong scale). It becomes an object of disinterested contemplation or reverie. Love of the small is a child's emotion, one colonized by Surrealism. The Paris of the Surrealists is "a little world", Benjamin observes; so is the photograph, which Surrealist taste discovered as an enigmatic, even perverse, rather than a merely intelligible or beautiful, object, and about which Benjamin wrote with such originality. The melancholic always feels threatened by the dominion of the thing-like, but Surrealist taste mocks these terrors. Surrealism's great gift to sensibility was to make melancholy cheerful.

"The only pleasure the melancholic permits himself, and it is a powerful one, is allegory", Benjamin wrote in *The Origin of German Trauerspiel*. Indeed, he asserted, allegory is the way of reading the world typical of melancholies, and cited Baudelaire: "Everything for me becomes Allegory." The process which extracts meaning from the petrified and insignificant, allegory, is the characteristic method of the German baroque drama and of Baudelaire, Benjamin's major subjects; and, transmuted into philosophical argument and the micrological analysis of things, the method Benjamin practised himself.

The melancholic sees the world itself become a thing: refuge, solace, enchantment. Shortly before his death, Benjamin was

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these short independent texts were presented. *One-Way Street* was published by Ernst Rowohlt in Berlin, in booklet form with typography intended to evoke advertising shock effects; the cover was a photographic montage of aggressive phrases in capital letters from newspaper announcements, ads, official and odd signs. The opening passage, in which Benjamin hails "prompt language" and denounces "the pretentious, universal gesture of the book", does not make much sense unless one knows what kind of book, physically, *One-Way Street* was designed to be.

planning an essay about miniaturization as a device of fantasy. It seems to have been a continuation of an old plan to write on Goethe's "The New Melusina" (in *Wilhelm Meister*),<sup>11</sup> which is about a man who falls in love with a woman who is actually a tiny person, temporarily granted normal size, and unknowingly carries around with him a box containing the miniature kingdom of which she is the princess. In Goethe's tale, the world is reduced to a collectible thing, an object, in the most literal sense.

Like the box in Goethe's tale, a book is not only a fragment of the world but itself a little world. The book is a miniaturization of the world, which the reader inhabits. In *Berlin Chronicle*, Benjamin evokes his childhood rapture: "You did not read books through; you dwelt, abided between their lines." To reading, the delirium of the child, was eventually added writing, the obsession of the adult. The most praiseworthy way of acquiring books is by writing them, Benjamin remarks in "Unpacking My Library".<sup>12</sup> And the best way to understand them is also to enter their space: one never really understands a book unless one copies it, he says in *One-Way Street*, as one never understands a landscape from an airplane but only by walking through it.

"The amount of meaning is in exact proportion to the presence of death and the power of decay", Benjamin writes in the book on the *Trauerspiel*. This is what makes it possible to find meaning in one's own life, in "the dead occurrences of the past which are euphemistically known as experience". Only because the past is dead is one able to read it. Only because history is fetishized in physical objects can one understand it. Only because the book is a world can one enter it. The book for him was another space in which to stroll. For the character born under the sign of Saturn, the true impulse when one is being looked at is to cast down one's eyes, look in a corner. Better, one can lower one's head to one's notebook. Or put one's head behind the wall of a book.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Benjamin's letter (No. 326 in the *Briefe*) to Gretel Adorno, written in Paris on January 17, 1940.

<sup>12</sup> In *Illuminations*, London, 1970, an earlier selection of Benjamin's writings, edited by Hannah Arendt, which includes the essays on Kafka and Proust.

It is characteristic of the Saturnine temperament to blame its undertow of inwardness on the will. Convinced that the will is weak, the melancholic may make extravagant efforts to develop it. If these efforts are successful, the resulting hypertrophy of will usually takes the form of a compulsive devotion to work. Thus Baudelaire, who suffered constantly from "acedia, the malady of monks", ended many letters and his *Intimate Journals* with the most impassioned pledges to work more, to work uninterruptedly, to do nothing but work. (Despair over "every defeat of the will"—Baudelaire's phrase again—is a characteristic complaint of modern artists and intellectuals, particularly of those who are both.) One is condemned to work; otherwise one might not do anything at all. Even the dreaminess of the melancholic temperament is harnessed to work, and the melancholic may try to cultivate phantasmagorical states, like dreams, or seek the access to concentrated states of attention offered by drugs. Surrealism simply puts a positive accent on what Baudelaire experienced so negatively: it does not deplore the guttering of volition but raises it to an ideal, proposing that dream states may be relied on to furnish all the material needed for work.

Benjamin, always working, always trying to work more, speculated a good deal on the writer's daily existence. *One-Way Street* has several sections which offer recipes for work: the best conditions, timing, utensils. Part of the impetus for the large correspondence he conducted was to chronicle, report on, confirm the existence of work. His instincts as a collector served him well. Learning was a form of collecting, as in the quotations and excerpts from daily reading which Benjamin accumulated in notebooks that he carried everywhere and from which he would read aloud to friends. Thinking was also a form of collecting, at least in its preliminary stages. He conscientiously logged stray ideas; developed mini-essays in letters to friends; rewrote plans for future projects; noted his dreams (several are recounted in *One-Way Street*); kept numbered lists of all the books he read. (Scholem recalls seeing, on his second and last visit to Benjamin in Paris, in 1938, a notebook of current reading in which Marx's *Eighteenth*

*Brumaire* is listed as No. 1649.)

How does the melancholic become a hero of will? Through the fact that work can become like a drug, a compulsion. ("Thinking which is an eminent narcotic", he wrote in the essay on Surrealism.) In fact, melancholics make the best addicts, for the true addictive experience is always a solitary one. The hashish sessions of the late 1920s, supervised by a doctor friend, were prudent stunts, not acts of self-surrender; material for the writer, not escape from the exactions of the will. (Benjamin considered the book he wanted to write on hashish one of his most important projects.)

The need to be solitary—along with bitterness over one's loneliness—is characteristic of the melancholic. To get work done, one must be solitary—or, at least, not bound to any permanent relationship. Benjamin's negative feelings about marriage are clear in the essay on Goethe's *Elective Affinities*. His heroes—Kierkegaard, Baudelaire, Proust, Kafka, Kraus—never married; and Scholem reports that Benjamin came to regard his own marriage (he was married in 1917, estranged from his wife after 1921, and divorced in 1930) "as fatal to himself". The world of nature, and of natural relationships, is perceived by the melancholic temperament as less than seductive. The self-portrait in *Berlin Childhood* and *Berlin Chronicle* is of a wholly alienated son; as husband and father (he had a son, born in 1918, who emigrated to England with Benjamin's ex-wife in the mid-1930s), he appears to have simply not known what to do with these relationships. For the melancholic, the natural, in the form of family ties, introduces the falsely subjective, the sentimental; it is a drain on the will, on one's independence; on one's freedom to concentrate on work. It also presents a challenge to one's humanity to which the melancholic knows, in advance, he will be inadequate.

The style of work of the melancholic is immersion, total concentration. Either one is immersed, or attention floats away. As a writer, Benjamin was capable of extraordinary concentration. He was able to research and write *The Origin of German Trauerspiel* in two years; some of it, he boasts in *Berlin Chronicle*, was written in long evenings at a café, sitting close to a jazz band. But although

Benjamin wrote prolifically—in some periods turning out work every week for the German literary papers and magazines—it proved impossible for him to write a normal-sized book again. In a letter in 1935, Benjamin speaks of “the Saturnine pace” of writing *Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century*, which he had begun in 1927 and thought could be finished in two years.<sup>13</sup> His characteristic form remained the essay. The melancholic’s intensity and exhaustiveness of attention set natural limits to the length at which Benjamin could explicate his ideas. His major essays seem to end just in time, before they self-destruct.

His sentences do not seem to be generated in the usual way; they do not entail. Each sentence is written as if it were the first, or the last. (“A writer must stop and restart with every new sentence”, he says in the Prologue to *The Origin of German Trauerspiel*.) Mental and historical processes are rendered as conceptual tableaux; ideas are transcribed *in extremis* and the intellectual perspectives are vertiginous. His style of thinking and writing, incorrectly called aphoristic, might better be called freeze-frame baroque. This style was torture to execute. It was as if each sentence had to say everything, before the inward gaze of total concentration dissolved the subject before his eyes. Benjamin was probably not exaggerating when he told Adorno that each idea in his book on Baudelaire and nineteenth-century Paris “had to be wrested away from a realm in which madness lies”.<sup>14</sup>

Something like the dread of being stopped prematurely lies behind these sentences as saturated with ideas as the surface of a baroque painting is jammed with movement. In a letter to Adorno,

<sup>13</sup> Letter to Werner Kraft (No. 259 in the *Briefe*), written from Paris on May 25, 1935. At his death in 1940, Benjamin left thousands of pages of draft manuscript, only a small portion of which has been published. *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism* (New Left Books, 1973) contains translations of the material from Benjamin’s Paris project published in German so far.

<sup>14</sup> In a letter from Adorno to Benjamin, written from New York on November 10, 1938, translated in *Aesthetics and Politics* (New Left Books, 1977). Benjamin and Adorno met in 1923 (Adorno was twenty), and in 1935 Benjamin started to receive a small stipend from Max Horkheimer’s Institut für Sozialforschung, of which Adorno was a member.

Benjamin describes his transports when he first read Aragon's *Le Paysan de Paris*, the book that inspired *Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century*: "I would never read more than two or three pages in bed of an evening because the pounding of my heart was so loud that I had to let the book fall from my hands. What a warning!"<sup>15</sup> Cardiac failure is the metaphoric limit of Benjamin's exertions and passions. (He suffered from a heart ailment.) And cardiac sufficiency is a metaphor he offers for the writer's achievement. In the essay in praise of Karl Kraus, Benjamin writes: "If style is the power to move freely in the length and breadth of linguistic thinking without falling into banality, it is attained chiefly by the cardiac strength of great thoughts, which drives the blood of language through the capillaries of syntax into the remotest limbs." Thinking, writing are ultimately a question of stamina. The melancholic, who feels he lacks will, may feel that he needs all the destructive energies he can muster.

"Truth resists being projected into the realm of knowledge", Benjamin writes in *The Origin of German Trauerspiel*. His dense prose registers that resistance, and leaves no space for attacking those who distribute lies. Benjamin considered polemic beneath the dignity of a truly philosophical style, and sought instead what he called "the fullness of concentrated positivity"—the essay on Goethe's *Elective Affinities*, with its devastating refutation of the critic and Goethe biographer Friedrich Gundolf, being the one exception to this rule among his major writings. But his awareness of the ethical utility of polemic made him appreciate that one-man Viennese public institution, Karl Kraus, a writer whose facility, stridency, love of the aphoristic, and indefatigable polemic energies make him so unlike Benjamin.<sup>16</sup>

The essay on Kraus is Benjamin's most passionate and perverse defence of the life of the mind. "The perfidious reproach of being

<sup>15</sup> Letter to Adorno (No. 260 in the *Briefe*), written from Paris on May 31, 1935.

<sup>16</sup> Benjamin had his Krausian side in reviews. See his "Left-Wing Melancholy", written the same year (1931) as the Kraus essay, a withering pan of a volume of poems by Erich Kästner, which pillories—through Kästner—shallow, philistine melancholy. Translated in *Screen*, Vol. 15, No. 2, Summer 1974.



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