

Walter Benjamin, Flâneur: A Flanerie · Sven Birkerts

The collector destroys the context in which his object was only part of a greater, living entity, and since only the uniquely genuine will do for him he must cleanse the object of everything that is typical about it. The figure of the collector as old fashioned as that of the flâneur, could assume such eminently modern features in Benjamin because history itself—that is, the break in tradition which took place at the beginning of this century—had almost relieved him of this task of destruction and he only needed to bend down, as it were, to select his precious fragments from the pile of debris.

—Hannah Arendt, *Walter Benjamin: 1892-1940*

THE WRITER MYSTERIOUSLY exceeds his reader—any attempt at true reading confirms this. I say “mysteriously” because the language, the face that we inspect, and which inspects us, originates in the unconscious and is out of reach. It is at once the living source and the core of privacy. Thus, the more complex and profound the writer, the deeper his linguistic roots, the less we are able to throw our nets around the phenomenon—his work—and bind it to us. We respond by looking for ideograms that can encompass it symbolically; we draw out threads where we can and follow them. In the case of a writer as evolved and compacted as Walter Benjamin (to call him a “critic” is to misplace him), the ideogram must be of Byzantine complexity, as subtle and singular as a fingerprint. But he supplies it for us himself: in his essay *A Berlin Chronicle* he refers to his life, and his work, as a labyrinth. And, truly, a labyrinth is very much like a large fingerprint, its runnels deepened into passageways, its fleshy parts raised to wall height. But a labyrinth is not a labyrinth if there is not the possibility of negotiating it successfully, and for this we need a thread. Possibly the most serviceable guide through the passages of Benjamin’s thought is the figure of the flâneur, the wandering observer who confronts the chaos of the modern world as if it were a labyrinth that only he can penetrate.

The style maps the man: Benjamin’s prose style represents as nothing else can the stresses and conflicts in his character and the drive that seeks

to surmount all contrariety. Each sentence is a reconciliation effected between concept and living detail, the difficulty of true speech and the necessity of it, between rigorous logic and the belief that the real contents of life will always flee logic. Reading Benjamin, we feel that here is a man climbing a Matterhorn by incising each step. With each attainment he stops, takes his chisel to the next piece of rock, begins again. Another metaphor comes to mind: Benjamin as both Theseus and Daedalus, the hero over obstacles and the creator of obstacles. The sentences themselves are labyrinths, the meaning that coils through them is a slight but durable filament.

To talk about the *flâneur* in Benjamin's sense—and Benjamin's *flâneur* is a motif, a concept in many ways different from the historical flesh-and-blood stroller who wandered the boulevards and passages of 19th century Paris—we must first remark Benjamin's vision of complexity. For he was a man acutely aware of the world as layered sense. Like the Kabbalists, he spoke in terms of 49 levels of meaning; if something was not difficult it could not be true. Indeed, perception itself was a hermeneutics. Looking at the external world he saw the ramified density of history. The present was at every moment the net result of all that had ever happened. Looking inward he saw the complex ramifications of personal history, the self as net result of every decision and event ever experienced. Small wonder that the simplest act of perception was, for Benjamin, the confrontation of vast networks of complexity. The discovery of meaning through analytic operations was defeated by the sheer multifariousness of relevant detail.

Benjamin's *flâneur* is a response to a world in which sense is disjected, scattered, crystallized in detail. The *flâneur* is the collector and connoisseur of detail. He is a sensibility as opposed to an intelligence. His highest aspiration is to become a medium, a precipitate in which the scattered particles of sense can reconstitute themselves. The original whole (and Benjamin's conceptions are never without their Biblical sense) has been shattered, by time, by history, by the hubris of progress; but the *flâneur*, by drawing together bits and pieces from the rubble, can discover its echo. The *flâneur* is, thus, dedicated to the surveying of space, for it is only in space, in the network of layered particulars, that the successive images of time are concretized. Space exists to take the print of time.

The *flâneur*, Benjamin once wrote, is the priest of the *genius*

loci when that genius has lost its sacred and unique place, when it has become a wandering spirit or homeless voice. It is in the air as a startling image: the poem, then, or Baudelaire's quasi-priestly activity is to recover and inscribe these exilic images, to restore spirit to place, if only in poems.

—G. Hartmann, *Criticism in the Wilderness*

. . . all these things think through me or I through them (for in the grandeur of reverie the ego is quickly lost!); I say *think*, but musically and picturesquely, without quibblings, without syllogisms, without deductions.

—Baudelaire, *Paris Spleen*, translated by Louise Varèse

Stroller, dandy, saunterer, idler, man of the crowd—there is no exact English or, presumably, German equivalent for the word *flâneur*, no single word that can carry the overtones that Benjamin intended. The *flâneur* is a phenomenon specific to Paris—Paris of the 19th century—which, not coincidentally, was the locus of Benjamin's most sustained literary, sociological and historical investigations. Benjamin discovered that in tracking the gradual extinction of the historical *flâneur* he was able to diagram the progress of the "modern": mechanization, urbanization, the incorporation of 'shock' into daily life, and the erosion and withdrawal of spirit ('aura') from the interaction of man and his environment. The processes were correlate. Benjamin's studies (especially his unfinished work on Paris in the 19th century) are, in a sense, projections of the principle of natural selection upon the human sphere. The *flâneur*, as the delicate vessel of sensibility, was not constituted for survival.

For Benjamin the *flâneur* is at once a genuine historical manifestation and a personal emblem, the representation of a sympathetic sensibility. The two are not to be confused. The historical *flâneur* was already an extinct species in Benjamin's day. But this did not prevent him from appropriating the term for his own uses, or from viewing his own peregrinations as "flaneries." But what we must keep in mind is that Benjamin's *flâneur emblem* is to a large extent a construct, a collection of attributes—real and imagined—around a vanished historical entity. By excerpting the *flâneur* from the past, by projecting his image upon modern urban life, Benjamin conferred a shock upon the word. He turned a phenomenon into a type, a mask.

To the historical flâneur belonged certain traits, a specific self-conscious style: he was idle, whimsical (Nerval was seen walking a lobster on a leash on the streets of Paris), casual. He celebrated the gratuitous, the serendipitous. His leisure, particularly in 19th century France, presupposed a sound economic base. But the flâneur was not a dandy. In spite of certain shared attributes, flâneur and dandy were quite different. The dandy represented the elevation of class distinction into style; his detachment was a deliberate underscoring of the prerogatives accorded to lineage and wealth. The flâneur, on the other hand, represented an elevation of values into style. He was the protest of spirit in the face of encroaching materialism, of human time in the face of artificial acceleration. Thus, he made a cult of the materially useless. His prized possession was the observation, the insight.

Baudelaire's descriptions of the painter Constantin Guys are the finest characterizations of the type:

I would willingly call him a dandy and for that I would have a sheaf of good reasons; for the word 'dandy' implies a quintessence of character and a subtle understanding of all the moral mechanisms of this world; but, from another aspect, the dandy aspires to cold detachment, and it is in this way that M. G., who is dominated, if ever anyone was, by an insatiable passion, that of seeing and feeling, parts company trenchantly with dandyism.

To be away from home and yet to feel at home anywhere; to see the world, to be at the very center of the world, and yet to be unseen of the world, such are some of the minor pleasures of those independent, intense and impartial spirits, who do not lend themselves easily to linguistic definitions Thus the lover of universal life moves into the crowd as though into an enormous reservoir of electricity. He, the lover of life, may also be compared to a mirror as vast as this crowd; to a kaleidoscope endowed with consciousness, which with every one of his movements presents a pattern of life It is an ego athirst for non-ego

If in a shift of fashion, the cut of a dress has been slightly modified, if clusters of ribbons and curls have been dethroned

by rosettes, if bonnets have widened and chignons have come down a little on the nape of the neck, if waistlines have been raised and skirts become fuller, you may be sure that from a long way off his eagle's eye will have detected it.

We may rest assured that this man . . . has a nobler aim than that of the pure idler, a more general aim, other than the fleeting pleasure of circumstance. He is looking for that indefinable something we may be allowed to call 'modernity' . . . The aim for him is to extract from fashion the poetry that resides in its historical envelope, to distil the eternal from the transitory.

—from *The Painter of Modern Life*
translated by P. E. Charvet

If we simply change 'fashion' to 'phenomena' we will have secured the primary function of Benjamin's flâneur.

It is not always easy to disentangle the image of the original crowd-walker from the overlay of attributes and values that Benjamin has conferred upon it. Benjamin's rendering of the flâneur, for instance, emphasizes the cognitive possibilities of his "style." But Benjamin was fully aware of this distortion. When he speaks of the flâneur he is speaking not so much of his historical manifestation as of his latent possibilities. These are equally vital to the concept, and equally real. And it is by developing and extending these latent possibilities that Benjamin is able to identify himself with the flâneur. It was, for him, a necessary identification—it clarified his psyche to himself. Benjamin's interest in the flâneur, and his conception of himself as flâneur, was part of a process of self-reconciliation. His sense of failure, peripherality, his inability to do the right academic thing, these were gathered into an intellectually acceptable image, attached to a type with some historical precedent. The image of the flâneur gave a certain fashionable legitimacy to Benjamin's socially marginal predilections: wandering, collecting, observing. Likewise, it made his self-exemption from marital and familial responsibilities appear less an indication of failure than of resolve: the flâneur *wants* to preserve his peripherality, it is the basis of his existence. By highlighting the unique virtues of the flâneur—virtues established as such by Benjamin himself—he was, in effect, making a case for his own persistent nonconformity.

Still, it would be a mistake to identify Benjamin completely with the flâneur. There is a sense in which the flâneur represents everything that Benjamin is not, as if the image were a carefully elaborated alter-ego. The flâneur, for example, was at home on the street, at ease in the depths of the metropolis. Benjamin was not. He was a timid, civilized, fastidious man. He yearned for ease but could not have it. The flâneur moved freely in all directions on the societal grid. Benjamin's ventures always represented approaches to the threshold, the Other, the forbidden. To gauge the kind of tension he experienced—tension between his nature and his desire—we have only to consider this passage from his essay *Hashish in Marseilles*:

The music that meanwhile kept rushing and falling, I called the rush switches of jazz. I have forgotten on what grounds I permitted myself to mark the beat with my foot. This is against my education, and it did not happen without inner disputation.

There were boundaries and borders everywhere for Benjamin. In some cases they were class lines. But these he set out topographically. Certain streets or districts represented the forbidden. The precincts of the poor he always associated with vice and prostitution. For Benjamin, crossing class lines was a spatial exercise, a way of exacerbating the tension between the self and the Other. He writes: "... the places are countless in the great cities where one stands on the edge of the void." The void is, of course, internal. And crossing these boundaries—in one case he speaks of a sensation of "trembling and sweet fear."

The idleness of the flâneur represents a calculated affront to the time=money equation that was institutionalized with the advance of technology and the organization of the labor process. His gait was a sign of his mockery. Benjamin (whose own gait writer Max Rychner described as "at once advancing and tarrying, a strange mixture of both") typically raises this to the status of an epistemological problem. In *Theses on the Philosophy of History* he writes: "The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again." The flâneur, whose idleness is the result of his peculiar reorganization of sensibility, is the only one who, as Hannah Arendt observes, "receives the message." The implications are profound, two-sided: it is not just the aptitude of the flâneur, it is the character of reality itself. Idleness

becomes a pre-requisite for cognition. Or, more accurately, idleness sponsors indirection, and indirection proves to be the only access to certain aspects of the truth. Not only is the flâneur's casual progress a form of protest, it is an evolved adaptation to the complexity of transformed urban life.

Given Benjamin's assumption—that "the true picture of the past flits by" and that data vital to understanding are concretized in scattered details and inaccessible to immediate inspection—what then is the flâneur's tactic of cognition? To say that he is a reader of signs and a correlator of particulars presupposes that there is something to be read, a hidden picture. And, indeed, this is the very conviction (or longing) that underlies and animates Benjamin's thinking. He believed, as did Kafka, that an order once whole has been broken up and scrambled; a metaphysical reality once present to man is now concealed in fragments. The prototype is, of course, the hubris at Babel and the ensuing disaster: the one true language was deformed into countless different tongues. What prevents Benjamin's vision of the situation from being entirely hopeless (as it is in Kafka) is the belief that the scattered pieces still possess some residual attraction for one another, that the original reality could theoretically be re-discovered. The flâneur, because he has abandoned the hierarchy of accepted values and modes of perception, is the medium through which the original connections and relations have a chance to disclose themselves. His task is three-fold: to gather detail, to remain sensitive to all possible correlations, and to refrain from judgment or the imposition of theoretical constructs.

. . . the failure of the systematic thinker constitutes the true triumph of the master of hermeneutics who, in 'reading' the things of the world as if they were sacred texts, suddenly decodes the overwhelming forces of human history.

—Peter Demetz, Introduction to *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, by Walter Benjamin.

'Decoding' is one way to think of it. If we take up the original analogue of the labyrinth, then we can think of 'reading' as the process of tracing a thread. This is more appropriate, I think, for decoding suggests understanding in the form of sudden revelation, a form Benjamin would probably have rejected. Hannah Arendt characterizes the process less dramatically:

What fascinated him [Benjamin] about the matter was that the spirit and its material manifestations were so intimately connected that it seemed permissible to discover everywhere Baudelaire's correspondences, which clarified and illuminated one another if they were properly correlated, so that they finally would no longer require any interpretive or explanatory commentary. He was concerned with the correlation between a street scene, a speculation on the stock exchange, a poem, a thought, with the hidden line that holds them together and enables the historian or philologist to recognize that they must all be placed in the same period.

—Walter Benjamin: 1892-1940

This obsession with proper correlation found expression as well in Benjamin's lifelong fantasy: to assemble a book consisting entirely of quotations from his readings, the pieces selected and arranged in such a way that they would make a seamless whole. The fantasy is nothing less than the flâneur's original desire—to assemble the true picture of history (and, thereby, the present)—projected onto the image of a book. It incorporates neatly the whole secondary realm of Benjamin's flâneries, those that took as their field the vast territories of the printed word.

Ideally speaking, then, the flâneur sets himself up as a kind of neutral medium through which the hidden connections between phenomena reveal themselves. Practically speaking, however, the various relations are seldom self-announcing; the flâneur must exercise his highly intuitive discrimination. He must know which detail "speaks" and he must have some sense about how it may relate to another. This already suggests some prior intuition of form or pattern on his part. And where might this originate? Second-guessing Benjamin, I would say that the flâneur—indeed, every person—possesses some prelapsarian residue, and that the discovery of external pattern is connected to the uncovering of the concealed essence within. This should not sound too foreign—it is precisely Plato's theory of knowledge as *anamnesis*.

Finding and relating, this is the sum and substance of the flâneur's obscure art. The process is, of course, complex. On one level there are relations across the surface; that is, the relation of detail to detail, like to like, the forging of connections among disparate entities. On another level there is the relation of detail to cause, manifestation to underlying phenomenon, or, in Marx's terms, superstructure to infra-

structure. Benjamin's unfinished 'Arcades' project, provisionally entitled *Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century*, was to be the apotheosis of his method, a study of the the origins of 'the modern' that would combine the flâneur's ambient perspective with the more rigorous methodology of Marxist "science."

Hausmann's urban ideal was of long perspectives of streets and thoroughfares. This corresponds to the inclination, noticeable again and again in the nineteenth century, to ennoble technical necessities by artistic aims. The institutions of the secular and clerical dominance of the bourgeoisie were to find their apotheosis in a framework of streets. Streets, before their completion, were draped in canvas and unveiled like monuments. Hausmann's efficiency is integrated with Napoleonic idealism. The latter favors finance capital. Paris experiences a flowering of speculation. Playing the stock exchange displaces the game of chance in forms that had come down from feudal society. To the phantasmagorias of space to which the flâneur abandons himself, correspond the phantasmagorias of time indulged in by the gambler . . .

—*Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century*

Benjamin submitted portions of the 'Arcades' project to his friend Theodor Adorno at the Institute for Social Research. Adorno's carefully-worded reply indicates that Benjamin's Marxist formulations were anything but orthodox:

This, I think, brings me to the centre of my criticism. The impression which your entire study conveys—and not only on me and my arcades orthodoxy—is that you have done violence to yourself. Your solidarity with the Institute, which pleases no one more than myself, has induced you to pay tributes to Marxism which are not really suited to Marxism or to yourself. They are not suited to Marxism because the mediation through the total social process is missing, and you superstitiously attribute to material enumeration a power of illumination which is never kept for a pragmatic reference but only for theoretical construction.

—letter, November 10, 1938

Adorno's statement underscores the fact that Benjamin's mode of

relating detail to structure could not be assimilated entirely to Marxist methodology. It is too impressionistic and favors the suggestiveness of details over the rigors of causal explanation. But we must keep in mind that Benjamin's purpose is not to explain history—he wants to arrange its concrete details in such a way that it will enunciate itself and disclose its true patterns. Benjamin is not committed to a Hegelian march of reason and the eventual emancipation of mankind implicit. His vision of futurity—and therefore his whole vision of history—is deeply penetrated by the teleology of Judaic messianism. In his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, written one year before his death, he presents this image of the angel of history (based upon Klee's drawing *Angelus Novus*):

His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.

To relate Benjamin's vision of history to his practice of prospecting for the telling detail would require a major excursus. Suffice it to say, for the present, that while his method of correlation resembled that of Marxist practice in some ways, Benjamin was in no sense attempting a thoroughgoing material analysis of history. He was, as the following passages show, too much alert to the singular, tactile actuality of his surroundings; he could not refrain from the 'enumeration' that Adorno chides him for.

Benjamin's Flaneries:

Travel by streetcar in Moscow is above all a tactical experience. Here the newcomer learns perhaps most quickly of all to adapt himself to the curious tempo of this city and to the rhythm of its peasant population. And the complete interpenetration of technological and primitive modes of life, this world-historical experiment in the new Russia, is illustrated in miniature by a streetcar ride. The conductresses stand

fur-wrapped in their places like Samoyed women on a sleigh. A tenacious shoving and barging during the boarding of a vehicle usually overloaded to the point of bursting takes place without a sound and with great cordiality. (I have never heard an angry word on these occasions.) Once everyone is inside, the migration begins in earnest. Through the ice-covered windows you can never make out where the vehicle has just stopped. If you do find out, it is of little avail. The way to the exit is blocked by a human wedge. Since you must board at the rear but alight at the front, you have to thread your way through this mass. However, conveyance usually occurs in batches; at important stops the vehicle is almost completely emptied. Thus even traffic in Moscow is to a large extent a mass phenomenon.

—*Moscow*, 1927

In their materials, too, the street decorations are closely related to those of the theater. Paper plays the main part. Red, blue, and yellow fly-catchers, altars of colored glossy paper on the walls, paper rosettes on the raw chunks of meat. Then the virtuosity of the variety show. Someone kneels on the asphalt, a little box beside him, and it is one of the busiest streets. With colored chalk he draws the figure of Christ on the stone, below it perhaps the head of the Madonna. Meanwhile a circle has formed around him, the artist gets up, and while he waits beside his work for fifteen minutes or half an hour, sparse, counted-out coins fall from the onlookers onto the limbs, head, and trunk of his portrait. Until he gathers them up, everyone disperses, and in a few moments the picture is erased by feet.

—*Naples*, 1924

Suburbs. The farther we emerge from the inner city, the more political the atmosphere becomes. We reach the docks, the inland harbors, the warehouses, the quarters of poverty, the scattered refuges of wretchedness: the outskirts. Outskirts are the state of emergency of a city, the terrain on which incessantly rages the great decisive battle between town and country. It is nowhere more bitter than between Marseilles and the

Provençal landscape. It is the hand-to-hand fight of telegraph poles against Agaves, barbed wire against thorny palms, the miasmas of stinking corridors against the damp gloom under the plane trees in brooding squares, short-winded outside staircases against the mighty hills.

—*Marseilles*, 1929

For Benjamin the historical appearance of the flâneur coincided meaningfully with the transformation of social life in 19th century France. Indeed, the latter determined the former. The bases for this transformation were to a large extent economic and political, but Benjamin directed his attention less to their underlying structure, more to their conspicuous manifestation in public life. Changing architecture, the appearance of the first arcades, the widening of the streets, the dramatic increase in traffic, new forms of public entertainment—these developments were all linked. And in this public arena the flâneur appeared as a kind of warning light: what was in danger was the life of the spirit. The flâneur was a moral protest, a figure of witness. He was made necessary by the dramatic extrusions in the material realm. But these same extrusions finally brought about his eclipse. As the material forces increased, his social position changed from the marginal to the absurd. The disproportion between values had stripped the relationship of its tension. Paris outgrew the flâneur; the man of the crowd was overwhelmed by the crowd.

The greater the share of the shock factor in particular impressions, the more constantly consciousness has to be alert as a screen against stimuli; the more efficiently it does so, the less do these impressions enter experience, tending to remain in the sphere of a certain hour in one's life.

—*On Some Motifs in Baudelaire*

Benjamin saw the adaptation to modern life as a schooling in shocks. He places the concept of shock at the very center of his analysis. And here, for him, is the importance of Baudelaire. Baudelaire was the last fighter, the last flâneur—he sacrificed himself in the effort to parry the shocks of modern life. “He indicated the price for which the sensation of the modern world may be had: the disintegration of aura in the experience of shock.” ‘Shock’ we may define as the collision of the adaptive faculties and the stimuli of a rapidly changing environment.

'Aura,' an essential Benjamin term, designates authenticity, an original or primary relation of man to his world, or, more precisely, the product of a relation in which the perceived object "has the ability to look at us in return." The presence of aura is the guarantor of the sacredness of experience. As shocks increase and intensify, the possibilities for genuine perception and a genuine relation of the self to the world diminish. The flâneur was only meaningful so long as he could sustain or represent the genuine perception or response. Baudelaire's was the last stand; the *Fleurs du Mal* are to be read as an elegy.

Benjamin's appropriation of the image of the flâneur for himself was to some extent an ironic gesture. He knew that the harmony between man and his world had been all but irreparably violated. But it was precisely this knowledge—this hopelessness—that forced him to effect a major transformation. Moving from the objective to the subjective, he brought the flâneur sensibility to bear upon the inside life. And thus, the flâneur becomes a bridge connecting Baudelaire to Proust; and Benjamin's autobiographical *A Berlin Chronicle* can be read as his complex mediation of these two figures.

The key insight and connection point is to be found in Benjamin's discussion of aura in the Baudelaire essay. He writes:

To perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return. This experience corresponds to the data of the *mémoire involontaire*.

It was Proust who, drawing upon the philosophy of Henri Bergson, articulated the distinction between voluntary and involuntary memory. Voluntary memory, habit-conditioned, depending upon the projection of a chain of cause and effect upon one's own past, has no bearing upon the real 'lived' contents. It represents the destruction of the aura of the past; its premise is explanation. Involuntary memory, on the other hand, obeying laws of its own, ignoring every command of the will, is our sole means of contact with the real experience of the past. As Samuel Beckett wrote in his essay *Proust*:

Involuntary memory is explosive, 'an immediate, total and delicious deflagration.' It restores, not merely the past object, but the Lazarus that it charmed and tortured, not merely Lazarus and the object, but more because less, more because it abstracts the useful, the opportune, the accidental, because

in its flame it has consumed Habit and all its works, and in its brightness revealed what the mock reality of experience never can and never will reveal—the real.

Thus, just as the flâneur, by virtue of his lingering walk and his radically dissociated sensibility, is able to garner in its particularity the “true picture of the past,” so only a susceptibility to the grace-like workings of the involuntary memory could return to the individual the genuine experience, or aura, of his personal past. What Benjamin writes about the historical past (*Theses on the Philosophy of History*) is virtually identical to the Proustian formula: “The past can be siezed only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again.” Underlying both is the presupposition that the life of the past concentrates its essences into detail. Only thus can the taste of the madeleine cake unfold a forgotten world around the narrator Marcel. And just as there is no telling *when* the involuntary memory will yield its hoard, so there is no knowing which stray detail will bear the impress of a world.

The only record we have (at least in English) of Benjamin’s *flanerie interiore* is his piece *A Berlin Chronicle* which was written in the late 1930’s. It is a remarkable document, not only because of its dense, compacted style and its temporal montage effects, but also because of what it reveals to us of Benjamin. The sixty pages of text are all but unpopulated: what memory has restored to him are the images and sensations of space. The paradox is significant. Benjamin’s flâneur, perambulating space, discovers time; Benjamin, casting his net back into time, discovers space. As space bears crystals of time, so time itself proves to have crystallized into space. Nothing could be farther from Proust’s experience. In *Remembrance of Things Past* the restored world is rich with emotion and the delicate shadings of personality. *A Berlin Chronicle* is as barren as a moonscape. In this respect, curiously, it recalls Osip Mandelstam’s autobiographical memoir *The Noise of Time*—also a sequence of precisely rendered interiors that are all but unpopulated. Psychologists might find something to ponder in the convergence: both memoirs were left by intellectually and linguistically precocious sons of well-to-do Jewish families. Mandelstam: 1891-1938; Benjamin: 1892-1940.

One of the curious features of *A Berlin Chronicle* is that, despite the static character of each section, the progression and organization of the

specific memories suggest that the material was not consciously called to mind, but that it was, in fact, given by the *mémoire involuntaire*. If this was the case, we are left with pressing psychological questions. Is this depopulated image of the past a result of repressive energies? How else could active emotion crystallize so completely into the static pictures of places and things? Whence the need for repression? The questions can be fairly raised, but given the paucity of evidence about Benjamin's early life, I do not think that they can be satisfactorily answered.

I have long, indeed for years, played with the idea of setting out the sphere of life—bios—graphically on a map. First I envisaged an ordinary map, but now I would incline to a general staff's map of a city center, if such a thing existed . . . I have evolved a system of signs, and on the grey background of such maps they would make a colorful show if I clearly marked in the houses of my friends and girlfriends, 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 I saw filled, the sites of prestigious cafes whose long-forgotten names daily crossed our lips, the tennis courts where empty apartment blocks stand today, and the halls emblazoned with gold and stucco that the terrors of dancing classes made almost the equals of gymnasiums.

—*A Berlin Chronicle*

The passage speaks for itself, as does the following, where Benjamin is referring to the suicide of his close friend, the poet Fritz Heinle:

No matter how much memory has subsequently paled, or how indistinctly I can now give an account of the rooms in the Meeting House, it nevertheless seems to me today more legitimate to attempt to delineate the outward space the dead man inhabited, indeed, the room where he was 'announced,' than the inner space in which he created.

A pronouncement of this kind only makes sense if we keep in mind the aesthetics of indirection practiced by the *flâneur*. But even so the contradiction is not resolved. It is, finally, the contradiction that stands

at the heart of Benjamin's work, at the Minotaur's place in the labyrinth: that a man so vulnerable to the real should spend his life so doggedly—and by way of such intricate mental maneuvering—in pursuit of it. His whole intellectual effort was aimed at devising a position that would enable him to dispense with intellectuality. He wanted desperately to get his hands on the real. The flâneur was his chosen emblem because the flâneur moved about in the world unencumbered by concepts. But in adapting the emblem to his needs Benjamin could not but turn it into a concept as well. And so, Benjamin's flâneur is in many ways the opposite of the original man of the crowd: he is the subtlest of mental constructs, the divinatory creature who wants the redemption of pure meaning, meaning anterior to all mental constructs.

Note: Two collections of Benjamin's essays are presently available in this country: *Illuminations*, edited and with an introduction by Hannah Arendt, translated by Harry Zohn, 1968, Harcourt, Brace. *Reflections*, edited and with an introduction by Peter Demetz, translated by Edmund Jephcott, 1978, Harcourt, Brace.