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Condition: Critical

Outside, it is a wintry morning in Berlin in 1900. Inside, the maid has put an apple to bake in the little oven at eight-year-old Walter Benjamin's bedside. Perhaps you can imagine the fragrance, but even if you can, you won't be able savour it with the manifold associations that Benjamin experienced when he memorialised the scene thirty-two years later. That baking apple, Benjamin wrote in his memoir *Berlin Childhood Around 1900*, extracted from the oven's heat

> the aromas of all the things the day had in store for me. So it was not surprising that, whenever I warmed my hands on its shining cheeks, I would always hesitate to bite in. I sensed that the fugitive knowledge conveyed by its smell could all too easily escape me on the way to my tongue. That knowledge which sometimes was so heartening that it stayed to comfort me on my trek to school.[1]

But comfort was quickly displaced: at school he was overtaken by 'a desire to sleep my fill . . . I must have made that wish a thousand times, and later it actually came true. But it was a long time before I recognised its fulfilment in the fact that all my cherished hopes for a position and proper livelihood had been in vain'.[2]

So much of Walter Benjamin is in this vignette, starting with the cursed Adamantine apple, whose aromas prefigure his expulsion from childhood Eden, which in turn prefigures his adult exile from Germany into picaresque vagabondage and tragic death on the run from the Nazis aged forty-eight in 1940. There is the vulnerable figure

who struggles to impose himself on the difficult world beyond the charmed, fragrant bedroom. There is the melancholic who gets what he wants (sleep) only when it is irredeemably associated with the frus- tration of other wishes. There is the jump-cut (from bed to school, disenchanted adulthood) echoing the modernist writing techniques he brought to his 1928 book *One-Way Street* and prefiguring the championing, in his 1936 essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', of cinematic montage and its revolution- ary potential. In particular, there is in Benjamin's remembrance of his childhood at the beginning of the twentieth century the very strange counterintuitive critical move that he makes again and again in his writings – namely to tear events out of what he called the continuum of history, to look back and mercilessly expose the delusions that sustained earlier eras, to retrospectively detonate what, at the time, looked natural, unproblematic, sane. He may have looked as though he was nostalgically basking in an idyllic childhood made possible by daddy's money and the work of hired help, but really he was figura- tively putting sticks of dynamite into its foundations and, indeed, the Berlin of his early years. There is also in this memoir of a lost child- hood much of what made this great critic and philosopher so impressive and influential to the mostly younger, fellow German Jewish intellectuals who worked for the Institute for Social Research – or what has become known as the Frankfurt School. Although Benjamin was never on the School's staff, he was its most profound intellectual catalyst.

Like many of the childhood homes of the leading members of the Frankfurt School, the comfortable, bourgeois apartments and villas in the west of Berlin that Emil, a successful art dealer and antiquarian, and Pauline Benjamin lived in were the fruits of business success. Like the Horkheimers, the Marcuses, the Pollocks, the Wiesengrund-Adornos and other families of assimilated Jews from which the thinkers of the Frankfurt School came, the Benjamins lived in unprec- edented luxury amid the Wilhelmine pomp and pretension of the rapidly industrialising early twentieth-century German state.

That was one reason Benjamin's writings resonated so profoundly for many of the leading members of the Frankfurt School: they

shared his privileged, secular Jewish background in the new Germany and, like him, rebelled against the commercial spirit of their fathers. Max Horkheimer (1895–1973), the philosopher, critic and, for more than thirty years, director of the Institute for Social Research, was the son of a textile factory owner in Stuttgart. Herbert Marcuse (1898–1979), the political philosopher and darling of the 1960s student radicals, was the son of a well-off Berlin businessman and was raised as an upper-middle-class youth in a Jewish family integrated into German society. The father of the social scientist and philosopher Friedrich Pollock (1894–1970) turned away from Judaism and became a successful businessman as the owner of a leather factory in Freiburg im Breisgau. As a boy, the philosopher, composer, music theorist and sociologist, Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno (1903–1969), lived in an ease comparable to that of the young Walter Benjamin. His mother, Maria Calvelli-Adorno, had sung opera and his father, Oscar Wiesengrund, was a successful assimilated Jewish wine merchant in Frankfurt, from whom, as the historian of the Frankfurt School Martin Jay puts it, '[Theodor] inherited a taste for the finer things in life, but little interest in commerce'[3] – a remark that applies to several members of the Frankfurt School who were dependent on their fathers' commerce but queasy about becoming contaminated by its spirit.

The Frankfurt School's leading psychoanalytical thinker, Erich Fromm (1900–1980), was slightly different from his colleagues, not because his father was only a moderately successful travelling fruit-wine salesman based in Frankfurt, but because he was an Orthodox Jew who served as cantor in the local synagogue and carefully observed all the Jewish holidays and customs. But Fromm certainly shared with his colleagues a temperamental distaste for Mammon and a rejection of the world of business.

Henryk Grossman (1881–1950), at one point the Frankfurt School's leading economist, had his childhood home in Krakow, in what was then a Galicia colonised by the Austrian Habsburg Empire. It was materially lavish thanks to the work of his father, a bar owner who had become a successful small industrialist and mine owner. Henryk's biographer, Rick Kuhn, writes that: 'The prosperity of the Grossman

family buffered it from the consequences of social prejudices, political currents and laws that discriminated against Jews.[4] Many of the Frankfurt School's leading thinkers shared that buffering in their childhood, though none of course were spared discrimination entirely, especially when the Nazis came to power. That said, Grossman's parents, though assimilated into Krakow society, ensured that their sons were circumcised and registered as members of the Jewish community: there were limits to assimilation.

All were intelligent men, alive to the irony of their historical situation, namely that it was thanks to the business acumen of their fathers that they were able to choose the life of critical writing and reflection, even if those writings and reflections were Oedipally fixated on bringing down the political system that had made their lives possible. The comfortable worlds in which these men had been born and raised may well have seemed to childish eyes eternal and secure. But while Benjamin's memoir was an elegy to one of those worlds – the materially sumptuous world of his childhood – it also revealed the unbearable truth that it was neither eternal nor secure, but rather had existed only briefly and was doomed to disappear. The Berlin of Benjamin's childhood was a recent phenomenon. The city that had been a relatively provincial Prussian backwater only half a century earlier had by 1900 arguably supplanted Paris as mainland Europe's most modern city. Its rage for reinventing itself and erecting very nearly bombastic architecture (the Reichstag building, for instance, opened in 1894) stemmed from the swaggering self-confidence that came from the city becoming capital of the newly unified Germany in 1871. Between then and the turn of the century Berlin's population rose from 800,000 to two million. As it grew, the new capital was modelled on the city it sought to supplant in grandiosity. The Kaiser-Galerie that connected Friedrichstrasse and Behrenstrasse was an arcade modelled on those of Paris. Berlin's Paris-style grand boulevard, the Kufürstendamm, was newly developed when Benjamin was a boy; the city's first department store at Leipziger Platz opened in 1896, apparently modelled on Au Bon Marché and La Samaritaine, the grand temples to shopping that had opened in Paris more than half a century earlier.

In writing his childhood memoir, Benjamin was attempting something that might on the face of it seem merely a nostalgic escape from a difficult adulthood, but on closer inspection appears as a revolutionary act of writing. For Benjamin, history was not, in Alan Bennett's words, one fucking thing after another, just a sequence of events without sense. Rather, narrative sense had been imposed on those events – that was what made them history. But imposing meaning was hardly an innocent act. History was written by the victors and its triumphalist narrative had no place for losers. To tear events out of that history as Benjamin did and set them in other temporal contexts – or what he would call constellations – was both a revolutionary Marxist act and also a Jewish one: the former because it sought to expose the hidden delusions and exploitative nature of capitalism; the latter because it was inflected with Judaic rituals of mourning and redemption.

Crucially, then, what Benjamin was doing involved a new conception of history, one that would break with the belief in the kind of progress that capitalism took to be an article of faith. In this, he was following Nietzsche's critique of historicism, that soothing, triumphalist, positivistic sense that the past could be scientifically apprehended as it was. In German idealist philosophy, that belief in progress was underpinned by the dialectical, historical unfolding of the Spirit. But that historicist fantasy erased elements of the past that didn't fit the narrative. Benjamin's task was therefore to retrieve what had been consigned to oblivion by the victors. The subversive Benjamin, then, aimed at breaking through this widespread amnesia, shattering this delusive notion of historical time, and awakening those who lived under capitalism from their illusions. Such a breakthrough was, he hoped, what would result from what he called 'a new, dialectical method of history'.[5] For this method, the present is haunted by the ruins of the past, by the very detritus capitalism had sought to airbrush from its history. Benjamin scarcely wrote in Freudian terms of the return of the repressed, but that is what his project sets in motion. That's why, for example, in *Berlin Childhood* he recalled as a little boy visiting something called the Kaiserpanorama in a Berlin arcade. The panorama was a dome-like apparatus that presented stereoscopic

images of historical events, military victories, fjords, cityscapes, painted on a circular wall that trundled slowly around the view- audience. Modern critics have drawn a parallel between such panora- mas and today's multiplex cinematic experience, and Benjamin would doubtless have appreciated the comparison: the way in which exam- ing an obsolete technology-driven form of entertainment that we once the last word can make us reflect on a later technology with sim- lar pretensions.

The Kaiserpanorama had been built between 1869 and 1873 and now was consigned to obsolescence. But not before its final audiences, mainly children, had appreciated it, especially when it was raining outside. 'One of the great attractions of the travel scenes found in the Kaiserpanorama', Benjamin wrote, 'was that it did not matter where you began the cycle. Because the viewing screen, with places to sit before it, was circular, each picture would pass through all the stations . . . [E]specially towards the end of my childhood, when fash- ion was already turning its back on the Kaiserpanorama, one got used to taking the tour in a half empty room.'[6] For Benjamin, it was such out-of-date things, as well as the aborted attempts and abject failures that had been erased from the narratives of progress, that drew his critical attention. His was a history of the losers, not just of defeated humans, but of expendable things that, back in the day, had been the last word. So when he recalled the Kaiserpanorama he wasn't merely indulging in bittersweet reminiscence of what he did one rainy after- noon in his childhood, but doing what he often did in his writings – studying the overlooked, the worthless, the trashy, the very things that didn't make sense within the official version of history but which, he maintained, encoded the dream wishes of the collective consciousness. By way of recovering the abject and obsolete from historical oblivion, Benjamin sought to awaken us from the collective dream by means of which capitalism had subdued humanity.

The Kaiserpanorama had once been the newest thing on the scene, a projection of utopian fantasies as well as a projector of them too. By the time little Walter visited the panorama, it was heading for the scrap heap of history. It was, as the grown-up Benjamin realised while writ- ing his reminiscences, an allegory of the delusions of progressive

history: the panorama revolves endlessly, its history being repetition, precluding real change. Like the notion of progressive history itself, the panorama was a phantasmagoric tool to keep its spectators subdued, passive and fatuously dreaming, longing (as did Walter when he visited) for new experiences, distant worlds and diverting journeys; for lives of endless distraction rather than confrontation with the realities of social inequality and exploitation under capitalism. Yes, the Kaiserpanorama would be replaced by newer, better technologies, but that was what always happened under capitalism: we were always confronting the new, never turning our gaze to contemplate the fallen, the obsolete, the rejected. It was as if we were the torture victim in *A Clockwork Orange* or Dantesque denizens in some ring of hell, doomed to keep consuming the newest commodities for eternity.

Writing his childhood memoirs, then, was for him part of a more general literary project that was also a political act. A political act that was the basis for the Marxist-inflected, multidisciplinary work called critical theory that Benjamin's fellow German Jewish intellectuals would undertake during the twentieth century in the face of the three great (as they saw it) benighted triumphalist narratives of history delivered by the faithful proselytisers for capitalism, Stalinist communism and National Socialism.

IF CRITICAL THEORY means anything, it means the kind of radical re-thinking that challenges what it considers to be the official versions of history and intellectual endeavour. Benjamin initiated it, perhaps, but it was Max Horkheimer who gave it a name when he became the director of the Frankfurt School in 1930: critical theory stood in opposition to all those ostensibly craven intellectual tendencies that thrived in the twentieth century and served as tools to keep an irksome social order in place – logical positivism, value-free science, positivist sociology, among others. Critical theory stood in opposition, too, to what capitalism in particular does to those it exploits – buying us off cheaply with consumer goods, making us forget that other ways of life are possible, enabling us to ignore the truth that we are ensnared in the system by our fetishistic attention and growing addiction to the purportedly must-have new consumer good.

When Benjamin recalled a childhood winter's morning in 1900, then, he may initially have seemed to be lost in reverie over his privileged childhood, but in reality he was writing like a Marxist, albeit a very oddball one. The new morning and the new century into which little Walter was lured into consciousness by the sweet aromas made possible by a woman's work in 1900 seemed to promise lovely possibilities and material security, but they were exposed by Benjamin as illusions. 'Capitalism,' he once wrote, 'was a natural phenomenon with which a new dream-filled sleep came over Europe, and, through it, a reactivation of mythic forces.'[7] The aim of his writing aim was to shake us from those dogmatic slumbers. The world his parents had established in their villa in West Berlin needed to be exposed: it was a life that seemed secure, permanent and natural, but which in fact was based on complacency combined with a ruthless exclusion of those who didn't fit the triumphalist narrative, notably the poor.

He described, for instance, his birthplace in a large apartment in a then elegant district south of Berlin's Tiergarten, choosing to write in the third person, perhaps as a distancing technique to suggest the communist writer's alienation from his earlier self: 'the class that had pronounced him one of its number resided in a posture compounded of self-satisfaction and resentment that turned it into something of a ghetto held on lease. In any case, he was confined to this affluent quarter without knowing of any other. The poor? For the rich children of his generation, they lived in the back of beyond.'[8]

In a section of a *Berlin Childhood* called 'Beggars and Whores,' he described encountering a poor man. Until that moment for little Walter, the poor had existed only as beggars. But then, as if to prove the point that only by writing could he truly experience something, he recalled doing a little piece of writing, 'perhaps the first I composed entirely for myself', about a man who distributes leaflets and 'the humiliations he suffers in encountering a public that has no interest in his literature':

> *So the poor man (this is how I ended it) secretly jettisons the whole pack of leaflets. Certainly the least promising solution to the problem. But at the same time I could imagine no other form of revolt than*

> *sabotage – something rooted, naturally, in my own personal experience, and to which I had recourse whenever I sought escape from my mother.*[9]

Projecting on to a struggling worker the modes of protest he had deployed against an overbearing mother may hardly count as the most sophisticated form of revolt for someone who would become a self-styled communist, but Benjamin's youthful if limited empathy was at least a start. He was repeatedly drawn into reflections on how his privileged childhood was premised on a ruthless airbrushing of the unpalatable and the unfortunate, and how its bourgeois security involved a monstrous, more or less intentional, act of forgetting of what lay beyond the lowered blinds of the family's apartments. In *A Berlin Chronicle*, for instance, a series of newspaper articles from the 1920s that predate the writing of *Berlin Childhood*, Benjamin remembered the sense of bourgeois security that suffused his family's apartment:

> Here reigned a species of things that was, no matter how compliantly it bowed to the minor whims of fashion, in the main so wholly convinced of itself and its permanence that it took no account of wear, inheritance, or moves, remaining forever equally near to and far from its ending, which seemed the ending of all things. Poverty could have no place in these rooms where even death had none.[10]

In his last essay, Benjamin wrote: 'There is no document of civilisation that is not at the same time a document of barbarism.'[11] That sense of the repression of the unacceptable, the embarrassing, the awkward, of the ideological disappearing of that which doesn't fit the master narrative, had come early to him and remained with him lifelong: barbarism for, Walter Benjamin, began at home. And the Frankfurt School, too, was committed to uncovering the barbarism that they thought underpinned capitalism's putative civilisation, even if they didn't excavate it quite so assiduously in their own families as did Benjamin.

Certainly, his childhood sounds as though it teemed with consumer durables, as though his parents were unwitting victims of what Marx

called the fetishism of commodities, expressing their faith in the profane religion of capitalism through protracted bouts of shopping, accumulating the articles that their son would imaginatively repurpose both as a child and as a Marxist adult. 'Around him,' write his biographers, 'was a multifarious *Dingwelt*, a world of things appealing to his well nurtured imagination and omnivorous imitative abilities: delicate china, crystal, and cutlery that emerged on festive days, while antique furniture – large, ornate armoires and dining tables with carved legs – readily served in games of masquerade.'[12] At thirty-two years' remove, Benjamin wrote of how little Walter pierced this sumptuous surface, describing for example a table laid out for a lavish dinner: 'As I gazed at the long, long rows of coffee spoons and knife rests, fruit knives and oyster forks, my pleasure in this abundance was tinged with anxiety, lest the guests we had invited would turn out to be identical to one another, like our cutlery.'[13] An insightful thought: when the Frankfurt School thinkers and other leading Marxists such as György Lukács considered the nature of reification under capitalism, they would worry that persons as much as cutlery became commodities, compelled to bow before the all-consuming principle of exchange, dehumanised and endlessly substitutable for articles of equivalent value.

But what particular need prompted Walter Benjamin in 1932 to write about his childhood in Berlin at the turn of the century? To be sure, he returned again and again in his writings during the 1920s and 1930s to those childhood scenes that fired his imagination. But, in the summer of 1932 in particular, he memorialised his childhood in the first draft of what became *Berlin Childhood Around 1900*, in order to satisfy a very specific psychic need and, moreover, to satisfy it in a particularly strange way. That summer he was wandering around Europe, keeping away from Berlin, finally pitching up in the Tuscan seaside resort of Poveromo.[14] The Berlin of his childhood was poised to disappear, the Jews and communists of the city murdered or forced into exile by the Nazis. Benjamin had the misfortune to be both a Jew and a communist. *Berlin Childhood* was written, then, as Benjamin suggested in its introduction, as 'it became clear to me that I would have to bid a long, perhaps lasting farewell to the city of my birth.'[15]

Nostalgia is typically decadent, delusive and conservative, particularly when it involves an adult looking back on childhood. But Benjamin's nostalgia for his Berlin childhood at the turn of the century was that of a revolutionary Marxist and, even more importantly, that of a Jew seeking to give the traditional Judaic rituals of mourning and remembrance a new twist. The Marxist critic and Benjamin scholar Terry Eagleton recognised as much when he wrote that:

> Today, nostalgia is almost as unacceptable as racism. Our politicians speak of drawing a line under the past and turning our back on ancient quarrels. In this way, we can leap forward into a scrubbed, blank, amnesiac future. If Benjamin rejected this kind of philistinism, it was because he was aware that the past holds vital resources for the renewal of the present. Those who wipe out the past are in danger of abolishing the future as well. Nobody was more intent on eradicating the past than the Nazis, who would, like the Stalinists, simply scrub from historical record whatever they found inconvenient.[16]

There was work to be done on the past: for the Nazis it involved scrubbing and airbrushing; for Benjamin it was the delicate spadework of the archaeologist. 'Memory is not an instrument for surveying the past but its theatre,' he wrote in *Berlin Childhood*. 'It is the medium of past experience, just as the earth is the medium in which dead cities lie buried. He who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging. Above all, he must not be afraid to return again and again to the same matter; to scatter it as one scatters earth, to turn it over as one turns over soil.'[17] This is what Benjamin did: he returned again and again to the same scene, digging through layers of repression until he got to the treasure.

'Remembering was not merely an inventorying of the past', writes his biographer Esther Leslie. 'Memory's significance depended on the strata that smothered it, right up to the present, the moment of and place of their rediscovery. Memory actualises the present.'[18] There was, in other words, what Benjamin was to call in *The Arcades Project*, a 'now of recognisability'[19] – as if the significance of things long buried could only be recognised much later. We look to the past, in part, to

understand the now. For instance, as Benjamin reminisced about his boyhood in the 1920s and 1930s, he returned again and again to one particular childhood scene in which his father Emil came into five-year-old Walter's bedroom:

> He had come to say goodnight to me. It was perhaps half against his will that he gave me the news of a cousin's death. The cousin had been an older man who did not mean a great deal to me. My father filled out the account with details. I did not take in everything that he said. But I did take special note, that evening, of my room, as though I were aware that one day I would again be faced with trouble there. I was well into adulthood when I learned that the cause of the cousin's death had been syphilis. My father had come by in order not to be alone. He had sought out my room, however, and not me. The two of them could have wanted no confidant.[20]

Benjamin excavated and re-excavated this scene: in different drafts for *Berlin Childhood Around 1900* and its precursor, *Berlin Chronicle*, he wrote about it four times, each time focusing on different aspects. Here and elsewhere the premonitions of the child and the knowledge of the grown man remembering his past in writing bring past and future together in a dialectical relationship. Only as he wrote his reminiscences could he understand the full significance of why his father had visited him in his bedroom; only as an adult did the event have a now of recognisability.

This obsessive remembrance of childhood makes one think of one of Benjamin's favourite writers, Marcel Proust, and in particular another bedroom scene at the start of *À la recherche du temps perdu* in which another privileged little boy – neurotic, Jewish, Victorian, obsessive Marcel – sits awaiting his beloved mother's goodnight kiss. 'We know that in his work Proust did not describe life as it actually was', wrote Benjamin in his essay 'The Image of Proust', 'but a life as it was remembered by the one who had actually lived it. And yet even this statement is imprecise and far too crude. For the important thing for the remembering author is not what he experienced, but the weaving of his memory, the Penelope work of recollection.'[21] Benjamin

thus seized on Proust's notion of *mémoire involontaire*, the work of spontaneous recollection contrasting with the purposive recollection of *mémoire volontaire*. Benjamin took dreams to be key in such remembrance. 'When we awake each morning we hold in our hands, usually weakly and loosely, but a few fringes of the tapestry of lived life, as loomed for us by forgetting', he wrote in the same essay. 'However, with our purposeful activity and, even more, our purposive remembering each day unravels the web and the ornaments of forgetting. This is why Proust finally turned his days into nights, devoting all his hours to undisturbed work in his darkened room with artificial illumination, so that none of those intricate arabesques might escape him.'[22]

It was when Proust tasted a Madeleine dipped in a tisane that his childhood was opened up in hitherto unyielding detail. It was through such moments that what Benjamin called 'Proust's blind, senseless, frenzied quest for happiness'[23] could be realised. Benjamin, as he recalled the aroma of baked apple, may seem at first reading to be engaged in a similar quest to save his childhood from the ravages of time, but in truth he was engaged upon something stranger. Proust's search for 'lost time' was undertaken to escape from time altogether; Benjamin's project was aimed at putting his childhood in a new temporal relationship with the past. As the literary scholar Peter Szondi puts it, Proust's 'real goal is escape from the future, filled with dangers and threats, of which the ultimate one is death'. Benjamin's project is different and, to my mind, less delusive: there can be no inoculation nor escape, ultimately, from death. 'In contrast, the future is precisely what Benjamin seeks in the past. Almost every place that his memory wishes to rediscover bears "traces of what was to come" as he puts it . . . Unlike Proust, Benjamin does not want to free himself from temporality; he does not wish to to see things in their ahistorical essence.'[24] Rather, in looking into the past, and finding there the forgotten, the obsolete, the allegedly irrelevant, Benjamin sought not just to redeem the past by means of the kind of revolutionary work of nostalgia Terry Eagleton liked, but to redeem the future. 'The past', Benjamin wrote in 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', 'carries with it a secret index by which it is referred to

redemption.'[25] Benjamin's task, as critical archaeologist, was to recover and decipher that index.

In this, what he was doing was very Jewish. Proust, himself a great Jewish writer, had sought to redeem his childhood from the ravages of time by taking it, through the novel's imaginative work, out of the continuum of history. Benjamin found inspiration in that project, but his memoir had a different purpose. He was seeking to understand himself and his historical condition as a function of capitalism's class system through meditating on his privileged childhood. For Proust, memory was a means of recreating bliss, of stopping time's arrow; for Benjamin, the act of remembrance through writing had a palimpsestic, dialectical character that raced backwards and forwards in time, weaving temporally disparate events together in what he called the Penelope work of memory.

But *Berlin Childhood* was supposed to do something more in Benjamin's estimation – to be a kind of spiritual prophylactic against what was to come, the Nazi takeover of his homeland and the exile that would most likely entail. 'Several times in my inner life,' he wrote in the book's introduction,

> 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 autobiographical but the necessary social irretrievability – of the past.[26]

When one first reads this, it's hard not to think that the project seems hopeless, more likely to infect and enfeeble a troubled exile than steel him against the rigours to come; or at least to resemble more putting one's finger into a wound and stirring it rather than helping the process of healing. True, philosophers in adversity sometimes strive to gain solace by contemplating happier times – consider the philosopher Epicurus, who wrote to a friend saying that on this, the last day of his

life, he was in excruciating pain from kidney stones and unable to urinate, but was nonetheless cheerful because 'the recollection of all my philosophical contemplation, counterbalances all these afflictions'.[27] Philosophical detachment had, or so Epicurus claimed, overcome the pain caused by kidney stones.

But Benjamin's project of self-inoculation against suffering is weirder than Epicurus'. For a start, he is aware that recalling the past is apt to encourage a longing for that happier time, a longing that cannot be realised. Epicurus overcomes the effects of physical pain through philosophical detachment; Benjamin seems bent on overcoming the psychic pain of loss and homesickness through a different crypto-Marxist kind of detachment. Not for Walter Benjamin the Proustian project of satisfying longing by taking childhood out of time through writing and thereby making it imperishable. Rather, for him the images of homesickness he evokes in his memoir are meant to make him realise that what is lost is lost, and that meditating on the irretrievability of his childhood will – somehow – soothe him and inoculate him against suffering.

But there is an important twist: Benjamin was writing, as he noted, not about the contingent, autobiographical nature of loss – a loss, after all, that each one of us experiences as we grow up and look back, perhaps fondly, to the childhoods that we will never again live through, except by means of the relatively pallid movement of imaginative recreation. Rather, he is writing about the necessary social irretrievability of the past, by which he means to reflect, as a Marxist historical materialist, on the loss, not just of his, Walter Benjamin's, privileged childhood, but on the loss of the world that sustained it. This was what made Benjamin's lovely memoir so exquisitely suggestive to the leading lights of the Frankfurt School, since it evoked a lost world of material comfort for secular Jews in that new-born German Empire of the last years of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth, a world that had seemed permanent and stable to childish eyes but which Benjamin revealed as having, a little like summer's lease in Shakespeare's sonnet, all too short a date.

There was, then, no Proustian escape from lost time for Benjamin, merely the consolation – if that's the right word – of meditating on the

necessity of loss. Theodor Adorno, Benjamin's friend and arguably the Frankfurt School's greatest thinker, wrote the most insightful words about Benjamin's memoir, suggesting that it 'laments the irretrievabil-ity of what, once lost, congeals into an allegory of its own demise'. Fine, but how is one supposed to find solace or inoculation from such a lament? How to inoculate oneself from past and future woes by recalling a more materially secure past forever obliterated? The project seems esoteric, counter-productive and yet, at the same time, compel-lingly subversive and political. Benjamin sought succour from the remembrance but also discovered its opposite – that his childhood was precarious, a little world that tottered even as it seemed secure before it collapsed entirely.

What's also odd about Benjamin's memoirs of childhood as he remembered and re-remembered it in his writings is that he increas-ingly purges them of people. In *A Berlin Chronicle* of 1924 he revisited family and schoolfriends from a quarter of a century earlier. But with *Berlin Childhood Around 1900*, written in 1932, his remembrances become like the literary equivalent of a neutron bomb – purging people, and filling their places with things. It was a baked apple, the loggias of his grandmother's apartment block, the Victory column in Berlin's Tiergarten that triggered his associations, that opened up his past, that served his needs in Poveromo. In his essay on Proust he wrote that *À la Recherche* 'has at its centre a loneliness which pulls the world down into its vortex with the force of a maelstrom'. As Eiland and Jennings put it, Proust's novel involves for Benjamin the 'transfor-mation of existence into a preserve of memory centred in the vortex of solitude'.[29] Benjamin's memoirs have a similar tenor. You could read these remembrances believing he was what he was not, an only child. His parents are mute presences (apart from the image of his father uttering threats and curses into the telephone when the complaints department was on the line). And the portrait of his childhood is one in which the sitter scarcely appears, his presence taken by objects.

'Everything in the courtyard became a sign or hint to me', Benjamin wrote in a section of *Berlin Childhood* entitled 'Loggias'. 'Many were the messages embedded in the skirmishing of the green roller blinds drawn up high, and many the ominous dispatches that I prudently left

unopened in the rattling of the roll-up shutters that came thundering down at dusk.'[30] But this depopulated memoir, which could be read as an elegy to the fetishised commodities of his parental home, is more apparent than real. Each object contains the ghost of human presence, a history, the heat of attachment.

Frankfurt School thinkers were serially impressed by the way things carry the heat of our attachment to persons. Adorno, years later, was to write of the potency of objects, of how the libidinal cathexis of one's attachment to a beloved person can be replicated in our attachment to non-human objects. 'The more second person atti-tudes a subject can attach to this same object in the course of its libidinal cathexis', wrote the current director of the Frankfurt School, Axel Honneth, of Adorno's account in his essay *Reification*, 'the more rich in aspects the object will ultimately appear in its objective real-ity.'[31] Adorno was convinced it was possible to speak of recognition with non-human objects, a conviction that Benjamin surely shared. But in this memoir, Benjamin wasn't merely drawing up an inventory of the treasure trove of the past:

> the man who merely makes an inventory of his findings, while failing to establish the exact location of where in today's ground the ancient treasures have been stored up, cheats himself of his richest prize. In this sense, for authentic memories, it is far less important that the investiga-tor report on them than that he mark, quite precisely, the site where he gained possession of them. Epic and rhapsodic in the strictest sense, genuine memory must therefore yield an image of the person who remembers, in the same way a good archaeological report not only informs us about the strata from which its findings originate, but also gives an account of the strata which first had to be broken through.[32]

As Benjamin dug into his past, he was revealing himself to himself: he wasn't just recording the past, but actualising the present. That said, it is important to recognise that he was recording the past, in particular a past in which privileged boys were born and raised in families of materially successful, mostly secularised, Jewish businessmen in the years leading up to the First World War. From that privileged

position, then, Walter Benjamin and the Frankfurt School sought to indict what had made that privileged position possible. In developing the multidisciplinary intellectual movement called critical theory, they indicted, too, the values for which their fathers' stood.

When the critic T. J. Clark reviewed Benjamin's posthumously published, uncompleted *The Arcades Project* – a great wreck of a book teeming with data about the phantasmagoric nature of consumer capitalism in Paris in the nineteenth century that Benjamin had laboriously written onto cards in the French capital's Bibliothèque Nationale – he noted that 'there was from the beginning a shadow spreading across the notecards, of a larger, more wonderful study in which all the great dreams of his father's generation, and his father's father's, would be related and denounced'.[33] That book never got written by Benjamin, but the impulse to write it remained. 'We have to wake up from the existence of our parents', he wrote in *The Arcades Project*.[34] But why? Arguably because some of the most ardent of capitalism's faithful were the fathers of the Frankfurt School's leading thinkers. As a result, the troubles Benjamin and many of the Frankfurt School scholars had with their fathers during their childhoods and adolescence, which we will turn to in the next chapter, were crucially important to the way in which critical theory developed during the twentieth century.