



# *The Sound of Memory: Thoughts on Benjamin's Berliner Chronik*

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1. On April 7 1932, Walter Benjamin boarded the steam freighter *Catania* in Hamburg, *en route* to Barcelona. From Barcelona, Benjamin made his way to the Island of Ibiza, where his friends the Noeggeraths were waiting for him. In 1932, Ibiza appeared to Benjamin archaic and pristine:

The most remote of places [ ... ] cut off from the world and civilization [ ... ] (*die Insel wirklich seitab des Weltverkehrs und auch der Zivilisation*). Just as farming and animal husbandry are still carried on here in an archaic manner (*Wie Ackerbau und Viehzucht hier noch archaisch betrieben werden*) – there are not more than four cows on the whole island, as the peasants keep to their tradition of goats, no agricultural machinery to be seen and the irrigation of the fields is done as it was centuries ago with water scooped up by wheels turned by mules (*die Bewässerung der Felder wie vor Jahrhunderten durch Schöpfräder geschieht*) – so the interiors are also archaic: three chairs against the wall opposite the entrance confront the visitor with aplomb and gravity, as if there were three Cranachs or Gauguins on the wall; a sombrero hung on the back of a chair creates more effect than precious Gobelin tapestries. (Benjamin, letter to Gerhard Scholem, 22 April 1932. *Briefe*, Band 2, 1966: 548, English translation by Anthony Stephens.).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Benjamin, Walter, *Briefe*, Band 2, (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1966), p. 548. English translation by Anthony Stephens.

In the tranquillity of the house that he rented for “one mark and eighty”, Benjamin found the space and serenity to start sketching one of his most illuminating reflections on time: *Berliner Chronik (A Berlin Chronicle)*.

The late 1920s and early 1930s had proven quite taxing and traumatic for Benjamin. He had recently divorced from his wife Dora and, as a result, he had virtually lost all of his material property, including most of his beloved library. He moved from rented flat to rented flat and his famous love for travelling, which continued incessantly even in these troublesome years, increasingly became a form of escapism. In travelling, Benjamin was not only finding refuge from a personal life in disarray but also from a highly volatile and menacing political situation. It is rather fitting and quite just – in a life otherwise characterised by gross miscalculations and bad luck – that the money Benjamin needed to travel to Ibiza came to him thanks to Goethe’s anniversary celebrations and the work Benjamin produced in honour of the occasion. In effect, Benjamin’s life as a wandering and exiled intellectual began to take shape and form in those early years of the 1930s. Far from coincidentally, Benjamin felt the need to pause during this unsettled period and to write once again about his childhood and Berlin. He conceived of this work not only as a gift to his son Stephan but also as a kind of intellectual and spiritual will.

2. Benjamin’s recollection of his childhood in Berlin for his son Stefan is interspersed with many qualifications and clarifications. The narrative is so often interrupted by haphazard and strategically inconsistent explanations (one, for instance, would assume that methodological claims should be made at the beginning of a text), that there is no way of knowing whether such provisos are for the benefit of Stefan or Benjamin himself, or whether they are in fact not explanatory at all but rather integral parts of the narrative; memories themselves, fragments of the same rhapsodic song.

One of the most important digressions occurs a third of the way into the narrative and deserves to be quoted in its entirety:

Reminiscences (*Erinnerungen*), even extensive ones, do not always amount to an autobiography. And these quite certainly do not, even for the Berlin years that I am exclusively concerned with here. For autobiography has to do with time, with sequence and what makes up the continuous flow of life. Here, I am talking of space, of

moments and discontinuities (*Hier aber ist von einem Raum, von Augenblicken und vom Unstetigen die Rede*). For even if months and years appear here, it is in the form they have at the moment of recollection. This strange form – it may be called fleeting or eternal (*man mag sie flüchtig oder ewig nennen*) – is in neither case the stuff that life is made of. And this is shown not so much by the role that my own life plays here, as by that of the people closest to me in Berlin – whoever and whenever they may have been. The atmosphere of the city that is here evoked allots them only a brief, shadowy existence. They steal along its walls like beggars, appear wraithlike at windows, to vanish again, sniff at thresholds like a *genius loci*, and even if they fill whole quarters with their names, it is as a dead man’s fills his gravestone. Noisy, matter-of-fact Berlin, the city of work and the metropolis of business, nevertheless has more, rather than less, than some others, of those places and moments when it bears witness to the dead, shows itself full of dead; and the obscure awareness of these moments, these places, perhaps more than anything else, confers on childhood memories a quality that makes them at once as evanescent and as alluringly tormenting as half-forgotten dreams.<sup>2</sup>

The transparency of Benjamin’s discourse on the temporal narratives of reminiscence and autobiography, and their dissimilarities, must be regarded with caution. The main difference between autobiography and the peculiar kind of reminiscence Benjamin writes in *A Berlin Chronicle* lies in the contrast between the temporal structure of the former and the spatial structure of the latter. Whereas autobiography is made of a “continuous flow of life” (*den stetigen Fluß des Lebens*), Benjamin’s reminiscence comprises “moments and discontinuities”. This is clearly true if an autobiography is narrated in a linear fashion consonant with the unfolding of life. In this case individual segments, the “moments” (*Augenblicken*) Benjamin speaks of, are linked chronologically to describe a clear beginning, middle and end. Such an autobiography is the sewing together of temporal individualities, whose orchestration is delegated to the sequential continuity of linear time. Each segment is understood and interpreted in the context of a community of segments whose very

<sup>2</sup> Benjamin, Walter, *Reflections*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken Books, 1978), p. 28.

communality is decreed by a chronological hierarchy. Each part makes sense not so much by virtue of its being as such as by virtue of its belonging to a greater whole in which its essence is measured in relation to what follows or proceeds.

In this kind of autobiography, an isolated “moment” is meaningless and pointless. What is important is the dependent relationship of the part and the whole, and while the part is necessary for the whole, it is also irrelevant without the whole. Autobiography, in the sense given to it by Benjamin, is a narrative that wishes to possess a temporal fragment by knowing it in the context of a community of temporal fragments. An individual fragment is not possessed in relation to the knowing of it *as such*, but to the knowing of the whole within which each fragment sacrifices its own specificity and unique meaning. Is this the price that must be paid to achieve the intelligibility of life and, more generally, the intelligibility of history?

In *A Berlin Chronicle* Benjamin chooses the opposite path. He narrates segments in their individuality; he narrates moments as such by wresting them away from a temporal continuity and casting them into space. What one sees, therefore, is not the whole rolling in an uninterrupted narrative before the eyes, but rather snippets, glimpses of life crystallised in their spatial masks. In other words, what Benjamin tells is nothing other than remnants of time, postcards from the past whose incompleteness can only evoke or suggest their becoming, their coming forward in presence. In possessing these “discontinuities” we must also learn to renounce the whole, in the sense Martin Heidegger gives to the word “renunciation.”<sup>3</sup> What I mean is that in saying the moments we renounce the whole by singing it into presence. This possession is also the knowledge of the halo, of that which exists in the “death mask” of its incompleteness. We can perhaps now understand better Benjamin’s emphasis on the “now” and place Giorgio Agamben’s important remark on Benjamin’s temporality into context:

Instead of the nullified present (*il presente nullificato*) of the metaphysical tradition, Benjamin posits a ‘present which is not a transition, but in which time stands still and has come to a stop (*si tiene immobile sulla soglia del tempo*)’. Instead of the social democratic and historicist notion of the historical progress of humankind, which

‘cannot be sundered from the concept of its progression through a homogeneous empty time’, he puts forward the revolutionaries’ ‘awareness that they are about to make the continuum of history explode’. Against the empty, quantified instant, he sets a ‘time of the now’ (*un temporale*), *Jetzt-Zeit*, construed as a messianic cessation of happening, which ‘comprises the entire history of mankind in an enormous abridgement.’<sup>4</sup>

The “past of the now”, as narrated in *A Berlin Chronicle*, has exactly the same function as the “time of the now”. In fact, Benjamin’s critique of the “nullified present of the metaphysical tradition” is really the critique of a nullified time; a time robbed of its moments as independent entities. In this nullified time, moments are forced to roll into each other in the service of the whole; they ultimately vanish into the blur of a temporal crowd. The sacrifice of the moment is the celebration of the whole and its general (because assembled) truth as opposed to the truth of the specific. The long perspective of the whole, its historical length and longevity, is at the base of its power but it is also the cause of its profound limitations.

If the whole – the history of Western thought, for instance – provides us with a sense of general grounding, it also betrays the inevitable vulnerability of this very grounding. This vulnerability lies precisely in the potential inaccessibility and unintelligibility of one or more of its originally constitutive parts, for instance the essence of ancient Greek thought. If it is true that the whole is produced by individual moments, and their subsequent sacrifice, it is also true that the whole may continue to be even when one of these moments and its original essence have become blurred, uncertain. Similarly our life “goes on”, and autobiography can be written, even in the irreparable absence of some of the individual moments that made it. And yet, as Benjamin reminds us, “...it is to cheat oneself of the richest prize to preserve as a record merely the inventory of one’s discovery...”<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Heidegger, Martin, *On the Way to Language*, trans. Peter D. Hertz (San Francisco: Harper, 1982), pp. 139.

<sup>4</sup> Agamben, Giorgio, *Infancy and History The Destruction of Experience*, trans. Liz Heron (London & New York: Verso, 1993), p. 102

<sup>5</sup> Heidegger, Martin and Fink, Eugen, *Heraclitus Seminar*, trans. Charles H. Seibert (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993), p. 102.

3. In *Heraclitus Seminar*, Heidegger, Fink and the participants were confronted by the opposite problem. They had fragments of Heraclitus' work but could not fit them into the context of the whole. How could they make sense of what they believed to be one of the key notions in Heraclitus's writing, *tà pánta* ("the universe", "everything"), and its relation to being, *en*, if all they had to work on were only the remnants of a larger and irretrievably lost narrative?

*Participant*: If we attempt to make clear to ourselves the meaning of *tà pánta* starting from a fragment, can't we revert to Fr. 50 in which it is said, 'Everything is one?'

*Heidegger*: But everything we have of Heraclitus' fragments is not the whole, is not the whole Heraclitus.<sup>6</sup>

Heidegger's frustration and delight, his sharp and also *quasi*-exultant reply, is an interesting mixture of despondency and excitement in the face of a typical hermeneutical circularity. The participants' predicament is compounded by the fact that the whole of Western thought is rather tentative in its dealing with this moment of ancient Greek thought: "From Martin Heidegger's dialogues with the Greeks", writes Fink, "in many of his writings, we can learn how the furthest becomes near and the most familiar becomes strange, and how we remain restless and are unable to rely on a sure interpretation of the Greeks. For us, the Greeks signify an enormous challenge."<sup>7</sup> *Heraclitus Seminar* is interesting and instructive, because it is a practical instance of present thought and present thinkers questioning the remains of the past in search of a wholeness that can only exist through and because of its parts. As such, *Heraclitus Seminar* and the methodological approach adopted for this journey of discovery, for this digging away, sheds light on and assist us in our endeavour to understand the difference between the meaning of autobiography and reminiscence in Benjamin's *A Berlin Chronicle*.

*A Berlin Chronicle* is not an autobiography simply because it is not supported and subsumed by a given, present before us whole, whose main traits are carefully connected and explained temporal segments, generating union and harmony. What the *Chronicle* lacks is the orchestrating subjectivity – as historicity – of autobiographical writings. In its place Benjamin provides discontinuities and fragments. If Heraclitus' are

<sup>6</sup> Heidegger & Fink, *Heraclitus Seminar*, p. 17.

<sup>7</sup> Heidegger & Fink, *Heraclitus Seminar*, p. 3.

fragments of thought, linguistic remains, Benjamin's fragments are visual memories, and if the transposition of Heraclitus' fragments into contemporary thought and language begins from a grasping of the "spiritual views" underpinning them, similarly Benjamin's translation of memories into language must commence from thinking temporal gaps and shadows. To make the affinities between the methodology applied in the *Heraclitus Seminar* and Benjamin's reminiscences in *A Berlin Chronicle* stand out once and for all, we need to look closely at the distinction that Fink makes between philology and "spiritual view" on the one hand, and, on the other, at Benjamin's distinction between mnemonic stuff and the "stuff that life is made of". In *Heraclitus Seminar* Fink writes thus:

Our seminar should be an exercise in thinking, that is, in reflection on the thoughts anticipated by Heraclitus. Confronted with his texts, left to us only as fragments, we are not so much concerned with the philological problematic, as important as it might be, as with advancing into the matter itself, that is, toward the matter that must have stood before Heraclitus's spiritual view. This matter is not simply on hand like a result or like some spoken tradition; rather, it can be opened up or blocked from view precisely through the spoken tradition. It is not correct to view the matter of philosophy, particularly the matter of thinking as Martin Heidegger has formulated it, as a product lying before us. The matter of thinking does not lie somewhere before us like a land of truth into which one can advance; it is not a thing that we can discover and uncover.<sup>8</sup>

Let us recall now this passage in *A Berlin Chronicle*: "Here, I am talking of a space, of moments and discontinuities. For even if months and years appear here, it is in the form they have at the moment of recollection. This strange form – it may be called fleeting or eternal – is in neither case the stuff that life is made of." Benjamin's visual memories are a by-product of the present in which they are remembered and, most importantly, they are not individual parts of an assembled whole. They are not like life, which proceeds sequentially and then puts things together chronologically, following a linear progression. Rather, they are moments crystallised in their fleeting yet eternal memorability, a series of unchangeable, detailed "nows", Their precision, their exactness as such is matched by the

<sup>8</sup> Heidegger & Fink, *Heraclitus Seminar*, p. 3

uncertain, fuzzy and also unavailable surroundings. They are “shadows”, names on “gravestones”, echoes of a larger existence that spills over as their very own halo.

Perhaps the most appropriate metaphor for the fragments of a thinker long gone is that of sound. What perceptible truth remains can be thought of as a sound that once carried a precise meaning made up of space, time, landscapes, language – in a word, life.. And yet, what is left as a fragment is not life, but a sound the resounding of which is the form we give to it “now”. How could philology, the life of language turned back upon itself, its rewound history, regain the totality of a whole life to us? It may perhaps bring forward other parts, other sounds, other shadows of the whole. The whole as such remains concealed, but in remaining so it “releases us”, in the words of Fink, “to the matter that merits being named the matter of thinking.”<sup>9</sup> Similarly, the concealed past *releases us to the matter that merits being named the matter of memory* and relates it to the matter of life.

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<sup>9</sup> Heidegger & Fink, *Heraclitus Seminar*, p. 3.

# The Pattern of Creation

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## Creativity and Personality

We know a surprising amount about the nature of individual creativity. During the twentieth century, the empirical cognitive psychology of creation established a comprehensive list of attributes of creative personalities.<sup>1</sup> As a result, we can say with some confidence that creative individuals are a mirror of the nature of creation. Creation is best described as a union of opposites. This is its most enduring hallmark. Creative personalities are literal embodiments of this universal trait of creative action. They are often walking contradictions. They combine enthusiastic energies with the capacity for quiet concentration. They are predictive and insightful while displaying naïve, even credulous, wonderment at things. They are playful but disciplined, imaginative but grounded, responsible and irresponsible in turns. They mix extroverted and introverted, sociable and anti-social traits. Creative individuals are often lacking in courtesies and social manners, yet have close long-term intellectual friends and peers to whom they relate on the most generous and intimate terms.

About their own work, they are both humble and proud. They treat it with enthusiastic reverence and dispassionate, even brutal, objectivity. They are persons of wide interests and expansive curiosities yet they are persistent, even obsessive, about pursuing defined intellectual goals. Creative personalities are adventurous, even thrill-seeking, but for a point. At the highest level, “the point” is to bridge apparently unbridgeable divides. The ambition, say, to unify Einstein’s theory of relativity with quantum mechanics is a classic case in point. Creative personalities are persistent in the face of the “it can’t be done” response to the difficult, even recalcitrant, nature of creative problem-solving. Persistence, translated into social situations, can take the shape of stubbornness and uncooperativeness – and the working of long, anti-social hours. Persistence in creation requires mental discipline, concentration, and focus. The flipside of this

<sup>1</sup> This tradition is epitomised by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Creativity Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996).