

Chapter 1:

Benjamin, Proust and the Rejuvenating Powers of Memory

The impact that Benjamin's fascination with the writings of Marcel Proust had on the development of his ideas in the 1920s and 30s cannot be underestimated. The significance of this fascination (which can be traced in Benjamin's correspondence to the early 1920s) first takes on concrete form in 1925 in his decision to undertake the "enormous task" of translating *Sodom and Gomorrah* (or what Benjamin, in a letter to Gershom Scholem, describes as the "main novel" of Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*).¹ While Benjamin's translation of *Sodom and Gomorrah* was never published, two other volumes of the book which he translated in collaboration with Franz Hessel were released as *Im Schatten der jungen Mädchen* and *Die Herzogin von Guermantes* in 1927 and 1930 respectively.² Throughout this period, the significance of Benjamin's close engagement with Proust's writings is revealed in his correspondence with friends and associates. In the above mentioned letter to Scholem, Benjamin's acknowledgment of the close affinity between Proust's "philosophical perspective" and his own prompts him to describe their relationship as one of "kindred souls". "I am eager to see", Benjamin writes, "whether this feeling will be maintained now that I will be intimately involved with his work".³ In a letter to Rainer Maria Rilke written four months later, the continuation of these feelings is confirmed:

1. This letter to Scholem was written on July 21, 1925. See *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin: 1910-1940*, ed. by Gershom Scholem/Theodor W. Adorno, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press 1994, pp. 277-278. Hereafter referred to as *Correspondence*.

2. Momme Brodersen: *Walter Benjamin: A Biography*, ed. by Martina Davis, London and New York: Verso 1997, pp. 166-168.

3. *Correspondence*, p. 278.

The deeper I delve into the text [*Sodom and Gomorrah*], the more grateful I am for the circumstances that caused it to be entrusted to me! What I have gained from having been so deeply involved with this great masterpiece will in time become very tangible for me.⁴

However, despite Benjamin's own claims about the philosophical affinities between his own ideas and those of Proust, there has been much speculation about the extent to which Benjamin and Proust are in fact "kindred souls". This speculation has, in part, been fuelled by Theodor W. Adorno's account of a conversation he had with Benjamin about the Proust translations. In "On Proust" Adorno writes that Benjamin once told him "that he did not want to read one word more of Proust than he had to translate, because otherwise he would fall into an addictive dependency that would impede him in his own production".⁵

In "Hope in the Past: On Walter Benjamin", Peter Szondi claims that Benjamin's remark can be read not as a confirmation of his felt affinity to Proust, but rather as a sign of trepidation about his concentrated engagement with a work "only apparently similar to his own".⁶ According to Szondi's argument, Proust and Benjamin's shared concern to capture "lost time" (as manifested in *In Search of Lost Time* and "Berlin Childhood around 1900" respectively⁷) obscures "the fact that the intentions of the two works are not only not related but are in fact totally opposed".⁸ Szondi claims that Proust's search for, and experience of lost time (through the conjunction of the past and the present triggered by involuntary memory) is primarily motivated by a desire to "escape from the sway of time itself".⁹ He argues that this desire (the goal of which is to evade the future, and with it death) stands in stark contrast to

4. Ibid., p. 285.

5. Adorno: "On Proust", in: Adorno: Notes to Literature: Volume 2, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann, New York: Columbia University Press 1992, p. 313.

6. Szondi: "Hope in the Past", *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (Spring, 1978), p. 496.

7. Marcel Proust: *In Search of Lost Time* (6 Vols.), London: Vintage 1996. Only the volume and page numbers will be given hereafter. Benjamin: "Berlin Childhood around 1900", in: Benjamin: *Selected Writings*, Vol. 3, ed. by Howard Eiland/Michael W. Jennings, Cambridge, Mass. and London, England: Harvard University Press 2002, pp. 344–386. Hereafter referred to as "Berlin Childhood".

8. "Hope in the Past", p. 496.

9. Ibid., p. 497.

the promise of the future that Benjamin seeks in the past evoked by involuntary memory.

The evidence for such a claim can, in part, be found in the comments of Proust's narrator Marcel in the final volume of the book: *Time Regained*. In a discussion of the effects evoked by the taste of the madeleine (which was the catalyst for his first sojourn into the realm evoked by involuntary memory) Marcel states that the "joy" induced by these "impressions" hinges on their extra-temporality:

A minute freed from the order of time has re-created in us [...] the man freed from the order of time. And one can understand that this man should have confidence in his joy, even if the simple taste of a madeleine does not seem logically to contain within it the reasons for this joy, one can understand that the word 'death' should have no meaning for him; situated outside time, why should he fear the future?¹⁰

As Szondi and others have pointed out, the desire to escape the future by submerging oneself in a timeless, idealised past does not sit comfortably with Benjamin's analysis of the significance of the experience of the past in the present evoked by involuntary memory.¹¹ While Benjamin is not openly critical of Proust in this regard, in his 1929 essay "The Image of Proust", he does point out that there are "rudiments of an enduring idealism" in Proust's writings, but adds that "it would be a mistake to make these the basis of an interpretation".¹² For while the concerns that underpin Benjamin's interest in involuntary memory do differ from those of Proust in certain regards, there are, nonetheless, a number of important similarities between each of their analyses of the "rejuvenating" effects precipitated by an experience of "convoluted time". While Marcel's trepidation about the future is quelled by his encounters with the past, to claim this as the primary motivation behind his search for lost time is to radically undermine the significantly more complex, nuanced conception of the powers of involuntary memory that emerges from the six volumes of *In Search of Lost Time*.

In order to get a fuller sense of the important influence that Proust's writings had on the development of Benjamin's conception of a radical

10. Proust: Vol. 6, p. 225.

11. See also John McCole: Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press 1993, p. 261.

12. Walter Benjamin: "The Image of Proust", in: Benjamin: Illuminations, ed. by Hannah Arendt, London: Fontana Press 1992, p. 206.

historical consciousness, an analysis of Proust's distinction between voluntary and involuntary memory is required. In *In Search of Lost Time*, Marcel argues that the "desiccated" and "insubstantial" images evoked by voluntary memory (which is otherwise referred to as "the memory of the intellect") do not preserve anything of the "reality" of the past. He argues that the true past (which is located "beyond the reach of the intellect") "lies hidden" within "some material object" or "in the sensation which that material object will give us" – the location of which can only be discovered by chance.¹³ This is because the reality of the past consists of impressions (of colours, scents, feelings and sounds) which have been separated by the intellect from the events or moments with which they were associated, because – as Marcel points out – it "could make nothing of them for its own rational purposes".¹⁴ Although excluded from the realm in which they could be voluntarily recalled, Marcel claims that these impressions nonetheless remain "immured as within a thousand sealed vessels", each of which is filled with scents, colours, and temperatures which, when discovered, provide us with "the sensation of extraordinarily diverse atmospheres".¹⁵ For Marcel, the "essential character" of these ephemeral encounters (which, like "a propitious breeze", blow in from the past¹⁶) is that they cannot be recalled at will, and this – he claims – is the "mark of their authenticity".¹⁷

As Benjamin argues in his 1939 essay "Some Motifs in Baudelaire", a comparison can be drawn between Proust's ideas and those elaborated by Sigmund Freud in his 1921 essay "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" (an essay which Benjamin describes in *The Arcades Project* as "probably the best commentary" that exists on Proust's writings¹⁸). In a similar vein to Marcel's analysis of the desiccating function of the intellect, Freud argues that consciousness plays an important role in parrying stimuli from the realm in which they could leave behind an imprint in memory. "The basic formula of this hypothesis", Benjamin writes:

13. Proust: Vol. 1, p. 51. See also Proust's analysis of the differences between voluntary and involuntary memory in his letter to Antoine Bibesco (written in 1912). *Letters of Marcel Proust*, ed. by Nina Curtiss, New York: Random House 1949, pp. 226-227.

14. Proust: Vol. 6, p. 221.

15. Ibid.

16. Proust: Vol. 1, p. 187.

17. Proust: Vol. 6, p. 232.

18. Walter Benjamin: [S2,3], *The Arcades Project*, Cambridge, Mass. and London, England: Harvard University Press 1999, p. 547.

is that ‘becoming conscious and leaving behind a memory trace are processes incompatible with each other within one and the same system’. Rather, memory fragments are ‘often most powerful and most enduring when the incident which left them behind was one that never entered consciousness’. Put in Proustian terms, this means that only what has not been experienced explicitly and consciously, what has not happened to the subject as an experience [*Erlebnis*], can become a component of the *mémoire involontaire*.¹⁹

For Benjamin, the “special achievement” of the intellect can be found in its “function of assigning to an incident a precise point in time in consciousness at the cost of the integrity of its contents”.²⁰ This process not only turns the incident into “a moment that has been lived (*Erlebnis*)” but, in doing so, “sterilize[s it [...] for poetic experience” (“*dichterische Erfahrung*”).²¹ “Experiences”, Benjamin writes, “are lived similarities”. “What is decisive here is not the causal connections established over the course of time” (which characterise the kind of experience designated by the term *Erlebnis*)²², but rather “the capacity for endless interpolations into what has been”.²³ While “a lived event is finite – at any

19. Walter Benjamin: “Some Motifs in Baudelaire”, in: Benjamin: Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism, London and New York: Verso 1997, p. 114.

20. Ibid., p. 117.

21. Ibid., pp. 116–117. See also Benjamin: “Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire”, in: Benjamin: Gesammelte Schriften (7 Vols.), ed. by Rolf Tiedemann/Hermann Schweppenhäuser, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1991, Vol. I.2, p. 614. “The *mémoire volontaire*”, Benjamin writes in *The Arcades Project*, “is a registry providing the object [or incident] with a classificatory number behind which it disappears. ‘So now we’ve been there.’ (‘I’ve had an experience’).” See [H5, 1], p. 211. In a letter to Adorno (written in May, 1940) Benjamin “trace[s] the roots of [his] ‘theory of experience’ to a childhood memory”. “My parents”, Benjamin writes, “naturally took walks with us wherever we spent our summers. There were either two or three of us children. The one I have in mind is my brother. After we had visited one of the obligatory tourist attractions around Freudenstadt, Wengen, or Schreiberhau, my brother used to say, ‘Now we can say that we’ve been there.’ This statement made an unforgettable impression on me.” Correspondence, p. 629.

22. “Experience”, in: Benjamin: Selected Writings, Vol. 2, ed. by Michael W. Jennings/Howard Eiland/Gary Smith, Cambridge, Mass. and London, England: Harvard University Press 1999, p. 553, and “Zur Erfahrung”, in: Benjamin: Gesammelte Schriften, Vol. VI, pp. 88–89.

23. Benjamin: “A Berlin Chronicle”, in: Selected Writings, Vol. 2, p. 603.

rate, confined to one sphere of experience [*des Erlebens*]; a remembered event is infinite, because it is only a key to everything that happened before it or after it”.²⁴

Like Benjamin, Marcel argues that the images of the past which can be voluntarily recalled have been “made arid by the intellect” through and by which they have been filtered and systematised.²⁵ While the “snapshots taken by [his] memory” do not reveal anything of the substance of his trip to Venice, for example, an experience of a very different kind is communicated to him after the event via a chance encounter, in Paris, with an uneven path like the one he had encountered in the baptistery at St.Mark’s.²⁶ For Marcel, what is important about this encounter is not so much the uncanny recurrence of the sensation of bumpy paving stones underfoot, but rather the extent to which this recurrence serves as a trigger for the mood and emotions associated with that time. Marcel’s discovery of an old book, for example, not only reignites within him the memory of reading it as a child, but serves as a catalyst for an encounter with “the brilliant sunshine that prevailed while [he was] reading it”, and the desires and dreams “that were then shaping themselves in his mind”.²⁷

This emphasis on the evocation of feeling and mood (rather than a purely imagistic encounter with the past) plays an important role in Benjamin’s analysis of *In Search of Lost Time*. In his observations on Proust collected in the “Proust-Papiere”, he writes:

[w]hat Proust discovered was that once he had broken open the secret compartment of ‘mood’, what lay inside [...] could be appropriated: this disorderly pile of things [*dies Ungeordnete, Gehäufte*] which we ourselves having [...] faithfully crammed there, had forgotten, and which now overwhelms the person who stands before it, like the man at the sight of a drawer which is stuffed to the brim with useless, forgotten toys. It is this playfulness [*Verspieltheit*] of true life, of which only memory speaks to us, that one must seek in Proust, and make the central point of reflection.²⁸

24. “The Image of Proust”, p. 198. I have modified the English translation of “*ein erlebtes Ereignis*” as “an experienced event” to “a lived event” because the translation of “*erlebtes*” as “experienced” is confusing in this context. See “Zum Bilde Prousts”, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. II.I, p. 312.

25. Proust: Vol. 6, p. 224.

26. *Ibid.*, pp. 217-218.

27. *Ibid.*, pp. 241-242.

28. *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. II. 3, p. 1057. In his 1928 review of a book

This sense of “playfulness” (which is also central to Benjamin’s analysis of the radicality of childhood perception and cognition) is, in his analysis of Proust, entwined with the relationship he draws between involuntary memory and “rejuvenation” (*Verjüngung*).²⁹ Anticipating Benjamin’s fascination with both the child’s capacity for imagination, and his/her refusal to accept the form of something as it exists³⁰, Marcel argues that the rejuvenating power of the impressions evoked by involuntary memory lies in their capacity to evoke a sense of “fresh emotion” and “spiritual renewal”³¹ which could serve as a “starting-point” or “foundation-stone” for the construction of a different kind of existence³². This sentiment is also echoed in “The Image of Proust”, when Benjamin claims that *In Search of Lost Time* is marked by a “constant attempt to charge an entire lifetime with the utmost awareness”³³ – a consciousness which springs from the “shock of rejuvenation” that occurs when “the past is reflected in the dewy fresh ‘instant’”.³⁴

written by Karl Gröber, Benjamin claims that it is amongst the contents of a box of toys that one can find the most important images of one’s life; images for which one “would be willing to give the whole world”. See Benjamin: “Toys and Play”, in: *Selected Writings*, Vol. 2, p. 120. The review is of Gröber’s *Kinderspielzeug aus alter Zeit: Eine Geschichte des Spielzeugs*, Berlin: Deutscher Kunstverlag 1928.

29. In his “Notizen über Proust und Baudelaire”, Benjamin makes a number of references to the rejuvenating powers of memory. See, for example, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. II.3, p. 1063, and “The Image of Proust”, pp. 206–207. It is important to note in this context that the German term for rejuvenation (*“Verjüngung”*) contains within it the word *“jung”* (young) – a term which connects the German word with the process of rendering someone younger than they were previously. In Benjamin’s writings, this association takes on a greater significance when considered in the light of his analysis of the extent to which the experiences evoked by involuntary memory could be said to rejuvenate one’s capacity for imagination (a capacity which, in Benjamin’s writings, is predominantly associated with children).

30. See, for example, Benjamin: “Sammlung von Frankfurter Kinderreimen”, *Gesammelte Schriften*, IV-2, p. 792.

31. See, for example, Proust: Vol. 1, p. 187, and Vol. 6, p. 237.

32. Proust: Vol. 5, p. 294.

33. “The Image of Proust”, p. 207.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 206.

1.1 Benjamin's Childhood Reminiscences

Benjamin's analysis of the significance of the relationship between this "shock of rejuvenation" and the experience of the past in the present evoked by involuntary memory is also manifest in his childhood reminiscences. In both "A Berlin Chronicle" and "Berlin Childhood around 1900", the past as recalled via involuntary memory emerges as a preserve of hope for a different kind of future. According to Scholem, Benjamin started work on "A Berlin Chronicle" in Berlin in January 1932, and in the following months continued to work on it while living in Ibiza.³⁵ As Benjamin explains in a letter written to Scholem in April of that year, his stay on the island was prompted "first and foremost" by his very poor financial situation, and the "strain of inconceivable proportions" engendered by the difficulties associated with making ends meet in Berlin.³⁶ Benjamin completed "A Berlin Chronicle" in Ibiza, and in July travelled to France, where he planned to take his own life in a Hotel in Nice. In a letter to Scholem (written on July 26) Benjamin describes the "profound fatigue"³⁷ that had overcome him as a result of the political events in Germany which were "preparing the way for Hitler's assumption of power"³⁸ – the impending consequences of which Benjamin was facing "with a grimness verging on hopelessness".³⁹ However, despite the mood of despair which pervades his letters of this period, Benjamin did not take his life, but travelled instead to Italy and Berlin, where he worked – until the end of the year – on "a series of sketches

35. Gershom Scholem: *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*, Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America 1981, p. 181.

36. Correspondence, pp. 389-390.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 395.

38. "Chronology", *Selected Writings*, Vol. 2, p. 844. The situation is described by the editors of Benjamin's *Selected Writings* as follows: "On July 20, 1932, Franz von Papen, who had been German chancellor for only a month, suspended the democratically elected Prussian government, naming himself 'Imperial Commissar for Prussia' and preparing the way for Hitler's assumption of power. Benjamin was all too aware of the immediate and possibly future results of Germany's political demise. By the end of July he had already, as a Jew, received a letter from the building-safety authorities ordering him to abandon his apartment because of alleged code violations; his radio work had also been brought to a halt by the dismissal of the left-leaning directors of the Berlin and Frankfurt stations." p. 844.

39. Correspondence, p. 396.

concerning memories of [his] early life" entitled "Berlin Childhood around 1900".⁴⁰

The conditions under which Benjamin wrote "Berlin Childhood" are not insignificant. As Anna Stüssi has pointed out, the fragmentary images of his childhood out of which the book is constructed correspond with those memories ("which flash [...] up in a moment of danger") which Benjamin describes in "On the Concept of History".⁴¹ For our concerns here, however, another more productive comparison can be drawn between the images collected in "Berlin Childhood" and the delineation of involuntary memory that emerges from Benjamin's short, but nonetheless significant, study "Aus einer kleinen Rede über Proust, an meinem vierzigsten Geburtstag gehalten" ("From a small speech on Proust, delivered on my fortieth birthday") – a piece which was written around the time of Benjamin's planned suicide in 1932:

On the knowledge of the *mémoire involontaire*: not only do its images come when they are not summoned, but they appear rather as images that we have never seen before we remember them. This is most obvious in those images, in which – as in some dreams – we can see ourselves. We stand before ourselves, as we probably stood once somewhere in a primal past (*Unvergangenheit*) but as we have never stood before our gaze. And precisely the most important images – those which are

40. Letter to Adorno (written on September 3, 1932) in: Adorno and Benjamin: The Complete Correspondence, ed. by Henri Lonitz, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 1999, pp. 16-17. In the same letter, Benjamin notes that included among the books contained in the "small library" that he has brought with him to Ibiza are "four volumes of Proust" which he "frequently peruse[s]". See p. 16. While Benjamin sent Scholem a "provisional" manuscript of "Berlin Childhood" in December 1932, as attested by his correspondence, he continued to work on the project for several years. See Benjamin's letter to Scholem of December 10, 1932, in: The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem: 1932-1940, ed. by Gershom Scholem, New York: Schocken Books 1989, p. 24. During this time, Benjamin developed, refined, replaced and rearranged a number of sections, several of which were published in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* between 1933 and 1934. See Bernd Witte: *Walter Benjamin: An Intellectual Biography*, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997, pp. 134-135.

41. Anna Stüssi: *Erinnerung an die Zukunft: Walter Benjamins "Berliner Kindheit um Neunzehnhundert"*, Göttingen: Palaestra 1977, p. 83, and Benjamin: "On the Concept of History", in: Benjamin: *Selected Writings*, Vol. 4, ed. by Howard Eiland/Michael W. Jennings, Cambridge, Mass. and London, England: Harvard University Press 2003, p. 391.

developed in the darkroom of the lived moment – are the ones we get to see. One could say that our deepest moments [...] come with a little image, a photo of ourselves. And that ‘entire life’ that we often hear about, which passes before the dying, or those people who are hovering in danger of dying, is composed precisely out of these little images. They provide a quick procession like those booklets, the forerunners of the cinematograph, in which we, as children, could admire the skills of a boxer, swimmer, or tennis player.⁴²

In both “A Berlin Chronicle” and “Berlin Childhood”, it is these “little images” that Benjamin seeks to capture and represent, and which distinguish his reminiscences from the chronological, narrative based content of autobiographies which are developed primarily from the memory of the intellect. In “A Berlin Chronicle”, he writes:

Reminiscences, 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 a space, of moments and discontinuities.⁴³

In both “A Berlin Chronicle” and “Berlin Childhood” the temporal spaces opened up by involuntary memory are associated with rooms, objects, places, streets, sounds, and colours which surrounded Benjamin as a child, and later as a young man, growing up in Berlin. The images

42. *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. II.3, p. 1064. See also Benjamin’s 1936 essay “The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov”, in which he states something very similar. *Illuminations*, p. 93. “It is”, he writes, “characteristic that not only a man’s knowledge or wisdom, but above all his real life – and this is the stuff that stories are made of – first assumes transmissible form at the moment of his death. Just as a sequence of images is set in motion inside a man as his life comes to an end – unfolding the views of himself under which he has encountered himself without being aware of it – suddenly in his expressions and looks the unforgettable emerges and imparts to everything that concerned him that authority which even the poorest wretch in dying possesses for the living around him”.

43. “A Berlin Chronicle”, p. 612. In a letter to Scholem written in September 1932, Benjamin writes of “Berlin Childhood”: “[Y]ou will have guessed that they are not narratives in the form of a chronicle, but rather portray individual expeditions into the depths of memory”. *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem: 1932-1940*, p. 19.

in “Berlin Childhood” (which Hermann Hesse describes as having been “sketched out with the most careful hand and lightly hued as if with watercolours”⁴⁴) bear titles such as “Winter Morning”, “The Sewing Box”, “Hiding Places”, “Butterfly Hunt”, “The Moon”, “The Carousel”, “Market Hall”, and “Colors”, while the memories captured in “A Berlin Chronicle” revolve around places such as the *Tiergarten*, New Lake, the Viktoria Café, and other meeting places of the Youth Movement with which Benjamin was associated. As Benjamin writes in the preface to “Berlin Childhood”, this emphasis on Berlin was due partly to his realisation while abroad in 1932 that in the near future he could be forced “to bid a long, perhaps lasting farewell” to the city in which he was born, and partly because – for someone living in exile – the images that “are most apt to awaken homesickness” are those of childhood.⁴⁵

In “The Image of Proust”, Benjamin argues that Proust’s writings, too, are infused with an almost debilitating sense of homesickness. For Benjamin, however, Proust’s homesickness is not the catalyst for a desire to escape into the realm of childhood and away from time itself, but is the product of his longing for a “world distorted in the state of resemblance”.⁴⁶ Benjamin argues that the world that involuntary memory opens up to Proust is not a world of “boundless time” but rather a “universe of convolution”⁴⁷, and it is through this experience of “convoluted time” (which is achieved through the interweaving of memory with the present) that Benjamin locates the possibility for rejuvenation, and with it a sense of promise for a different kind of future. As John McCole has argued, this “entwinement” of memory stands in stark contrast to “the perpetual present of immediate, living experience (*Erlebnis*)”. It consists

44. Hermann Hesse: “Welche Bücher begleiten Sie”, *Die Weltwoche*, 20 (July, 1951). Quoted in: Brodersen: Walter Benjamin: A Biography, p. 212.

45. “Berlin Childhood”, p. 344.

46. “The Image of Proust”, p. 200.

47. *Ibid.*, p. 206. Benjamin’s analysis is supported by Proust’s comments in a letter written to Princess Marthe Bibesco in 1912: “A sensation”, Proust writes, “however disinterested it may be, a perfume, a ray of light [...] are still too much in my power to make me happy. It is when they bring back to my mind some other sensation, when I savor them between the present and the past (and not in the past – impossible to explain this here), that they make me happy”. *Letters of Marcel Proust*, p. 213. See also the narrator’s description of the impressions evoked by involuntary memory in Vol. 6, pp. 222–223: “A moment of the past, did I say? Was it not perhaps very much more: something that, common both to the past and the present, is much more essential than either of them?”

“neither in recalling discrete moments whose entire significance was given in the instant of their occurrence nor in freeing them from time”, but rather in “the ability to interpolate endlessly in what has been”.⁴⁸

Although it is clear that the emphasis Benjamin places on certain aspects of Proust’s search for lost time is driven by his own conception of the powers of involuntary memory, he is not uncritical of Proust. On the contrary, one of the key criticisms that he levels at Proust’s writing revolves around the two fundamentally different forms taken by the desire for happiness fuelling Proust’s homesickness. One of these forms, Benjamin argues, is associated with an experience of memory which revolves around “the unheard-of, the unprecedented, the height of bliss”, while the other is characterised by “eternal repetition, the eternal restoration of the original, the first happiness”.⁴⁹ While the latter – in its evocation of a self-enclosed, timeless space – is a recognition of the emphasis Proust places on the past as a refuge from the future, the former – in its reference to that which is “unprecedented” – evokes an experience of time much closer to that privileged by Benjamin in his reading of Proust’s “impassioned cult of similarity”.⁵⁰

For both Benjamin and Proust, the experiences provoked by these encounters are associated not with those incidents or events that one would ordinarily deem “memorable”, but rather with the fleeting experience of mood that Benjamin associates with “the night, a lost twittering of birds, or a breath drawn at the sill of an open window”.⁵¹ It is the moody, atmospheric quality of these encounters (which are themselves prompted by everyday impressions such as the flavour of a certain blend of coffee or the sight of a book) that draws Benjamin, despite his reservations, to the writings of Proust. “The sight”, Marcel notes,

of the binding of a book once read may weave into the characters of its title the moonlight of a distant summer night. The taste of our breakfast coffee brings with it that vague hope of fine weather which so often long ago – as with the day still intact and full before us, we were drinking it out of a bowl of white porcelain, creamy and fluted and itself looking almost like vitrified milk – suddenly smiled upon us in the pale uncertainty of the dawn.⁵²

48. McCole: Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition, p. 262.

49. “The Image of Proust”, p. 200.

50. Ibid.

51. Ibid., p. 199.

52. Proust: Vol. 6, p. 245. I have slightly modified the punctuation in this passage in an attempt to render it more clear.

For “[a]n hour”, he continues, “is not merely an hour, it is a vase full of scents and sounds and projects and climates”, and real experience is borne of a “connexion between these immediate sensations and the memories which envelop us simultaneously with them”.⁵³

It is also out of such moments that both “A Berlin Chronicle” and “Berlin Childhood” are constituted. In one of the most beautiful images contained in his childhood reminiscences, Benjamin recounts the memory of ice-skating on New Lake via an evocation of the sensation of weight (and, later, weightlessness) which accompanied the wearing (and removal) of his childhood skates. Nothing, Benjamin writes,

would bring back New Lake and a few hours of my childhood so vividly as to hear once more the bars of music to which my feet, heavy with their skates after a lone excursion across the bustling ice, touched the familiar planks and stumbled past the chocolate-dispensing machines [...] to the bench where you now savored for a while the weight of the metal blades strapped to your feet, which did not yet reach the ground, before resolving to unbuckle them. If you then slowly rested one calf on the other knee and unfastened the skate, it was as if in its place you had suddenly grown wings, and you went out with steps that nodded to the frozen ground.⁵⁴

The promise of the “scents and sounds and projects and climates” evoked by Benjamin’s images of the loggias, the Zoo, and ice-skating on New Lake do not lie, however, in the objects and spaces, occasions and conversations with which they are associated, nor in their capacity to provide a model for a different kind of future. Rather, in a similar vein to Marcel’s impression of the flavour of an early morning coffee when the day was “still intact and full before [him]”, their significance lies in their evocation of a time when the future was still open, and the past not yet completed.⁵⁵ For Benjamin, this experience of time contains within it its own revolutionary possibility, because it opens up a space in the so-

53. Ibid., pp. 245-246.

54. “A Berlin Chronicle”, pp. 610-611. See also “Berlin Childhood”, p. 384.

55. See Szondi: “Hope in the Past”, p. 499. See also the section entitled “Winter Morning” in: “Berlin Childhood” in which Benjamin describes the extent to which the scent of the apple which his nursemaid baked for him daily on the coal stove evoked “the aromas of all the things the day held in store for [him]”. p. 357.

called forward march of history within which the remembering subject is able to imagine the possibility of a different kind of future.⁵⁶

In *In Search of Lost Time*, Proust also draws a connection between the experience of “breathing the atmosphere” of childhood and the rejuvenation of one’s capacity for imagination. In *Time Regained*, for example, Marcel refers to the “celestial nourishment” which involuntary memory provides him, commenting later that his encounters with impressions such as the sight of the sea, and the smell of a room provoked by the texture of a starched napkin play an important role in “caress[ing his] imagination”.⁵⁷ As I will discuss in detail in the following chapter, this relationship between childhood and imagination plays an important role in Benjamin’s analysis of childhood perception and cognition in both “On the Mimetic Faculty” and “Doctrine of the Similar”.⁵⁸ In the context of this chapter, however, the heightened capacity for imagination that Benjamin attributes to children helps to shed light on the nature of the promise for the future that he locates in the spaces opened up by his childhood reminiscences. For, as Benjamin suggests in the preface to the book, the images that constitute “Berlin Childhood” are not specific to his own particular childhood.⁵⁹ Rather, as attested to by his delight upon hearing that Scholem had recognised his own childhood in the book, what is important for Benjamin is the degree to which “Berlin Childhood” captures not only something of the urban childhood of the middle classes, but something of the experience of childhood more generally.⁶⁰

56. In “Some Motifs in Baudelaire”, Benjamin notes that the time of involuntary memory is “outside history”. p. 143.

57. See Proust: Vol. 6, pp. 224 and 229 respectively.

58. As Benjamin notes in a letter to Scholem (written in February, 1933) his ideas on mimesis were “formulated while [he] was doing research for the first piece of the *Berliner Kindheit*”. Correspondence, pp. 402-403. See also Scholem’s comments on the significance of Benjamin’s fascination with childhood perception and cognition: “It is one of Benjamin’s most important characteristics that throughout his life he was attracted with almost magical force by the child’s world and ways”, including “the as yet undistorted world of the child and its creative imagination, which the metaphysician describes with reverent wonder and at the same time seeks conceptually to penetrate”. “Walter Benjamin”, in: Scholem, *Jews and Judaism in Crisis*, New York: Schocken Books 1976, p. 175.

59. Benjamin notes in the preface that “certain biographical features, which stand out more readily in the continuity of experience than its depths, altogether recede in the present undertaking”. p. 344.

In his writings on Proust, Benjamin is critical of what he describes as the private, self-absorbed focus of Proust's conception of the powers of involuntary memory. In "Some Motifs in Baudelaire", for example, he argues that Proust "nonchalantly and constantly strives to tell the reader: Redemption is my private show".⁶¹ Benjamin, however, claims in his later writings that "where there is experience in the strict sense of the word", aspects of one's "individual past" are entwined with those of the "collective".⁶² In his notes on Proust written after the publication of "The Image of Proust" in 1929, this collective emphasis features heavily. In his notes for *The Arcades Project*, for example, Benjamin argues that in order for a desire for change to become manifest, the experiences provoked by Proust's childhood recollections would have to be experienced at the level of the collective. Indeed, for Benjamin, the promise of the impressions evoked by involuntary memory lies not only in the particular content of the memories which are recollected, but in the extent to which the capacity for imagination that he associates with children's play is reignited along with those memories.

60. See "Berlin Childhood", p. 344. In a letter to Scholem (written in January, 1933) Benjamin writes: "[Y]ou could hardly have said anything more encouraging than that in fact now and again certain passages seemed to bear on your own childhood." See Correspondence, p. 400. In a letter to Benjamin (written in April, 1934) Adorno comments that Erich Reiss also "felt he could recognize his own childhood" in the images of Benjamin's childhood captured in the book. See Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno: The Complete Correspondence, p. 37.

61. "Some Motifs in Baudelaire", note 80, p. 145. See also Benjamin's comments in "The Image of Proust" in which he writes: "Since the spiritual exercises of Loyola there has hardly been a more radical attempt at self-absorption". p. 207.

62. "Some Motifs in Baudelaire", p. 113.

1.2 Children's Play and Proletarian Children's Theatre

This fascination with children's play stands as the heart of Benjamin's 1929 "Program for a Proletarian Children's Theatre".⁶³ Although the concerns addressed in this essay are intermeshed with those which are central to Benjamin's writings from this period (including, in particular, his writings on mimesis, Proust, hashish, and Surrealism), the impetus for the project sprang from his meeting with the Latvian performer and theatre director Asja Lacis – a "Russian revolutionary from Riga" with whom Benjamin first came into contact in 1924 during a six month stay on the island of Capri.⁶⁴

In the account of their first meeting outlined in *Revolutionär im Beruf*, Lacis describes the "extraordinary interest" demonstrated by Benjamin in the children's theatre she had established in 1918 in Orel.⁶⁵ Benjamin, Lacis recounts, was so "inflamed"⁶⁶ with enthusiasm for her work that he was inspired to write a "program" for the theatre which would provide her practical work with a theoretical grounding.⁶⁷ The central concern of this program is the development of a child-centred model for education based on experimentation and play that seeks to avoid the emphasis on morality and discipline characteristic of the bourgeois education system.⁶⁸ Instead of a teacher, proletarian children's

63. Benjamin: "Program for a Proletarian Children's Theatre", in: Selected Writings, Vol. 2, pp. 201-206.

64. This description of Lacis appears in a letter to Scholem written in July, 1924. See Correspondence, p. 245. For a more detailed account of Benjamin's relationship with Lacis, see Susan Ingram: "The Writing of Asja Lacis", *New German Critique*, No. 86 (Spring/Summer, 2002), pp. 159-177, and Walter Benjamin, 1892-1940: *Marbacher Magazin*, No. 55, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann/Christoph Gödde/Henri Lonitz, Marbach am Neckar: Deutsche Schillergesellschaft, 1990, pp. 161-70.

65. See Asja Lacis: "Orel 1918/1919: Proletarisches Kindertheater – Programm einer ästhetisch-politischen Erziehung (Benjamin)", in: Lacis: *Revolutionär im Beruf: Berichte über proletarisches Theater, über Meyerhold, Brecht, Benjamin und Piscator*, ed. by Hildegard Brenner, München: Rogner & Bernhard, 1971, pp. 25-26. Hereafter referred to as *Revolutionär im Beruf*. See also Lacis' discussion of their meeting in "Capri 1924, Benjamin – 'Neapel'", in: *Revolutionär im Beruf*, pp. 41-42.

66. *Ibid.*, p. 42.

67. *Ibid.*, pp. 25-26.

68. "Program for a Proletarian Children's Theatre", p. 205. Benjamin argues

theatre is organised by a “leader” who seeks neither to dictate, nor influence the children’s behaviour, but rather to guide their activities indirectly through his or her choice of subject material.⁶⁹ What is specific to the development of the learning process at the heart of the proletarian children’s theatre is that the emphasis is placed on the children, not the leader, on observation rather than instruction or direction. “No pedagogic love”, Benjamin writes,

is worth anything unless in nine-tenths of all instances of knowing better and wanting better it is deprived of its courage and pleasure by the mere observation of children’s lives. [...] For the true observer, however – and this is the starting point of education – every childhood action and gesture becomes a signal. Not so much a signal of the unconscious, of latent processes, repressions, or censorship (as the psychologists like to think), but a signal from another world, in which the child lives and commands.⁷⁰

What fascinates Benjamin about the world inhabited by children is the extent to which the capacity for imagination demonstrated in children’s play infuses both their world, and their audience, with a sense of possibility. “[W]e the educators”, Lacis writes, “learnt and saw many new things. How easily children can adapt themselves to situations, how inventive they are, [...] how] they make the wild imagination of their inventions visible”.⁷¹ Elaborating on this idea, Benjamin argues that the children’s performance “represents in the realm of children what the carnival was in the old cults. Everything was turned upside down; and just as in Rome the master served the slaves during the Saturnalia, in the same way in a performance children stand on stage and instruct and teach the attentive educators”.⁷²

For Benjamin, one of the most important lessons to be learnt from the active, creative behaviour of children is their refusal to accept the form of something as it is. As he demonstrates in both “One Way Street” and “Berlin Childhood”, children are particularly adept at transforming

that just as “the discipline which the bourgeoisie demands from *children* is the mark of shame”, the “proletariat must not pass on its own class interest to the next generation with the tainted methods of an ideology that is destined to subjugate the child’s suggestible mind”. p. 205.

69. Ibid., p. 203.

70. Ibid., pp. 203-204.

71. Revolutionär im Beruf, p. 25.

72. “Program for a Proletarian Children’s Theatre”, p. 205.

both themselves, and the world around them, into something radically different. In “One-Way Street”, for example, Benjamin describes the child’s transformation of his “dresser drawers” into an “arsenal and zoo, crime museum and crypt”. “To tidy up”, he writes, “would be to demolish an edifice full of prickly chestnuts that are spiky clubs, tinfoil that is hoarded silver, bricks that are coffins, cacti that are totem poles, and copper pennies that are shields”.⁷³ While in “Berlin Childhood”, Benjamin recounts his own experience of playing hide-and-seek, and his attempts to blend himself – chameleon like – into his surroundings in order to evade discovery by his pursuer.⁷⁴

In his “Program for a Proletarian Children’s Theatre”, Benjamin argues that it is the responsibility of the leader to “release” the creative energies generated in children’s play from the “world of sheer fantasy” by encouraging the children to apply themselves to materials – an activity which takes place in the various workshops in which children take part in activities such as “the making of stage props, painting, recitation, music, dance, [and] improvisation”.⁷⁵ Anticipating his writings on mimesis, Benjamin argues that what is revealed in the workshops is the direct connection between “receptive innervation” and creativity characteristic of the gestures and activities of children – the traces of which can be found in the activities of the painter who, like the child, is particularly adept at transferring “the receptive innervation of the eye muscles into the creative innervation of the hand”.⁷⁶

It is this process of transferral (between perception and creative action) demonstrated in children’s play, which – as we will see in the following chapters – provides Benjamin with a model for his analysis of the innervating mode of perception cultivated by hashish and film. Indeed, in a similar vein to his delineation of the rejuvenating effects evoked by involuntary memory, the significance of this playful, innervating mode of perception lies in the extent to which the experience of the past in the present with which it is associated can serve as a catalyst for the creation and sustenance of a desire for a different kind of future.

73. “One-Way Street”, p. 465. See also Benjamin’s analysis, in “The Image of Proust”, of the child’s playful, imaginative transformation of a “stocking” into a range of different objects and shapes. p. 200.

74. “Berlin Childhood”, p. 375.

75. “Program for a Proletarian Children’s Theatre”, p. 204.

76. Ibid.

1.3 Creative Writing and Play

In his analysis of Benjamin's "Program for a Proletarian Children's Theatre", Gerhard Fischer draws a highly productive comparison between Benjamin's analysis of the significance of the child's imagination and Freud's discussion of children's play in his 1907 lecture "Creative Writers and Daydreams".⁷⁷ In this short piece, Freud argues that the child's "intense occupation" with play (an activity which he or she takes very seriously) can be likened to the practices of the creative writer insofar as both seek to "create [...] a world of [their] own, or, rather, rearrange [...] the things of [their] world in a new way which pleases [them]".⁷⁸ He argues that the creative practices of both the child and the writer are fuelled by a desire for the fulfillment of "unsatisfied wishes".⁷⁹ "[A] happy person", Freud writes, "never phantasies, only an unsatisfied one [...] and every single phantasy is the fulfilment of a wish, a correction of [an] unsatisfying reality".⁸⁰

What is particularly interesting about Freud's analysis for our concerns here, is not only the relationship he draws between childhood play and an active desire to transform one's reality into something different, but his analysis of the extent to which this desire is reflected in the practices of the creative writer, which he argues are "a continuation of, and a substitute for, what was once the play of childhood".⁸¹

This conception of creative writing (as a practice which is driven by a dissatisfaction with the prevailing conditions) certainly provides us with an insight into the writings of Proust, which are – as Adorno has pointed out – infused by a "fidelity to childhood" borne of an implacable desire for happiness.⁸² "Proust", Adorno writes,

77. Gerhard Fischer: "Benjamin's Utopia of Education as *Theatrum Mundi* et *Vitae*: On the Programme of a Proletarian Children's Theatre", in: *With the Sharpened Axe of Reason: Approaches to Walter Benjamin*, ed. by Gerhard Fischer, Oxford and Herndon: Berg 1996, p. 214, and Sigmund Freud: "Creative Writers and Day-dreaming", in: *Art and Literature – Vol. 14: The Penguin Freud Library*, ed. by Albert Dickson, London: Penguin 1990, pp. 131-141.

78. Freud: "Creative Writers and Daydreaming", p. 132.

79. *Ibid.*, p. 134.

80. *Ibid.*, p. 133.

81. *Ibid.*, p. 139.

82. Adorno: "On Proust", p. 316.

looks at even adult life with such alien and wondering eyes that under his immersed gaze the present is virtually transformed into prehistory, into childhood. This has an aspect that is not at all esoteric but rather democratic. For every somewhat sheltered child whose responsiveness has not been driven out of him in his earliest years has at his disposal infinite possibilities of experience.⁸³

Contrary, however, to Benjamin's claims about the private, self-absorbed focus of Proust's analysis of the experiences evoked by involuntary memory, it is clear from both Proust's letters and the narrator's comments in *Time Regained* that Proust conceived of the task of the novel somewhat differently. In a letter to Camille Vetard (written in 1922), Proust claims that the task of the book is "to reveal to the conscious mind unconscious phenomena which, wholly forgotten, sometimes lie very far back in the past"⁸⁴ – the significance of which is framed, in *Time Regained*, in terms of a collective, rather than an individual recollection of the past. In a passage towards the end of the novel, Marcel claims that "it would be inaccurate [...] to say that I thought of those who would read [the book] as 'my' readers. For it seemed to me that they would not be 'my' readers but the readers of their own selves, [...] it would be my book, but with its help I would furnish them with the means of reading what lay inside themselves".⁸⁵ "The writer's work", he states, "is merely a kind of optical instrument which he offers to the reader to enable him to discern what, without this book, he would perhaps never have perceived in himself".⁸⁶

In his article "On Proust", Adorno expresses a similar sentiment. In a passage which reveals an important affinity between the childhood reminiscences of Benjamin and Proust that was not explicitly recognised by Benjamin himself, Adorno argues that the reader of Proust "feels addressed by [his descriptions] as if by an inherited memory".⁸⁷ It is from "under the mask of autobiography" that he is able to give away "the secrets of every person while at the same time reporting on something extremely specialized".⁸⁸ In the recollections of his childhood collected in "A Berlin Chronicle" and "Berlin Childhood" Benjamin has sought to achieve something very similar.⁸⁹ Confronted with a future eclipsed by

83. Ibid., p. 315.

84. Letters of Marcel Proust, p. 405.

85. Proust: Vol. 6, pp. 431–432.

86. Ibid., p. 273.

87. Adorno: "On Proust", p. 315.

88. Ibid., p. 313.

the horrors of Fascism, the value of his childhood reminiscences lies not in the extent to which they open up a space within which Benjamin can escape into the past, and away from the terror of the present. On the contrary, what is significant for Benjamin about the impressions evoked by involuntary memory is not only the degree to which they can reignite the capacity for imagination hidden within the crevices of one's childhood but – more significantly – the extent to which the child's capacity for imagination can be harnessed in the service of the creation of a different kind of future.

89. It would also be interesting to read Adorno's own childhood reminiscences in this context. Unfortunately, however, such a reading lies beyond the scope of this chapter. See Theodor W. Adorno: *Kindheit in Amorbach: Bilder und Erinnerungen*, ed. by Reinhard Pabst, Frankfurt am Main and Leipzig: Insel 2003.

