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“An Intimation of Mourning”: Freud and Walter Benjamin on Images of Childhood

Abstract: Images of childhood have a pivotal place in the writings of both Sigmund Freud and Walter Benjamin. The present paper offers a discussion on the subject of childhood memories that embody a return to infantile experience both in content and in form, mainly in the form of visual images. Freud’s visual image (*visuelles Bild*) and Walter Benjamin’s *Denkbild* (thought-image) present a dialectic between a condensed experience of the past and the inevitable transformation of experience into language. Childhood memories are not necessarily retrieved as realistic events but rather embody the potential to create new experiences in the present of remembrance, which are merely referred to the past. These notions are examined through a psychoanalytic reading of Benjamin’s *Berlin Childhood around 1900* (2002 [1938]). This memoir is constructed through a singular collection of *Denkbilder* that presents the experience of being a child in the city of Berlin around 1900. It expresses a lamentation by the author and on behalf of his Jewish generation for the abyss in which they found themselves in the face of the rise of the Nazi regime. The present reading will focus on three main themes: replacements for the original in modern society, images of childhood as prefigurations of later developments, and translations from images to words as vital transformations, especially in times of turmoil.

In my own case, the earliest childhood memories are the only ones of a visual character: they are regular scenes worked out in plastic form, comparable only to representations on the stage. (Freud, 1901, p. 46)

I have made an effort to get hold of the *images* in which the experience of the big city is precipitated in a child of the middle class . . . The images of my metropolitan childhood perhaps are . . . capable, at their core, of preforming later historical experience. (Benjamin, 2002 [1938], p. 344)

Childhood is a time of experiencing and exploring the world, both the external and the internal world (Freud, 1938, pp. 195–206). Images of childhood are constructed from memories and impressions that have been collected not only in childhood but also in various other historical phases, and that have been gradually condensed together and woven into a dynamic matrix of images (in German, the word *Bild* can mean both an image and a picture). Recalling memories of childhood challenges the individual to regress to our infantile processing stages, in terms of cognitive and emotional development, while simultaneously remaining in touch with our mature levels of processing. Seeing events through the eyes of the child that we once were means retrieving past events, including the context in which they occurred, the emotional atmosphere they convey, and their subjective interpretative aspect. Moreover, due to the distinct way that we have of processing and analyzing information in childhood, in comparison to other life periods, retrieving childhood memories means retrieving the events not only under the aspect of content, but also under that of form, mainly in terms of thinking in pictures. The specific selection of memories from childhood gradually constructs the individual's story and personal history.

In his 1899 paper, "Screen Memories," Freud discusses the characteristics of childhood scenes, emphasizing their pivotal visual aspect. He argues that childhood scenes are essentially remembered as pictures of a distinct kind:

It is evident that such a picture cannot be an exact repetition of the impression that was originally received. For the subject was then in the middle of the situation and was attending not to himself but to the external world . . . It looks as though a memory-trace from childhood had here been *translated back* into a plastic and visual form at a later date—the date of the memory’s arousal. (Freud, 1899, p. 321, emphasis added)

Knowing reality is not so much a process of greeting the new as it is a process of “translating back” to our early languages of knowing and experiencing. Childhood memories tend to be recollected in visual form, like the language of dreams: “In the case of childhood memories: they are plastically visual even in people whose later function of memory has to do without any visual element. Visual memory accordingly preserves the type of infantile memory” (Freud, 1901, p. 46). The perceptual-emotional information gathered in relation to past events is integrated with the multilayered language used by the psyche at the time of remembrance, in particular the archaic language of the unconscious that leans on “plastic and visual form.”

Freud argues that whereas in adulthood the individual remembers on either the visual or the auditory level,

. . . in dreams these distinctions disappear: we all dream predominantly in visual images (*visuelles Bild*). But this development is similarly reversed in the case of childhood memories: they are plastically visual even in people whose later function of memory has to do without any visual element. Visual memory accordingly preserves the type of infantile memory. (Freud, 1901, p. 47)

Thus, it is not the infantile memory that preserves images of childhood, but rather it is images of childhood that preserve infantile memory. The retrieval of early experiences is inherently obscure and partial. The singular path to childhood experience leads through the process of translating back into an early form of experiencing, one that leans on the sensual and, most emphatically, on the visual. Thus, the remembrance

of childhood leans on figurative processing, on the realm of images that arise from the unconscious, as we let go of the need to seek cause-and-effect relations.

In the case of early trauma that cannot be recollected or remembered as such, memory traces of the traumatic event are sometimes created as mnemonic visual traces. Freud states that this process of recollection does not singularly characterize traumatic events but, in fact, characterizes memories of childhood in general. He writes, “the raw material of memory-traces out of which it was forged remains unknown to us in its original form” (Freud, 1899, p. 322). According to Freud, memories of childhood are memories that are actively recreated in the present time of remembrance, perhaps even newly formed, affected by the state of mind at the time of remembrance, and merely referred to the past:

It may indeed be questioned whether we have any memories at all *from* our childhood: memories *relating to* our childhood may be all that we possess. Our childhood memories show us our earliest years not as they were but as they appeared at the later periods when the memories were aroused. In these periods of arousal, the childhood memories did not, as people are accustomed to say, *emerge*, they were *formed* at that time. And a number of motives, with no concern for historical accuracy, had a part in forming them, as well as in the selection of the memories themselves. (p. 322, emphasis in the original)

Freud questions the ontological value of remembrance as the process of bringing actual memories to consciousness. These early memories may seem very real and strongly related to actual life events, and yet Freud argues that this impression regarding the actual aspect of early memories is part of the manifold and illusory character of memory processes. Images of childhood that are brought to consciousness tell us more about the individual's present state than about their actual past. These notions are rearticulated in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*:

Some of the mnemonic images are certainly falsified, incomplete or displaced in time and place . . . Strong forces from later life have been at work on the capacity of childhood experiences for being remembered—probably the same forces which are responsible for our having become so far removed in general from understanding our years of childhood. (Freud, 1901, p. 46)

The quality of early memories is similar to the quality of dreams. They both arise from their relatively close connection to sensory experience, most prominently in the visual images that they offer. Both early memories and dreams are kept alive through the distinct language of visual images that capture a rich matrix of condensed experiences.

Following Freud's conception of early memories and dreams, Walter Benjamin's dialectical image refers to a distinct set of meanings that is not submitted to a simple obvious interpretation. It is an image or set of images that is created in the dialectic between dreaming and awakening and between the inability to present experience in language and the inevitability of this transformation. Benjamin, in his thoughts on history and memory, created the concept of the dialectical image to present the remembered event as an image in which the past is created as a new experience in the present: the "then" becomes "now" in the flashing moment (*blitzhaft*) of awakening (*das Erwachen*). Benjamin constructs an innovative conception of historical time based on the relationship between the "then" and the "now" (more than the past and the present), as brought together in images. Each historically specific "now" is understood to correspond to a particular "then." Benjamin developed a specific language of thinking-in-images and conceptualized this thinking-in-images as the epistemological principle of modernity (Weigel, 2015, p. 347). The dialectical image, and the literary form of the *Denkbild*, are presented as a constellation, a construction whose essence lies more in its spatial configuration than in the specific content of its elements (Didi-Huberman, 2005; Nägele, 2002).

Like Freud's language of dreams, Benjamin's dialectical image refers to a distinct set of meanings, or language, that

cannot be submitted to a simple or obvious interpretation. It is an image or set of images that is created in the dialectic between dreaming and awakening and between the inability to present experience in language and the inevitability of this transformation. For Benjamin, on the other hand, the image forms a constellation that is merely figural or spatial. The spatial setting of the image is further underlined in the repetition of the word *Stelle* (position), marking the creation of the dialectical image at a certain point or position. The dialectical image is thus created at a point at which something irrupts, interrupts, or breaks in. Instead of clarifying a thought by means of an image in linear fashion, the *Denkbild* presents an image of an integral, albeit not immediately recognizable, part of the thought. Neither the image nor the thought is clear without the other, and insight into their relation is arrived at through a process of reflection on the apparent incongruence between them (Tzur Mahalel, 2023).

The reliving of the past in *Nachträglichkeit* allows it to be translated as a new yet familiar experience, which gives the individual the freedom to experience himself or herself in new contexts. Memories of childhood are always captured as a work of mourning, an effort to retrieve something that is lost. This paper embodies an attempt to capture psychoanalysis's own memories of its own childhood, or early history. My efforts are intended to explore the genesis of psychoanalytic thought through Freud's ideas and the historical and cultural context in which they evolved. In this context, it is relevant to note that Freud and Benjamin share a similar cultural background and identity as intellectuals of the secular Western European Jewish bourgeoisie that witnessed the rise to power of the Nazi regime, along with its attendant atrocities. Perhaps because they share a relatively similar background, Freud and Benjamin also share a pivotal concern with subjects such as history, memory, and remembrance.

Introduction to *Berlin Childhood round 1900*

Benjamin's *Berlin Childhood around 1900* (*Berliner Kindheit um Neunzehnhundert*, 2002 [1938]) is constructed from a mon-

tage of thought-images (*Denkbilder*) of his childhood. These early reminiscences are presented as a collection of pictures, leaning on the visual aspect of mnemonic residues, each one attached to some minor association or fragmented thought. Benjamin's decision to write his private reminiscences of himself as a child growing up in the city of Berlin came about at a very distinct time in his life, when he had been forced to go into permanent exile from Berlin, after the Nazi regime came to power and his German citizenship had been taken away from him. Given his Jewish origin, this text can be read as a lamentation for a lost childhood in a lost city and a lost culture. And by culture, I mean here both the German liberal-intellectual culture of that time and the more specific secular intellectual Jewish culture.¹

It has been argued that Benjamin's text, constructed as it is from short pieces of prose, like a mosaic, consists not so much of historical documents as of prefiguration, or prophecies projected backwards. At 40 years old, Benjamin sought to locate the seeds of the destruction that was to bring the nineteenth-century world to an end in war. In this text, Benjamin is concerned less with portraying his own personal development than with showing the social construction of an individual growing up among the Jewish haute bourgeoisie before the turn of the century (Witte, 1991, pp. 11–14). Benjamin does not contextualize these reminiscences in a psychoanalytically oriented framework, despite the rich psychoanalytic thought that was available about images of childhood. The memoir does not express an attempt to heal his psyche by reconstructing his history; rather, it is an attempt to create an innovative language, the language of images or pictures. The language of images offers a rich matrix of the forthcoming tragedy on the personal and cultural levels, including the unfolding of cryptic messages that could have predicted this singular future.

In the spring of 1938, after *Berlin Childhood* had been rejected by at least three different publishers, Benjamin wrote to the literary journal *Mass und Wert*:

The text has ripened during my exile; of the past five years, none has gone by without my devoting a month or two to it . . . The plan for the work dates from 1932 . . .

It began to be clear to me that I would soon have to bid a long, perhaps lasting farewell to the city of my birth. Several times in my inner life, 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. (2002, [1938], pp. 445–46)

This introduction brings forth some of the main characteristics of Benjamin's distinctive text. First, bringing images of childhood back to life is by no means a nostalgic indulgence for Benjamin. Remembrance is presented as a unique work of mourning that stems from loss and absence. The text embodies a process of double mourning: mourning for his childhood as a melancholic adult and mourning for his city of birth as an exile. In this double mourning, Benjamin presents his origins and childhood as living relics of lost times.

The second theme upon which Benjamin's introduction touches is the integration of the external world and the internal world as a pivotal challenge that a child faces in the transition to adulthood. Childhood demands a context, an environment, and specific conditions that allow the expected processes to occur according to developmental stages. Within these stages, the specific environment that each child experiences is internalized and becomes a part of the child's internal world.

Benjamin offers a striking image of this complex matrix at the beginning of the essay: "For a long time, life deals with the still-tender memory of childhood like a mother who lays her newborn on her breast without waking it" (p. 345). Primary memories of mother and infant cannot be consciously retrieved by the infant as it grows up; they are destined to be held only by the mother. Benjamin's way of recapturing lost images of childhood involves a return to the first image, the mother and her newborn child.

Benjamin's memoir endeavors to present a childhood rich in experiences and impressions, but that nevertheless led him to an impasse in his adult life. He is reminiscing under certain

conditions: memories are constructed in the textual space, and the verbal language leans on the language of images. Images capture and unfold the infantile form of experiencing and interpreting the world both in content and form or, as Benjamin puts it, in the inseparable essence of the veil and the veiled (*Hülle und Verhülltes*) (Benjamin, 2004 [1925]; Tzur Mahalel, 2019). These images are accompanied by thoughts created in his work of memory. As mentioned, the *Denkbild* is constructed as an integration of the “then” and the “now.” The image, *Bild*, is referred to the past, whereas the thought, *Denken*, is referred to the present. Benjamin strives to create dialectical images that offer singular moments of lived experience. This is especially challenging and crucial in the case of childhood memories because the journey to childhood is a journey to “the beginning” of development, a time when the sensual perception is open to introjections, yet reflectivity is still undeveloped.

I intend to offer a psychoanalytic reading of a collection of *Denkbilder* from Benjamin’s *Berlin Childhood*, and I will attempt to describe the singular phenomenon of childhood memories as presented through Benjamin’s eyes. I will emphasize the language of visual images or pictures that Benjamin creates. According to the conceptualizations of Freud and Benjamin, the image challenges the boundaries of time and space and provides a gateway through which lost meanings and fragmented memories can be captured. The ability to live an experience that is attributed to the past as a new experience in the present transforms this experience into an experience beyond time and space (Tzur Mahalel, 2021). The present reading focuses on three main themes: replacements for the original in modern society, images of childhood as prefigurations of later developments, and translations from images to words and from imagination to the written word as vital transformations, especially in times of turmoil. Benjamin’s *Denkbilder* asks not to be read in a conceptual, intellectual manner but, rather, to be intuitively and sensually absorbed, as if the reader was looking at an old picture album or watching an 8-millimeter film. For it is from the frayed and the old that the true translation can appear.

The Loggias

Each *Denkbild* offers a distinct experience of space and time, and “The Loggias” (*Loggien*) is the opening *Denkbild*. It begins with the “still-tender memory of childhood,” accompanied by the image of “a mother who lays her newborn on her breast without waking it” (Benjamin, 2002 [1938], p. 345). Within this image, the notion is unfolded that development and remembrance occur through the processes of sleeping and dreaming, ensured by tender maternal attendance. Then, in contrast to the opening image, the concluding image of this text is that of “a mausoleum long intended just for him” (p. 346). Between these two images, we should ask: What happened to the child whose nurturing surroundings promised development but who then found himself, in adulthood, trapped in a mausoleum? Benjamin’s reference to “The Loggias” as “the most exact portrait it is given me to make of myself” (Eiland & Jennings, 2014, p. 214) reinforces the relevance of this question even more strongly.

First, the loggias (which are covered exterior arcades, but still part of the building to which they are attached) provided the child with a potential transitory space between the internal and the external, the domestic and the public: “Nothing has fortified my own memory so profoundly as gazing into courtyards, one of whose dark loggias, shaded by blinds in the summer, was for me the cradle in which the city laid its new citizen” (Benjamin, 2002 [1938], p. 345). The point of view presented here is that of a child gazing on the loggias from the outside looking in, and therefore expresses a shift from an infant in the tender embrace of its mother to a child walking in the public domain. During this transition, the child continues to long for a domestic space—and not for his own but rather for other courtyards, located in other domestic areas. Even the image of the cradle that is connected here to the distinct space provided by the loggias is associated with a place that is not necessarily located in his own private dwelling. The caryatids, the columnar female figures that supported the loggias and provide rich imagery here, are presented as belonging to the neighbors on the upper floor. These caryatids “may have slipped

away from their post for a moment to sing a lullaby beside that cradle—a song containing little of what later awaited me, but nonetheless sounding the theme through which the air of the courtyards has forever remained intoxicating to me” (p. 345). Thus, the motherly embrace that was initially presented in the text as tender is now, in later developmental stages, becoming complicated, for the loggias as “cradle” were in fact located in foreign houses and the child was looking at them from the outside. The longed-for lullaby that had once been sung beside the cradle was now sung by caryatids placed in the neighbors’ loggias. The child relates to objects more than he does to persons, and to others’ objects more than to his own. The mother and infant presented at the outset of the text as an emblem of intimacy and care have been transferred to the impersonal public domain.

Another pivotal characteristic of Benjamin’s text is the creation of a singular language. *Berlin Childhood* presents a language that brings forth pictures or visual images, distinct lights and shades, colors, and textures, alongside sounds and rhythms, scents, and odors. This sensual language brings back early memories, both in content and form. In the same way that the caryatids are presented as supporting the loggias, the sensual language that constructs these memories supports the formation of conceptual thinking; it “sustains the images and allegories which preside over my thinking” (p. 345).

Childhood embodies the development of the thinking subject, “the new citizen.” This development is presented as stemming from a mysterious mixture of the intimate and the foreign, the original and its various replacements. Benjamin describes the environment that surrounded and contained his childhood dreaming: “The rhythm of the metropolitan railway and of carpet-beating rocked me to sleep. It was the mold in which my dreams took shape—first the unformed ones, traversed perhaps by the sound of running water or the smell of milk, then the long-spun ones: travel dreams and dreams of rain” (p. 345). Here, implicitly, lies the key to the ability to overcome the challenging gaps with which the child is confronted. The ability to dwell in the intimacy of dreams and fantasies can help the child embrace the foreign, somewhat arbitrary,

experiences that are offered by the external world. Dreaming appears as a work of assimilating and recreating the external and internal worlds in ways that one can work through, draw meaning from, and use to pave one's personal paths, "For everything in the courtyard became a sign or hint to me" (p. 345). The effort to assimilate and interpret reality in ways that allow one to comprehend and adjust to it is presented as a crucial developmental challenge. Benjamin emphasizes the residues of this challenge; in many ways, this developmental challenge and its inevitable residues are the main subject of the *Berlin Childhood* as a whole. In "The Loggias," the residues appear in the form of replacements, which can only partly represent intimate emblems. This excessive matrix of replacements leaves such a deep mark on the child's development that it gradually traps the child in a mausoleum of dark shades.

An example of this matrix of replacements appears in the image of "the spot where the tree stood" (p. 345). Paving stones, a large iron ring, and metal bars had been built to safeguard an area of soil for the tree to grow in. This urban construction is presented as being an emblem of modernity. It embodies the intention to limit and control nature so that it can be recreated as an artifact of nature suitable for urban needs: "Not for nothing, it seemed to me, was it thus enclosed; from time to time I would brood over what went on within the black pit from which the trunk came" (p. 345). The black pit can be thought of as an image of earth and the roots of development. Benjamin implicitly weaves together the tender memory of a mother who lays her newborn on her breast and the black pit from which the tree trunk arises in order to imply an image of the residues of nature, transformed to become part of the urban environment.

Berlin, as a modern city, is presented from the outset as an amalgam of old and new, ancient and modern, integral and arbitrary. The hurriedness and demands of the urban environment create melancholic residues; as Benjamin describes it, "the palm tree looked homeless—all the more so as it had long been understood that not the dark soil but the adjacent drawing room was its proper abode" (pp. 345–46). Childhood in the modern city therefore offers a network of replacements

to replace the original essence of things: a pit replaces the dark soil, a foreign loggia replaces a cradle, the rhythm of the metropolitan railway replaces a lullaby. The palm tree that looks homeless is understood as a prefiguration of Benjamin's state at the time of writing and of the tragic destiny of European Jews in the coming future. Development means moving forward while simultaneously leaving something behind. A child who gradually turns into an adult is required to leave behind, to a certain extent, his dependency and innocence. Growing up in the city of Berlin around 1900 meant carrying out the complex processes of development using various replacements for particular original objects and relationships, while at the same time having to adjust to the haste and excessiveness of the modern environment (Benjamin, 2003 [1939]). This challenge of developing with replacements for the original, a challenge that the child was required to face too early and too excessively, left psychic residues in terms of memory traces, melancholic scars, and a continuous obscure longing.

These characteristics of development find another expression in "The Loggias" through the notion of growing time:

Time grew old in those shadowy little rooms, which looked out on the courtyards. And that is why the morning, whenever I encountered it on the loggia, had already been morning for so long that it seemed more itself there than at any other spot. Never did I have a chance to wait for morning on the loggia; every time, it was already waiting for me. (2002 [1938], p. 346)

Time in the context of childhood in "The Loggias" did not offer a gradual blooming but rather a growing old in the shadows. Time lingers in the loggias, never absent, never missed or longed for. The new day, as presented by the time of morning, was always already present and waiting. This could have potentially been a secure and comforting presence for the child, but instead, it created an experience of stagnation.

"The Loggias" ends with the gradual dominance of a melancholic tone. The child who had gazed into courtyards and dreamed in the loggias finds himself, in adulthood, devoid of

a sense of home or destination, trapped in the memories of the loggias' shadowy stillness: "In the years since I was a child, the loggias have changed less than other places. This is not the only reason they stayed with me. It is much more on account of the solace that lies in their uninhabitability for one who himself no longer has a proper abode. They mark the outer limit of the Berliner's lodging" (p. 346). The loggias are presented as an image of the initial foundation of space and time, the genesis of the physical and metaphysical. The child who was once intimate with their divine essence finds himself, in the present, trapped in them, outside his own proper abode:

Berlin—the city god itself—begins in them. The god remains such a presence there that nothing transitory can hold its ground beside him. In his safekeeping, space and time come into their own and find each other. Both of them lie at his feet here. The child who was once their confederate, however, dwells in his loggia, encompassed by this group, as in a mausoleum long intended just for him. (p. 346)

The ending note of "The Loggias" melancholically contrasts the childhood promise of fulfillment with the adult's mature, desolate state. An allusion to *Romeo and Juliet* further emphasizes the tragic destiny of the author, whose fate has become a mausoleum: "Romeo's last sigh flitted through our backyard in search of the echo that Juliet's vault held ready for it" (p. 346). Childhood is presented as a magical time when the whole universe lies open before the child's eyes. Like the genesis of the world, childhood offers open horizons and distinct opportunities to collect innovative experiences in manifold ways. The magical atmosphere of childhood is affected by its relatedness to the beginning of life, to embryonic experiences, and, intuitively, to the mother and the maternal. These childhood connections to the maternal are presented as a nurturing promise for later fulfillment, yet excessive replacements and cryptic messages are also woven into the memories of childhood, as a prefiguration of the destiny of the mausoleum.

The Maternal

The child's affinity to the maternal aspect is most prominently presented in "Winter Morning" (*Wintermorgen*). Here, the *Denkbild* opens with a childhood wish and its fulfillment:

The fairy in whose presence we are granted a wish is there for each of us. But few of us know how to remember the wish we have made; and so, few of us recognize its fulfillment later in our lives. I know the wish of mine that was fulfilled, and I will not say it was any more clever than the wishes children make in fairy tales. It took shape in me with the approach of the lamp, which, early on a winter morning, at half past six, would cast the shadow of my nursemaid on the covers of my bed. (p. 357)

The nursemaid who stands in this scene as an image of the maternal is only present through her shadow. Her shadow replaces her actual figure, just as she replaces the actual mother. The image of the nursemaid is therefore an image of an image, a double replacement for the actual mother. The atmosphere of waking up on winter mornings is presented as ideal: "only the voice of my nursemaid disturbed the solemnity with which the winter morning used to give me up into the keeping of things in my room" (p. 357). This image expresses the child's longing for a regressive form of being, surrounded by the things in his room and the multilayered sensual experience they offer. This experience embodies a singular wish he had made as a child and that was fulfilled. The first object that carries his wish is the lamp, a pivotal image in Benjamin's writings.² The lamp casts its light on images, and that light guides the child to turn his gaze to them and remember them.

The nursemaid lights a fire in the stove and "when it was ready, she would put an apple in the little oven to bake" (2002 [1938], p. 357). The child is fascinated by the apple as it bakes in the flames of the oven. He looks into the oven, waiting patiently, trying to "detect the fine bubbly fragrance that came from a deeper and more secretive cell" (p. 357). This hidden temptation, carrying the ancient myth from the beginning of time, embodies enigmatic messages for the curious child:

There lay the apple, the dark, warm fruit that—familiar and yet transformed, like a good friend back from a journey—now awaited me. It was the journey through the dark land of the oven’s heat, from which it had extracted the aromas of all the things the day held 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 in its smell could all too easily escape me on the way to my tongue. (p. 357)

The apple is presented as a dialectical image that conveys historical meanings and an eternal essence and at the same time provides a “now-time” (*Jetztzeit*), a momentary experience that is destined to soon be lost. The childhood experience that the apple provides can be brought to memory by the adult as a vivid image experienced in a condensed sensual form. As a child, waking up in his private garden of Eden, Benjamin has already internalized the experience of loss. He hesitates to bite into the fruit of desire because he senses that “the fugitive knowledge” embodied in its smell “could too easily escape me on the way to my tongue” (p. 357). Although the apple carries with it a history of ancient times, it also presents a promise that can suddenly disappear.

This enchanted experience gradually weakens on the way to school and comes to an abrupt termination by the time he arrives: “no sooner had I arrived than, at the touch of my bench, all the weariness that at first seemed dispelled returned with a vengeance. And with it this wish; to be able to sleep my fill” (p. 357). The initial wish to wake up to the desired scene presented earlier is suddenly replaced by a wish to return to sleep. The threat of having to approach the external world without preparation becomes explicit in the confession made by the adult author in the conclusion: “But it was a long time before I recognized its fulfillment in the fact that all my cherished hopes for a position and proper livelihood had been in vain” (pp. 357–58). The desolate adult author finds himself emptied of his dreams. Just as Eve found herself expelled from Eden with the sweet taste of the forbidden fruit still in her mouth, the

author finds himself in adulthood with nothing but the image of waking up to the shadow of the nursemaid on his bed and the warmth of the shining cheeks of the dark fruit in his hands.

Another *Denkbild* in Benjamin's *Berlin Childhood* that centers on the maternal image is "The Fever" (*Das Fieber*). This text opens with a thought on childhood illness as part of the misfortune that would follow Benjamin his whole life: "It was something that the onset of every illness always demonstrated anew: with what perfect tact, how considerately and skillfully, misfortune found its way to me" (p. 362). This distinct misfortune of frequent illness affected the child's life experience and had a pivotal place in the formation of his point of view: "I was often sick. This circumstance perhaps accounts for something that others call my patience but that actually bears no resemblance to a virtue: the predilection for seeing everything I care about approach me from a distance, the way the hours approached my sickbed" (p. 362). Illness demanded that the child stay home, in bed, close to his mother. In times of illness, the familiar bed went through a transformation: "My bed, which ordinarily was the site of the quietest and most retiring existence, now acquired a public status and regard" (p. 363). His childhood bed is presented as otherwise being "the preserve of secret enterprises" such as reading, playing with candles, and "that breathless, silent sport, which for me was never free of a secret anxiety" (p. 363), and with this he implies persecutory thoughts about illness as punishment for his "sins."

The most distinct transformation in these times of illness is the presence of the child's actual mother. Only in these times did she make her child's bed, dedicate herself to giving him his medicine, take his temperature, and, most significantly, sit by him and caress him: "Caresses laid a bed for this current. I loved them, for in my mother's hand there were stories rippling, which I might later hear from her lips. Such stories brought to light what little I knew of my forebears" (p. 363). Benjamin presents his episodes of childhood illness and recovery as processes of birth or rebirth, from embryonic life to the emergence into the world. Lying in bed and being caressed by his mother are presented as authentic moments of "aura," in Benjamin's conception, meaning the pure form of beauty (Benjamin, 2003

[1939]; Didi-Huberman, 2005). These moments embody an integration of body and spirit in which a transformation, or an internal translation, takes place, from the physical caress to stories that ripple. The mother's hand is presented as a dialectical image in which the "then" is experienced in the "now" and the sensual-emotional-relational experience is translated into stories and histories. These moments of maternal intimacy, which ended as soon as the child regained his health, can be thought of as screen memories of the continuous longing embodied in his predilection for seeing everything he cares about approach him from a distance, somewhat as "a traveller sitting next to the window of a railway carriage and describing to someone inside the carriage the changing views which you see outside" (Freud, 1913, p. 135).

Stories were created not only in his mother's hand, but also in the stillness of illness. The author reminisces about himself as a child, transforming his sickbed into a cave, translating the embryonic dark surroundings into stories: "I sometimes arranged things so that a cave opened up in this mountain wall. I crawled inside; I drew the covers over my head and turned my ear toward the dark abyss, feeding the stillness now and then with words. Which came back out of it as stories" (Benjamin, 2002 [1938], p. 364).

The Prefiguration of a Mausoleum

Childhood experiences are presented as evolving in a constant tension between an urge to regress to the internal world and a curiosity about exploring the external world. The child is tempted to remain in or to recreate an embryonic world of interior warmth and security as a way of coping with the multifaceted threats he faces. Pushing towards the resolution of the oedipal conflict, the child faces both external and internal challenges that he needs to process and comprehend in order to gradually find his own individual path between his internal drives and fantasies, the experiences offered by the external world, and the demand that he become a member of society and culture, or, in Benjamin's language, a citizen. Images and

memories of childhood are regarded as a prefiguration of his present state at the time of writing the memoir and, moreover, a prefiguration of the fate of his entire generation: the past promise of equality and prosperity given to Jews in German-speaking countries and the upcoming atrocities of the Nazi regime and the war.

“A Ghost” (*Ein Gespenst*) presents these challenges in childhood as inevitably pushing the author, as a child, toward the abyss embodied in the image of the mausoleum. This *Denkbild* recalls an image that he finds himself witnessing as a child of seven or eight one evening while playing in the garden—one of the servant girls “is still standing at the iron gate leading to some forgotten little avenue” (p. 376). Simultaneously, the child’s long exploration of the big garden has come to an end, and he recalls his internal state at the time: “All day long, I had been keeping a secret—namely, my dream from the previous night” (p. 376). This child is presented as being still immersed in his internal world of dreams. “In this dream, a ghost had appeared to me. I would have had a hard time describing the place where the specter went about its business. Still, it resembled a setting that was known to me, though likewise inaccessible” (p. 376).³ This familiar yet inaccessible place then becomes specified as the parents’ bedroom: “This was a corner of my parents’ bedroom that was covered by a faded purple velvet curtain, behind which hung my mother’s dressing gowns. The darkness on the other side of the curtain was impenetrable: this corner formed the infernal (*verrufene*) pendant to the paradise that opened with my mother’s linen closet” (p. 376). The child already knows that this distinct space called paradise is impenetrable, yet he is enchanted by its secret temptation:

In this way the old mysterious magic of knitting and weaving, which once had inhabited the spinning wheel, was divided into heaven and hell. Now the dream came from the latter kingdom: a ghost that busied itself at a wooden framework from which silk fabrics were hanging. These silken things the ghost stole. It did not snatch them up, nor did it carry them away; properly speaking, it did nothing with them or to them. Nevertheless, I knew

it had stolen them, just as in legends the people who come upon a ghostly banquet, even without seeing the spirits there eat or drink, know they are feasting. It was this dream that I had kept to myself. (p. 376)

The ghost stands for the child's imaginary world—his fears, desires, and shame—and in his dreams these ghostly internal parts steal his mother's precious silk. The act of stealing, an act that only the dreamer knows about and one that apparently does not have any consequences nor leave any evidence, represents the notion of theft from the embryonic space of his being, from his mother's secret corner. The combination of its being the mother's secret corner and its location in the parents' bedroom represents the dialectics of the maternal as both nurturing and sexual.

The inhibition of the child's integration of his external and internal worlds interrupts the crucial movement from a passive stance to an active stance. This inhibition is further strengthened through an actual theft that takes place in the house the following night:

The following night, I noticed—and it was as if a second dream had intruded upon the first—my parents coming into my room at an unusual hour. My eyes were already closed again before I could grasp the fact that they had locked themselves in with me. When I awoke next morning, there was nothing for breakfast. The house—this much I understood—had been burglarized. (p. 376)

A matrix of manifold paradoxes unfolds in this scene: the child's secret investigation of his parents' bedroom is transformed into an intrusion by his parents into his own bedroom; the fantasized ambiguous theft of silk fabrics is transformed into an actual large-scale burglary of the house; the imaginary ghost becomes an actual group of burglars; and the parents as authority figures are transformed into frightened individuals seeking shelter in their son's bedroom. The child is challenged by these events to integrate his internal realm of fantasy and dreams into the external reality.

Hence, in contrast to memories of childhood that resemble “a mother who lays her newborn on her breast without waking it” (p. 345), here the memory of childhood is that of a child waking up to a nightmare of theft: his childhood has been stolen from him. This challenge is further burdened by the notion that the servant girl whom the child had witnessed standing at the iron gate the previous evening had been part of the burglars’ scheme. If his mind had been prepared to interpret what he saw in terms of external implications, he could have possibly prevented the burglary. This memory of temptation, threat, and inhibition is presented as a fateful prefiguration of the author’s destiny. The dream of the ghost is understood as a prefiguration of the actual burglary, the actual burglary is presented as a prefiguration of the author’s experience of having his childhood and adulthood stolen from him, and the burglarized house is understood as a prefiguration of the atrocities that European Jews were destined to suffer at the time Benjamin was writing his memoir and even beyond his own untimely death.

This developmental failure contributes to the child immersing himself more deeply in his secret dream world and withdrawing more profoundly from external demands. “I was supposed to make a statement in the matter. But concerning the behavior of the maidservant who had stood at the iron gate in the evening, I knew nothing. And what I thought I understood much better—my dream—I kept secret” (p. 377). The ghost dream is a deep secret in the child’s experience. The scene that it evokes can be thought of as a representation of the primal scene, in which the child witnessing it experiences a dramatic conflict over the forbidden fruit of knowledge, involving temptation and dread. The child suffers from guilt stemming from his identification with the ghost in the ghost dream and its desire to enter his parents’ bedroom and steal something from his mother’s secret corner. He claims to know nothing about the actual events that led to the burglary and thinks he “understood much better” about the dream. Eventually, he chooses to close his eyes and mouth to both actual and dream knowledge: to know nothing and to say nothing. With this choice, he implicitly destines himself to a developmental arrest.

Translating Images into Words

A deeper understanding of the child's distinct choice is provided by a presentation of the external world as foreign and threatening. This external world takes the form mainly of school and of allusions to adult life, such as establishing a professional position and building a home. School is most often presented by Benjamin as a threat to his continued sensual-emotional exploration of the world. The rules, expectations, and rigid discipline of school hold the constant potential for failure, reproach, and reprimand. The external world is presented as a space for exploration only under conditions that enable that world to maintain its imaginative-magical essence. This kind of exploration is seen most vividly in the child's encounter with nature, as presented in "Butterfly Hunt" (*Schmetterlingsjagd*). This *Denkbild* opens with a butterfly collection that serves as a reminder of summer residences in the environs of Berlin where the Benjamin family used to spend its vacations:

Cabbage butterflies with ruffled edging, brimstone butterflies with superbright wings, vividly brought back the ardors of the hunt, which so often had lured me away from well-kept garden paths into a wilderness, where I stood powerless before the conspiring elements—wind and scents, foliage and sun—that were bound to govern the flight of the butterflies. (p. 350)

Confronting the untimely wilderness of nature, where modernism has not yet taken hold, the child lets the powers of nature act upon him, a receptive stance that is revealed as transformative:

Between us, now, the old law of the hunt took hold: the more I strove to conform, in all the fibers of my being, to the animal—the more butterfly-like I became in my heart and soul—the more this butterfly itself, in everything it did, took on the color of human volition; and in the end, it was as if its capture was the price I had to pay to regain my human existence. (p. 351)

In the process of hunting a butterfly, one must, to a certain extent, become a butterfly. The child's discovery that stories can be translated from the dark stillness of his sickbed is followed by the discovery that the languages of butterflies, flowers, and children can be translated to a communicative language during a butterfly hunt:

On that laborious way back, the spirit of the doomed creature entered into the hunter. From the foreign language in which the butterfly and the flowers had come to an understanding before his eyes, he now derived some percepts. His lust for blood had diminished; his confidence was grown all the greater. (p. 351)

In *Nachträglichkeit*, the author understands the child at that time to have been experiencing a late answer to the guilt he had suffered since the ghost dream and the burglary: hunting, and curiosity in general, can be motivated by a desire for translation rather than a lust for blood.

Under the distinct conditions of being close to nature, at a safe distance from both wilderness and modernity, the child can make certain transitions that he is not able to make in his regular urban environment—he becomes part of nature, part of the wilderness of animal and plant lives. His eyes remain wide open to the transformations in the languages of nature that are embodied in the dialogue between the butterfly and the flower. He can stand “powerless before the conspiring elements—wind and scents, foliage and sun” (p. 350) and not feel agonizingly passive. The pivotal element of this transformation is not aggression or the successful hunt, but rather the child's growing confidence in himself and his surroundings. Gradually, processes of translation and movement occurs between passive and active stances, between the images that appear in front of his eyes and the sensations, feelings, and thoughts that emerge from within. He experiences himself both as an inseparable part of nature and as a witness to its wonders.

This transformative transition between the manifold perspectives and impressions that the author remembers from his childhood butterfly hunt can be momentarily captured

through a continuous process of becoming in language, most distinctly in names:

The air in which this butterfly once hovered is today wholly imbued with a word—one that has not reached my ears or crossed my lips for decades. This word has retained that unfathomable reserve which childhood names possess for the adult. Long-kept silence, long concealment, has transfigured them. (p. 351)

This conclusion captures one of Benjamin's pivotal notions within his theory of language, or the theory of becoming in language. With the picture of the butterfly hunt, a word is revealed to him that totally captures "the air in which this butterfly once hovered." Following the child's choice in "A Ghost" to keep his ghost dream secret, he decides not to reveal the word that is revealed to him during the writing of the present text. The author understands in *Nachträglichkeit* that even while the "long-kept silence, long concealment" create manifold inhibitions, they are also the conditions necessary for retaining "that unfathomable reserve which childhood names possess" (p. 351).

Through a collection of childhood images, Benjamin's memoir strives to create new experiences that are attributed to the "then" of childhood. This process of remembering and reconstructing early memories resembles psychoanalysis, yet Benjamin's aspiration is to create a distinct language, constructed by constellations of pictures and thought-images through which one can create stories, and a personal history. This distinct language is built by what it conceals no less than by what it reveals, by what is kept silent no less than by what is communicated: "For language is in every case not only communication of the communicable but also, at the same time, a symbol of the noncommunicable. This symbolic side of language is connected to its relation to signs" (Benjamin, 2004 [1916], p. 74). The language that Benjamin constructs in *Berlin Childhood* embodies the singular history of his generation. The processes of translation that are embodied in *Berlin Childhood* convey translation as a transformation from the maternal and domestic realm into the public realm (as expressed in "The Loggias," "Winter Morning," and "The Fever"), from an en-

closed surroundings into broader possibilities and innovative opportunities (as expressed in “Butterfly Hunt”), and from infantile realm of dreams and fantasies into a developmental arrest and a melancholic abyss (as expressed in “A Ghost”). Either way, translation is presented as a process of transformation because it conveys a change in meaning and perspectives.

In “An Outline of Psychoanalysis,” Freud discusses the theme of translation. He asks how we learn to know reality, and he gives the answer that it is through our system of perception and by developing simultaneous listening to both the external and the internal world:

Reality will always remain “unknowable.” The yield brought to light by scientific work from our primary sense perceptions will consist in an insight into connections and dependent relations which are present in the external world, which can somehow be reliably reproduced or reflected in the internal world of our thought and a knowledge of which enables us to “understand” something in the external world, to foresee it and possibly to alter it. (Freud, 1938, p. 196)

The growing ability to know the world requires a movement from passive receptivity to an active alteration. For this to occur, the individual must learn to trust the ability of the external event to be reliably reproduced or reflected in their internal world. In other words, reality itself remains unknown unless we find ways to recreate it in our thoughts and dreams.

Behind the attributes (qualities) of the object under examination which are presented directly to our perception, we have to discover *something else* which is more independent of the particular receptive capacity of our sense organs and which approximates more closely to what may be supposed to be the real state of affairs. We have no hope of being able to reach the latter itself, since it is evident that everything new that we have inferred must nevertheless be *translated back into the language of our perceptions*, from which it is simply impossible for us to free ourselves. (p. 196, emphasis added)

Alongside the inability to know reality as such, regressing to the language of our perceptions, most emphatically in images, enables us to know reality, and to know our presence in the surroundings of reality. Translating back to our images of childhood is the only way we can know our present state and our present reality. Hence, discovering pictures and images that are referred to the past is our path to discovering something about our present. Moreover, translating back to thinking-in-pictures does not just enable us to discover obscure aspects of our present experience, but the process of knowing reality also involves discovering something else, something that is distinct from the real state of affairs, from any defined time or space, and from material knowledge.

In his childhood memoir, Benjamin presents himself as a child who witnesses the potential of growth and development, yet has learned to possess “the predilection for seeing everything I care about approach me from a distance, the way the hours approached my sickbed” (Benjamin, 2002 [1938], p. 362). His psychosomatic fragility, as well as the demand made by modern urban culture that we relate to replacements instead of to the original, contributed significantly to what Benjamin presents as the melancholic unfolding of his adult life. These contributions, among other factors, led to the creation of inhibitions in his ability to integrate his internal world of dreams and fantasy with the external world, with its demands, frustration, and compromise. This integration had been possible only under the specific conditions of being close to the maternal or to nature and is presented through the image of the mother’s caresses translated into stories and the languages of flowers, butterflies and children translated into each other.

The abyss he was confronted with in his development is presented most prominently in “A Ghost.” There, he was expected to transform from being deeply submerged in his dream world, and from his passive stance toward the external world, to being able to create links between the chain of events he witnessed that night and the following burglary that occurred there. The rhythm and intensity of these events made him regress to his internal world, in which he said nothing and knew nothing. But this choice left him in an eternally passive

stance, while the iron gate to knowing, in its broad potential connotations, remained closed.

Benjamin's childhood memoir ends with the melancholic tone conveyed in "The Little Hunchback" (*Das bucklichte Männlein*). The child's gaze has been naturally attracted to the internal more than to the external, to closed spaces more than to open spaces, and to the dark more than to the light. He finds himself seeking esoteric, underground places: "horizontal gratings . . . that overlooked a shaft opening into the pavement. The shaft provided a little sun and ventilation to skylight in basement apartments down below. The skylights almost never reached the open air, but were themselves underground" (p. 384). In retrospect, Benjamin interprets this enigmatic preference as the hidden secret of his developmental arrest and present desolation:

Hence the curiosity with which I gazed down through the bars of every grate on which I had just set foot, in order to carry away from the subterranean world the image of a canary, a lamp, or a basement dweller. Sometimes, though, after I had looked for these sights in vain during the day, I found the situation reversed the following night: in my dreams there were looks, coming from just such cellar holes, that froze me in my tracks—looks flung at me by gnomes with pointed hats. No sooner had they chilled me to the marrow, than they were gone again. (pp. 384–85)

The constellation of the child staring down into the subterranean world, imagining creatures of dark worlds, is thus reversed in his dream. He finds himself there being stared at by these imagined creatures. The child's fantasy world becomes external and the relationship between gazing and being gazed at is reversed. The adult author continually endeavors to translate these infantile images into words. In the process of reminiscing, an enigmatic message from his mother comes to mind:

Only today do I know what he was called. My mother gave me the hint. "Greetings from Mr. Clumsy" (*Ungeschickt lässt grüssen*), she would say, when I had broken something or fallen down. And now I understand what she was talking about. She was speaking of the little hunchback, who had been looking at me. Whoever is looked at by this little man pays no attention. Either to himself or to the little man. He stands dazed before a heap of fragments. (p. 385)

Benjamin emphasizes here that the threatening experience of being looked at by the little hunchback was repressed before it ever reached his consciousness. Only in *Nachträglichkeit* can this experience be translated into a conscious thought. This forgotten image is translated as a mark of failure, the sign of an identification with the crippled, uncanny, anomalous.⁴

To the child's dismay, the little hunchback is revealed in his dreams to be his double. The image of the double intrigued Freud's thought, and most emphatically the self-observing double: "A special agency is slowly formed there, which is able to stand over against the rest of the ego, which has the function of observing and criticizing the self and of exercising a censorship within the mind, and which we become aware of as our 'conscience'" (Freud, 1919, p. 235). According to Freud, the imaginary double carries the individual's split-off functions of self-criticism as well as something of their unfulfilled futures: "There are also all the unfulfilled but possible futures to which we still like to cling in phantasy, all the strivings of the ego which adverse external circumstances have crushed, and all our suppressed acts of volition which nourish in us the illusion of Free Will" (p. 236). For Benjamin, the little hunchback's gaze that follows him from childhood expresses a form of mourning for the freedom that had to be sacrificed in the uncomplete resolution of the oedipal conflict and the process of *Bildung*. The sensation of terror and foreignness that accompanies the experience of the double is explained by Freud as a process of archaic projection: "the quality of uncanniness can only come from the fact of the 'double' being a creation dating back to a very early mental stage, long since surmounted—a stage, incidentally, at which it wore a more friendly aspect. The 'double'

has become a thing of terror, just as, after the collapse of their religion, the gods turned into demons” (p. 236). An uncanny effect accompanies this phenomenon because it embodies the experience of “something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary [appearing] before us in reality, or when a symbol takes over the full functions of the thing it symbolizes” (p. 243).

Hannah Arendt argues that the hunchback was an early acquaintance of Benjamin, but only in *Berlin Childhood*, “did he clearly state who and what it was that had terrified him so early in life and was to accompany him until his death” (2007 [1968], p. 6). Benjamin translates this singular image as a pre-figuration of his tragic becoming, of being given the identity of a handicapped subject that gazes on nothing but fragments, a melancholic presence obliged to transform memories into history, but not into actual growth. In *Nachträglichkeit*, Benjamin understands his gaze as dreadfully turning back at him, intensifying its impact. His childhood surroundings have gradually been transformed into the form of the little hunchback, closed in on him rather than serving as the opening gates to the world. The objects in his early surroundings became similar to the little hunchback, and this transformation was embodied in the new names that they received:

Where the hunchback (*Männlein*) appeared, I could only look on uselessly. It was a look from which things receded—until, in a year’s time, the garden had become a little garden (*Gärtlein*), my room a little room (*Kämmerlein*), and the bench a little bench (*Bänklein*). They shrank, and it was as if they grew a hump, which made them the little man’s own. The little man preceded me everywhere. Coming before, he barred the way. . . . Only, I never saw him. It was he who always saw me. (Benjamin, 2002 [1938], p. 385)

The distinct places in the city of Berlin that were presented in the various *Denkbilder* of the memoir, as places where the child had lived, observed, experienced, and collected memories, are transformed, with this discovery about the little hunchback, into claustrophobic experience. Then, Benjamin comes to a tragic conclusion: the little child became one with the little

hunchback, embodied in his transfigured body, devoted to his desolate destiny, and, moreover, coerced to forever carry the memory of this destiny:

He has long since abdicated. Yet his voice, which is like the hum of the gas burner, whispers to me over the threshold of the century: "Dear little child, I beg of you, / Pray for the little hunchback too" (*Liebes Kindlein, ach, ich bitt, Bet fürs bucklicht Männlein mit*). (p. 385)

Benjamin's childhood memoir can be regarded as a late effort to translate the images and pictures of childhood and thereby to express the author's desolate destiny, both as an individual and as part of a generation of German Jews. In this context, the hunchback's voice, which is like "the hum of the gas burner" (Benjamin, 2002 [1938], p. 385) alludes to a 1939 Viennese report collected by Benjamin, saying that "The gas consumption of the Jewish population involved a loss to the gas company, since the biggest consumers were the ones who did not pay their bills. The Jews used the gas especially for committing suicide" (Arendt, 2007 [1968], p. 46).

The little hunchback is revealed to be the lost image for Benjamin's lost childhood. Moreover, the little hunchback is acknowledged by the author to be his historic double, who embodies cryptic messages regarding his identity, and a prefiguration of his tragic destiny.⁵ Benjamin's deliverance as an individual, and moreover as a voice of his Jewish generation, is found in writing. Writing embodies the transformation into an active stance by creating a language of unfolding images, naming, and constructing history. The act of naming embodies the transcendental significance of the word. The work of mourning lost childhood and lost history involves translating the visual images of the past that lives in memory into a verbal language, through the medium of writing.

In a *Denkbild* entitled "The Reading Box" (*Der Lesekasten*), Benjamin presents the image of a box filled with little tablets, with the letters of the alphabet inscribed on them, that he had as a child when he was learning to read: "each person developed those capabilities which helped to determine the course

of his life. And because—so far as my own life is concerned—it was reading and writing that were decisive, none of the things that surrounded me in my early years arouses greater longing than the reading box” (Benjamin, 2002 [1938], p. 396). Text for Benjamin touches on the dialectic between material and transcendental; it holds both a mortal body and an eternal soul. It draws a network of connections to all texts written by the writing individual since childhood, to all texts written throughout history, and furthermore to all texts that will potentially be written in the future. Alongside the replacements offered to him by urban culture and the inhibitions that followed, Benjamin acknowledges the linguistic and textual realm to be the dialectical space of both tender maternal embrace and active growth, of the “then” and the “now,” a true “now-time”: “Indeed, what I seek in it is just that: my entire childhood, as concentrated in the movement [*Griff*] by which my hand slid the letters into the groove, where they would be arranged to form words” (p. 396). Learning processes embody our vital movement forward, while at the same time creating mnemonic traces of loss. The author had learned to write many years earlier, yet the initial moment of translation from the language of dreaming and imagination to the language of written words is forever lost.

Language is not merely a medium with which we communicate but rather a medium through which we are communicated: “Language communicates the linguistic being of things” (Benjamin, 2004 [1916], p. 63). The act of naming is initially God’s act in the aftermath of his creation, and the complementary act of naming shared by God and humanity embodies the essence of humanity as created in God’s image [*betzelem*]. Therefore, Benjamin states, “*in the name, the mental being of man communicates itself to God*” (p. 65, emphasis in the original). The expulsion from Paradise as an archaic myth that is repeated for European Jews at the time, forced humanity to step outside the realm of pure language into a plurality of languages and affinities between words as abstract signs and words that signify the essence of things. After the fall from Eden, language inherently embodied translation and lamentation, a constant effort to come closer to the pure language of our initial being: “To be named—even when the namer is

godlike and blissful—perhaps always remains *an intimation of mourning*” (p. 73, emphasis added).

The fact that Benjamin was writing this childhood memoir as the atrocities of war were closing in on him gives these ideas a tragic tone. With this text, he is constructing not only a personal history but also a history of his generation. The writings of the Jewish intellectuals of that time, among them Freud and Benjamin, stand as historic testimonies to this dramatic rise and tragic fall.

Every text is both a distinct and individual creation and a hieroglyph of all texts. That, according to Benjamin, is the reason why writing embodies a translation that inherently involves memory, remembrance, and mourning. It is not only because one writes of one’s early memories under the aspect of content, but also because, by the very act of writing, one engages with the realm of the textual and linguistic, which inevitably involves the historical and the eternal. Every writing is an act of striving toward that “something else” that Freud referred to, distinct from any defined space or time, from any defined communication, pushing toward the horizons of the unknown. As Freud writes: “Concerning the factors of silence, solitude and darkness, we can only say that they are actually elements in the production of the infantile anxiety from which the majority of human beings have never become quite free” (1919, p. 252).

Notes

1. Benjamin’s childhood memoir does not explicitly discuss the author’s Jewish origins, with their tragic implications at the time of his writing. The melancholic tone embodied in the text can be read in the broad sense as a lamentation for a lost German Jewish culture. One singular reference to Benjamin’s Jewish origins and the complexity of belonging to a secular family is intriguingly presented in the *Denkbild* entitled “Sexual Awakening” (*Erwachen des Sexus*). He is presented there as a child, sent by his parents alone to celebrate the Jewish New Year at a reform congregation in the city. As he wanders the streets, lost, he experiences an innovative experience of sexual awakening (Benjamin, 2002 [1938], p. 386).
2. For example, 2005 [1933]; 2002 [1938], pp. 373, 388, 396, 404.
3. Ghosts were familiar imagery in Benjamin’s dreams; see for example Benjamin, 1999 [1982], p. 409.
4. The image of the child who has been looked at by the hunchback standing “dazed before a heap of fragments” alludes to Benjamin’s angel of history, as presented in his last manuscript: “His face is turned toward the past. Where a chain of events appears before *us*, *he* sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage [*unablässig Trümmer auf Trümmer*] and hurls it at his feet” (Benjamin, 2003 [1940], p. 392, emphasis in the original).
5. Arendt writes, “Wherever one looks in Benjamin’s life, one will find the little hunchback” (2007 [1968], p. 16).

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