

THE SCENE OF MEMORY

Names and Places, the Means of Translation

A Response to Carol Jacobs

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Benjamin's *Berlin Chronicle* is more than a splendid essay in autobiography; in the guise of an autobiography, it embodies an archeology of memory. Written in the early 30s and published as late as 1970, *Berlin Chronicle* appeared to its editor, Benjamin's friend from their Berlin school days, Gershom Scholem, not much more than a first, autobiographical attempt at what was to become in *Berlin Childhood around 1900* the panorama of a whole epoch rather than a personal memoir. But while we are fascinated by every archeology of a bygone era (and love to employ the archeological metaphors for that reason), we fall for the objectivity of the excavated which replaces the contact with what is lost by some mnemo-fetishism -- the relics of an old world order reaching uncannily into our own multi-cultural universe. *Berlin Chronicle* is a precious document in this respect, because it exposes the mnemotechnical substructure of such archeologies, the *arché* of archeology. That is, it is not a psychology in the autobiographical sense of making up one's memories.

[Walter Benjamin, *Berliner Chronik*, ed. Gershom Scholem (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1970); trans. Edmund Jephcott, *Reflections* (New York: Schocken, 1978), 3-60.]

Contrary to the evidence of archeologies, the evidence chronicled by Benjamin is linguistic and, as such, non-evident; it needs to be read and lends itself to reading. At the end of the 19th century, which comes to an end, perhaps, at the end of the 20th, Benjamin traces, and translates the traces, of a mnemonics forgotten but readable; in rendering traceable, within the significant material, what is readable, his *Berlin Chronicle* transforms the non-evident (the by necessity non-evident) into an evidence called "reading." His own name for this type of evidence, fully developed in *Berlin Childhood* or *One-Way-Street*, is the "dialectical image," whose paradox consists in that it presents what does not meet the eye. The ancient art of memory excavated by Frances Yates illuminated this evidence by an inner eye called "imagination."

Readings, like Carol Jacobs' reading of Benjamin, or any reading in a similarly strict sense of the word, are exercises in dialectics; they "show" (to mix the Benjaminian with a Wittgensteinian metaphor) what is to be read. Commenting upon the commented thus involves a process between meditation and repetition, the re-petition of what is to be regained through reading. Jacobs'

reading shows Benjamin “developing” the dialectical image. The irony of calling it an “image” is checked by the irony of calling its development a “chronicle.” What the *Berlin Chronicle* chronicles is not historical in the sense of some “facts” recorded “without philosophic treatment, or any attempt at literary style” (the OED’s definition of the chronicle quoted by Jacobs). Above all, the events related are discontinuous, and their discontinuity reveals the reader’s paradoxical task (a “task” not unlike the one of Benjamin’s notorious translator). What is missing here is the chronic organization of the material chronicled as much as the evidence of the “image” to be read.

The more advanced paradigms of the genre like Otto’s, the archbishop of Freising’s *Chronicle* (mentioned in Benjamin’s book on the baroque *Trauerspiel*), had already struggled with this paradox, since it was not at all obvious within the course of mixed events that were to be recorded from the history of the *civitas terrena* (that is, *permixta*) what was to be taken as an “event” at all. This remained to be read in the light of an entirely different state of affairs, the *civitas Dei* of Otto’s model Augustine. There, memory had to think, and take care, of the future in order to record the “eventuality” of events. Otto, who wrote towards the end of the 12th century, attempted to rewrite Augustine. For both, there was no more powerful indication of history than discontinuity; discontinuity was the name for the eventuality of events. Benjamin would be continuous with that tradition, if his main and only point were the “shocks” that qualify the “aura” of “disconnected snapshots” (as in Siegfried Kracauer’s theory of photography).

[Ottonis Episcopi Frisingensis *Chronica sive Historia de Duabus Civitatibus*, *Scriptores Rerum Germanicarum XIII* (Hannoverae et Lipsiae: Hahn, 1912): cited *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborn (London: Verso 1970), 77.]

Rather than presenting childhood memories, *Berlin Chronicle* traces the mechanics of memory. - Theoretician of memory rather than of epiphanies, dialectician of reading rather than of seeing, Benjamin investigates the means rather than the message: of the always already mediated. In the guise of a chronicle, the quintessential question of representation (*Darstellung* in the methodology of the *Trauerspiel*-book) enters the stage of memory. Method is *Umweg*, digression, or detour; *Darstellung*, more precisely, an exhibition of detour: a digression to be meditated. However, the figures of digression whose performance is to be meditated are the “pure means” of linguistic representation; they are figures whose temporality has been ruined in “allegory” (and whose ruin *is* allegory), but whose linguistic *idea* has surfaced and survived in those ruins as a language of “names.” In other words: No history of shocks is played out on the stage of memory, but a comedy of names. “Comedy” may be not one of Benjamin’s terms; his melancholy talent seems unfailingly drawn to tragedy and *Trauerspiel*. But the reading of his fate in Jacobs’ subtle analysis reveals the opposite, a comedy of errors.

“Topographically speaking,” the city has become the one and only scene, *Schauplatz*, where “profane illumination” takes place, or is likely to happen – in the café **Les deux magots**, for example, where one place calls up another, Paris Berlin. A forgotten encounter in Paris recalls and rewrites a forgotten one from Berlin. Like Scholem, one is tempted to put real names to this event and re-establish the lost “scheme” that came to Benjamin’s mind. But like Augustine who, in the *Confessions*, claims to have forgotten what his mother had to say after their celebrated “vision in Ostia,” Benjamin claims to have forgotten whom he was waiting for in **Les deux magots**. He admits at the same time remembering what was to be expected according to a “diagram of his life” that he was suddenly able to draw; a “graphic schema” of “passageways that lead us again and again, in different periods of life, to the friend, the betrayer, the beloved, the disciple, and master” (translation modified).

[Augustine, *Confessions*, Book IX.11.27.]

The topo-graphy, then, is one of “constellations” whose “graphic symbols” are accidental signposts in a labyrinth without center. As a model and metaphor of writing, this labyrinth has centers of vexation only. The Medusa is the master trope of such vexation; in turning away (from **Grete Radt**), Benjamin relates that he turned elsewhere (to **Jula Cohn**), that is, to some other though hidden center, whose Petrarchan symbol triggers him to draw, with the same “compelling force,” the schema of his life and write a sonnet to the member of some other “wedding,” as he is eager to elaborate; a sonnet addressed to the carrier of the symbol of desire (the ring with lute and laurel), and, to be even more precise, the finger thus encircled. Re-memberment: Leda on a ring now lost (of Greek origin); Medusa on a ring given away (of Roman origin); Laura, motif of a ring (of rather recent origins), and pretext of the sonnet; Pompey, not to forget, on a rival’s ring (allegedly from the real Renaissance, where the real heroes were called after Pompey). Whose diagram? Whose life? Whose memorial stone?

In an inversion of Goethe’s address to Rome (*Roman Elegy* I: “Tell me, you stones [...] Streets, say a word”), Benjamin makes sure that the *genius loci*, the genius of Paris now, speaks and what it speaks is names. The dark “garnet” from Alios Riegl’s *Late Roman Art Industry*, whose transparency brings a late Roman life to Medusa’s head, cannot have possibly carried so much weight (neither technically as is explained by Riegl, nor in Benjamin’s text, where the ring actually threatens to break.) Beside this jewel, the names of **Dorothea**, and **Ernst**, and **Grete** (not **Alfred**, or **Jula**) shine. What is brought to life, and kept alive, though not exactly in the life of their owners, are names -- including their Goethean text milieu.

[Alois Riegl, *Spätromische Kunstindustrie* (1901), new ed. (Wien: Österreichische Staatsdruckerei, 1927), s.v. "Granat," esp. pp. 266, 326-29, 339-46 (there is no Medusa-example in Riegl).]

This refers us back to what we know from Benjamin about the complex of *Elective Affinities*. The Goethe essay, as a matter of fact, was dedicated to Jula Cohn; it begins with one of Benjamin's central passages on the seal, the key passage on his many uses of that metaphor and emblem of the "truth" contained in works of art, associated for the occasion in a juxtaposition, as in Goethe's autobiography, of *Poetry and Truth* that is *Wahrheitsgehalt* (as opposed to *Sachgehalt*) and *Erfahrung*. The experience of applying one's seal ("die Erfahrung des Siegelns") is said to be an experience of difference (between *Wahrheitsgehalt* and *Sachgehalt*) "evident only" for whom it may concern: to the one who knows the name. (**Jula**, one might say, received the text – dedicated to her in 1924 – *instead* of the ring that changed its owner and went on to **Grete** after all.)

[Walter Benjamin, "Goethes Wahlverwandtschaften, Jula Cohn gewidmet," *Neue Deutsche Beiträge* (1924-25).]

Names surface in a constellation and stand for a constellation whose configuration is assembled "in their name," while the names, on the other hand, gain some second existence through the configuration whose configuring moment they are. The art of memory implicit in Benjamin's *Berlin Chronicle* depends, like the ancient *ars memoriae*, on "images" and their place-value in texts. "Names" are the markers through which these images are "fixed." The most perfect example imaginable is Benjamin's piece on the Berlin street crossing "**Steglitzer Ecke Genthiner**," whose design has been so brilliantly illuminated by Jacobs. In this theater of memory, we learn, remembrance is the "scene," *Schauplatz*, of the past and names are put on stage, "mise en scène." There is no re-enactment of the past on this stage but the sheer enactment of names, the re-collection of fragments that have been unearthed and rescued from the debris of time.

The city is the place of such recollection, where broken pieces might suddenly fall into place. What we find in "Benjamin's linguistic performance," as Jacobs observes, "is severed from its context and in itself broken;" only in this broken state of existence can the past be "viewed," and that means, indeed, read. It can "only" be read, but read after all. What the melancholy mind digs up and triumphantly contemplates, therefore, is not "nothing," not a loss but some treasure nevertheless, a "magot" like the Café's name. At the street-corner **Steglitzer** and **Genthiner**, aunt Lehmann towers into Benjamin's *Childhood*. Aunt Lehmann oversees not only this street, but calls up, by the sheer virtue of her name and, that is, as the "place-holder of some sovereignty," the whole surrounding March of **Brandenburg**, while, at the same time, marking a place, whose name, **Steglitz**, in turn reveals the sub-structure of "**Stiegen**" and "**steigen**" that leads deep down into the "mine" the same aunt places before the child on every visit – a mine

not unlike the dark pit (“Schacht”) of Hegelian memory, which appears in aunt Lehmann’s model an artificially well lighted place.

[Hegel, *Encyclopedia* (1830), § 453.]

But, as Carol Jacobs is careful to elaborate, the phonetic “veil of the acquired name” does speak only by virtue of a, however slight, transposition which associates the place-name, **Steglitz**, with a bird, **Stieglitz**, in whose cry the aunt’s voice reverberates, while echoing the network of this street-corner’s subterranean mine. Important enough, it is not the similarity between voice and cry that triggers a recollection, but the name’s hidden quality that produces, as a side-effect, a similarity of voices, a similarity which “can only take place in language.” The name marks a space, which is in itself a crypt, cryptical in its texture, while the voice remains outside and excluded.

Benjamin’s theater of memory, the *Schauplatz* of his writing, stages the name’s phonetical derivations as devices of a mnemo-technique. As etymology is meant to contain the memory of languages, Benjamin’s language of names contains, in a metaphor-like, although, precisely, non-metaphoric manner, what it “is about.” Memory speaks in a language of names. This name-language reverses the “conventional definition of onomato-poetics” to the effect that now “the entire language is onomato-poetic with respect to itself;” “we are to read,” as Jacobs proposes, “the term [*onomato-poiesis*] literally as a *making* of the name.” The model of the name, as opposed to the etymological model of metaphor, literally contains, within its space, the possibility of memory, whose pure mediality according to Benjamin is language -- and “translation” is this mediality’s most precise name, “already at play *within* the act of naming.”

This point needs further attention: the name’s concept and structure as a mode of representation, whose detour leads to the paradoxical anticipation of a “communicability” beyond the “means” of mere communication. Unmediated by any means, the name is the foreshadowing of an immediacy that encompasses the many layers of mnemo-technique. Within the mnemonic configuration of Benjamin’s work the name is the impossible figure, the one and crucial instance of impossibility in the realm of figures, which enables, nonetheless and “by no means,” figuration.

One of the unmistakably Benjaminian sayings one does not forget speaks of the “forest-like interior” of symbols (*silva*, forest: significant *materia* in neoplatonic terminology). Names are the “outside” of such symbolic depth: what is about to grow within the significant material is

anticipated in this depth. Its transformation and adaptation remains to be seen outside, and outside only. Conceived inside, the name proliferates outside, and establishes in the scene of memory, *Schauplatz* of reading rather than knowledge, the infinite connections and manifold coherences of language “as such.”

Eisenacher Strasse, not far from Steglitzer and Genthiner, May 1996.