

Article

The Death and Life of Walter Benjamin

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Abstract: What if Walter Benjamin actually made it to New York as he was escaping the Nazis, settling there for the rest of his long life? What if he was working on a sequel to his *Arcades Project*, translating his ideas about Paris, capital of the nineteenth century, to his new city and own epoch? And what if I inadvertently discovered the manuscript of this so-called *Manhattan Project*, and decided to write a study dedicated to the unearthed text? This paper offers a few reflections on, and quotations from, the book that I am currently, truly working on, which is an analysis of a phantom of a book, inspired by a real collection of reflections and quotations that were made in preparation for another book that was also never written.

Keywords: Benjamin; Walter; *Arcades Project*; Paris; New York; afterlife

“Suddenly there was a rush and a clatter and the tracks blazed with reflected light. A train pulled in, but going in the opposite direction. It brought passengers from Manhattan or who knew where. Although the train that arrived was not his, it brought some comfort, because if trains were coming *from* Manhattan, then trains were also going *to* Manhattan. In Grein’s mind, this was linked with a Cabalistic teaching that the Evil Spirit bears witness to the existence of God. If a left or dark side exists, then a right or light side must exist also. A solitary passenger had alighted and glanced at Grein from across the tracks. His face seemed to say mutely: I’ve come and you’re going...that’s how life is.”

—Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Shadows on the Hudson* ([1], p. 104)

The old world asserts itself on the new with no apologies. Apparitions talk to persons in the most casual of manners. Forgetfulness and repression lose the battle to the ghosts of the past. This is how the shadows on the Hudson manage to play such a central role in I. B. Singer’s city. Like most of the flesh-and-blood characters that populate his stories, the spiritual ones come from elsewhere. Everybody is a foreigner, especially those who have no body. Parvenues and pariahs prefer to keep

each other's company, whether real or imagined. The multitude of New Yorkers who were not born in this city do not share a history. Instead they are constantly looking back at their first incarnation, which they left behind.

I spent about a dozen years reading and writing for hours on end in the New York Public Library, on the corner of Forty-second Street and Fifth Avenue. Gradually it came to my attention that I was haunted by Walter Benjamin, especially by his *Arcades Project*, his book on Paris, capital of the nineteenth century, on which he worked for roughly the same number of years in the Bibliothèque nationale. Even after a couple of years of concentrated research dedicated to New York, capital of the twentieth century, I could not bring myself to admit that I was more than just *inspired* by that man and his unfinished book.

Needless to say, my grandiose project was going nowhere. One morning, though, I took my seat in the excessively air-conditioned reading room after a long bike ride in the steamy summer streets. When I looked across the football-sized room I saw an old man shuffling a stack of books. For some odd reason I decided to stand up and move closer. Then it dawned on me that I was looking at Walter Benjamin's ghost, who seemed to be working on the very book that I was struggling to write. I went back to my seat. That was the moment I realized that I need not write this sequel to Benjamin's *Arcades Project*. All I had to do was to *interpret* it: to simply, impossibly, literally, "read what was never written" ([2], p. 405).

"In a dream", Benjamin actually wrote in the mid-1920s, "I took my life with a gun. When it went off, I did not wake up but saw myself lying for a while as a corpse. Only then did I wake" ([3], p. 477). In this spirit, let's consider this fictional or hypothetical account, which begins where Benjamin's factual life ends. Faced with the desperate situation in Portbou, there was only one way he could have saved his life. With the help of a Spanish doctor he fakes his suicide and produces an unclaimed body as his own. He arrives in Lisbon with forged identification papers and boards the next ship to New York. The man who had already published his essays under quite a few pseudonyms becomes Carl Roseman, in tribute to Karl Rossmann, the protagonist of Franz Kafka's *Amerika* (originally titled *The Man who Disappeared*). Notice, however, that he eliminates the fateful K from his anglicized name.

A man he met on the ship from Europe secures for him a job at the mailroom of the Daily News Building on Forty-second Street and Second Avenue. Benjamin decides against contacting his many expatriate friends living in the US (such as Ernst Bloch, Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Siegfried Kracauer, Bertolt Brecht, and Hannah Arendt), or anyone else for that matter. Guarding his complete anonymity under his borrowed identity, he assumes the position of a kind of specter living an afterlife-haunting and haunted by his new city. Rather than contesting the reports about his death, he embraces this new solitary life, this posthumous existence, as if it were his personal resurrection.

After retiring in 1957 from his job with a modest pension, Benjamin (aka Roseman) begins to frequent the main branch of the Public Library on Fifth Avenue, up the street from his old workplace. His daily research leads to the composition of a sequel to *The Arcades Project*, which he calls either *The Manhattan Project* or *New York, Capital of the Twentieth Century*. This manuscript will remain his sole occupation for the next thirty years. Leaving the library building one rainy day in 1987, he slips and falls down the grand staircase. His ninety-five-year-old body cannot sustain the injuries, and he is declared dead (for the second time) before reaching the hospital. After the ambulance departs,

Beatrice Wald, a librarian who was his only known acquaintance, takes possession of the briefcase he left behind. It contains all of his surviving papers.

Eventually Wald bequeaths the manuscript of *The Manhattan Project* to the Public Library, where it is filed away as the Carl Roseman Papers, without attracting any scholarly attention whatsoever. Inadvertently, I come upon the manuscript while browsing the library's catalog. It is preceded by Wald's letter that recounts the above biographical details (she is, though, unaware of Roseman's true identity or importance). A thorough investigation proves beyond reasonable doubt the true authorship of the text.

The book that I ended up writing is an attempt to make sense of the hundreds of loose pages, written in miniature script and somewhat broken English, which comprise the unearthed manuscript. Since further biographical details are kept to a minimum, and since quotations from the text itself are restricted to Benjamin's own citations from his numerous sources, I treat my book as a work of pure textual interpretation. To clarify, *The Manhattan Project* is not reproduced but only analyzed. My book may therefore be understood as a work of secondary literature. To which one can add two observations: First, that Benjamin treats the city itself as a book that must be constantly read and interpreted. Second, that his many actual writings on cities are also structured like a metropolis, as Graeme Gilloch observes in his careful analysis of Benjamin's "text-as-city" and "city-as-text" ([4], p. 182).

The subject of my book is equal parts an author named Walter Benjamin and a city called New York. Yet its success or failure should be measured by its fidelity to a place more than to a thinker. This has to do with the fact that, like virtually anyone who has ever written anything of value about New York, Benjamin must be relegated to the position of the city's *ghostwriter*. Following Rem Koolhaas's suggestion, we could say that, like many public figures, the city has neither the time nor will nor ability to contemplate its own life and recount it in orderly chapters ([5], p. 11). The city cannot write its own autobiography. Instead, it hires a host of spectral scribes who are more than happy to do this job for it. *The Manhattan Project*—this epic montage of quotations from, and reflections on, a seemingly endless array of texts revolving around New York—should certainly earn its compiler a seat of honor among his shadowy peers. And if this is indeed the case, then I am no more than the ghostwriter of a ghostwriter of a ghostwriter.

Think of this as the "Roseman Hypothesis". Hypothesis means in Greek "that which is placed under" ([6], p. 23). Like *The Arcades Project*, *The Manhattan Project* takes an actual place and places it under. These texts can perform this neat trick by not pretending to make a statement about the reality in which we live (a thesis). Instead they are allowing us to observe what happens to our dully-accepted reality once their ideas are placed underneath it. What is placed under can function either as a pillar or as a bomb. Though a hypothesis as such does not make a direct claim for truth, the truth depends on the hypothesis that lies, or lurks, under. Sometimes using a lie is the best way to tell the truth.

But there is another important thing that a hypothesis can do. In ancient theater, the term hypothesis denotes something like the program that, nowadays, is handed out by the ushers before a play begins. A classical hypothesis supplies a compact plot summary, describes the setting, identifies the actors, and gives various notes about the production and the playwright. *The Manhattan Project* can be understood as a hypothesis in this sense as well, for it is meant to elucidate in a condensed form the elaborate drama that unfolds in front of our eyes—not only in this specific city but also, by synecdoche,

in other parts of this world. At bottom, this updated version of *The Arcades Project*, dedicated to another city in another century, is a new theory of modernity.

An urban philosopher like Walter Benjamin is moved by a strange kind of love. It is strange because it is not love at first sight but rather what he calls “love at last sight” ([7], p. 25). He explains: “It is one and the same historical night at the onset of which the owl of Minerva (with Hegel) begins its flight and Eros (with Baudelaire) lingers before the empty pallet, torch extinguished, dreaming of bygone embraces” ([8], p. 347). Unlike nostalgia, philosophy was alien to the dominant spirit at the height of New York’s power. During this vital peak the journalist A. J. Liebling pointed out: “It is very vulgar not to be dead, and this is what many writers hold against New York” ([9], p. 270). Philosophers, however, differ from other writers in that they usually feel most comfortable not with the dead but with the dying. Whereas most writers know how to phrase beautiful eulogies and formulate succinct epitaphs, philosophers are at their best when they supply palliatives and hold the forearm of the infirm.

Preferring to follow Hegel’s owl of Minerva instead of his own angel of history, my pseudoposthumous Benjamin knows that philosophy is meant not so much to rejuvenate a shriveling life as to comprehend its incoherent mumble. Unlike Marx, his prime concern is less to change the city and more to interpret it, like a good old philosopher. This may explain why he copied a couple of sentences from *The Arcades Project* as a sort of disclaimer in the beginning of his final work: “Nothing at all of what we are saying here actually existed. None of it has ever lived—as surely as a skeleton has never lived, but only a man” ([8], p. 833). Benjamin is obviously referring in this case only to his idea of New York, rather than to its actual, physical reality. He approaches his city as a subject of philosophical speculation mainly because he suspects that, by the time you read this, it will have to come to terms with its new position among the other great cities in the nursing home of the past. Anyway, Wallace Stevens suggests, “we live in the description of a place and not in the place itself” ([10], p. 494).

The events of *Ulysses* happen on June 16, 1904. Today this date is celebrated as Bloomsday, a tribute to Leopold Bloom, the novel’s protagonist. But at the time that James Joyce was working on his modernistic masterpiece it had completely different connotations, similar to those that September 12, 2001 might bring to mind today. Joyce knew full well that he was setting his narrative on the day after, when newspapers around the world reported on their first page about that most “terrible affair” ([11], p. 239).¹ On June 15, the General Slocum, a steamboat carrying members of St. Marks German Lutheran Church from the Lower East Side, caught fire and sank in the shallow waters just off the Bronx shore. More than a thousand of the thirteen hundred passengers were killed. Most were women and children. Until the end of the twentieth century this event was the worst tragedy in the history of New York. Unlike the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire and the Titanic disaster a few years later, General Slocum nearly vanished from the city’s memory. Yet nothing is more telling than an event that should be commemorated but is not.

¹ There are quite a few other explicit references scattered throughout the book. For example, “All those women and children excursion beanfeast burned and drowned in New York. Holocaust” ([11], p. 182). Richard Ellmann stands behind the seemingly settled explanation that Joyce chose this date to mark an event of a personal kind: the first time he went out with Nora Barnacle, his future wife ([12], pp. 155–156).

Although the later Benjamin's thought is devoted to a city he regarded as the capital of the twentieth century, dates like January 1, 1900 and December 31, 1999 can only be the arbitrary beginning and end points for his investigation. A more convenient and convincing beginning for the New York Century might be the 1898 consolidation of the adjacent municipalities into the five boroughs of the present city. For Benjamin, however, the New York century really begins only on the day of the General Slocum disaster. The magnitude of the tragedy, to which we are sadly desensitized by now, delivered such a powerful shock to the city's psyche that, perhaps for the first time, New York became conscious of its own significance and was able to contemplate its own worth. Mourning the dead led the living, as it often does, to come to terms with their own existence. Following Joyce, Benjamin sensed that this quintessentially modern trauma (the steam engine, this machine of progress, can also be a machine of mass destruction) presaged what the new century held in store. But he also notices how this event became instrumental in focusing the attention of all nations on New York City, which emerged during the same years as the de facto world's capital.

As for the symbolic moment when the New York century ended, it must be the other great tragedy in its history, after which the curtain had to fall (though many people remain seated, awaiting a rumored encore). Again, the sense of loss acts as the most effective catalyst for making people appreciate what they no longer have. A whole cloud of cynicism can condense into a drop of mortality. In the aftermath of September 11, 2001, the public resolved that life would go on and business would continue as usual. Still, there is a growing sense today that living in New York somehow resembles an afterlife, just as before the morning of June 15, 1904 the city was, in retrospect, still in its embryonic state.

It is one thing to imagine the day airplanes will crash into skyscrapers, as E. B. White did in "*Here Is New York*," his classic essay from 1949. It is another to analyze in precise terms the city's future demise through a close reading of White's text, as Benjamin did in the early 1970s, as the Twin Towers were being built. "It used to be," White writes, "that the Statue of Liberty was the signpost that proclaimed New York and translated it for all the world. Today Liberty shares the role with Death" ([13], p. 710). Being-toward-death becomes the modern city's decisive existential condition, whereas the enlightenment's being-toward-freedom (an ideal that anyhow belonged to Paris more than to New York) is somehow pushed to the side. As in Kafka's *Amerika*, the Statue of Liberty, this displaced Parisian immigrant, holds not a torch but a sword. Benjamin therefore talks about this "gloomy awareness that along with the great cities have evolved the means to raze them to the ground" ([8], p. 97).

Not everything that we see when our eyes are open can be called an image. Because our visual field changes as we move about, we barely notice it as such. We do not see that we see, so to speak. We might have noticed the elderly man who just crossed the street on our way to the subway, but we don't necessarily think of what we just observed as an image proper. Only on special occasions do we sense that what we look at crystallizes into a true image. But what, exactly, is an image? Benjamin's definition is as simple as it gets: "When one knows that something will soon be removed from one's gaze, that thing becomes an image" ([7], p. 53). A section in *The Manhattan Project*, curiously titled "New York Elderhood around 1980," is essentially a long literary montage of such thought-images, of little prosaic snapshots of his daily city life (cf. [14]).

Taking a photo is an act of preemptive mourning, an attempt to hold on to a present life that is certain to pass. Diane Arbus, Benjamin's favorite photographer, describes her own pictures as "the

proof that something was there and no longer is. Like a stain” ([15], p. 226). Even though, or precisely because, we know that everything that is solid will eventually melt into air, we cannot help trying to freeze being in time, to make life stand still. Notice, by the way, that the faster life changes, the more pictures we take. However, Arbus had no intention of holding on to the passing life toward which her camera was directed. By attending to the stillness, not the movement, of her subjects she was, in all earnestness, trying to *redeem* them. Benjamin’s *Manhattan Project*, which could easily be compared to a photo album made entirely of words, is driven by a parallel attempt to redeem the passing life of a city that, similarly to his own life, was vanishing like the flame of a match. But we are still here, at least for now, looking at the stained tablecloth after the feast is over, gazing at the pictures of those frozen, calcified, past lives whose “stillness”, Arbus observes, “is boggling. You can turn away but when you come back they’ll still be there looking at you” ([15], p. 226). In Benjamin’s manuscript, however, the word *looking* is crossed out, above which he wrote: *leaping*.

The morality of someone or legitimacy of something did not inform life in twentieth-century New York as much as their potential memory. No human creation is more resilient to the inevitable forces of oblivion than a city. Nevertheless, even though we rarely forget it, chances are that it will fail to remember us. To leave a mark on one’s family and friends is one thing; to leave a real mark on a big city is quite another. To illustrate, think of all the flora and fauna that ever existed in prehistoric times, and then think of those which calcified into immutable stones.

It might be interesting to ask a paleontologist why it is that certain lives petrify into fossils and others disintegrate without leaving a trace. Another option is to reformulate this question so that it addresses a fundamental urban concern, which was nicely expressed in a recent novel. In a moment of grief and rage, one of the characters demands to know what does it really take, other than pure luck, to survive in a city like New York? Who is allowed to stay and leave a mark? “The already half-dead? The unconscious?... Do you survive because of what is *in* you? Or because of what *isn’t*...?” ([16], p. 411). Benjamin, our urban paleontologist, registers a similar sentiment when he writes: “Do I need to live like a fossil to become one after I die?” [17].

The human mind is a devoted hoarder of its own memories. According to Freud, even the psyche of an infant continues to live in that of the adult. Yet a city, he claims in *Civilization and its Discontents*, functions very differently from a brain. As old parts of an “eternal” city like Rome are destroyed and new ones rise up, the urban landscape cannot help betraying its past. Does colonial New York, or New Amsterdam, or Lenapehoking of the Native Americans live on in today’s New York? If a city were indeed like a mind, Freud reasons, then all the different structures that ever occupied this or that block would somehow appear superimposed one on top of the other. So if one were to sit on a bench in Columbus Park in downtown Manhattan, one would not only see today’s Chinatown and Civic Center but also, with a slight shift of perspective, the infamous Five Points neighborhood that used to surround it, just as I can recall my eighth birthday and then, without even blinking, my twenty-eighth.

Benjamin’s reasoning, however, is the exact opposite of Freud’s. His basic question in *The Manhattan Project* is not whether an urban experience can replicate the psychic experience. He is much more interested in the possibility that our mental life could function more like city life. Here is the same point, formulated with Marx instead of Freud in mind: For far too long we were busy thinking about ways to change the city. It is about time that we let the city, just the way it is, change the way we think.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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