

Translated excerpt

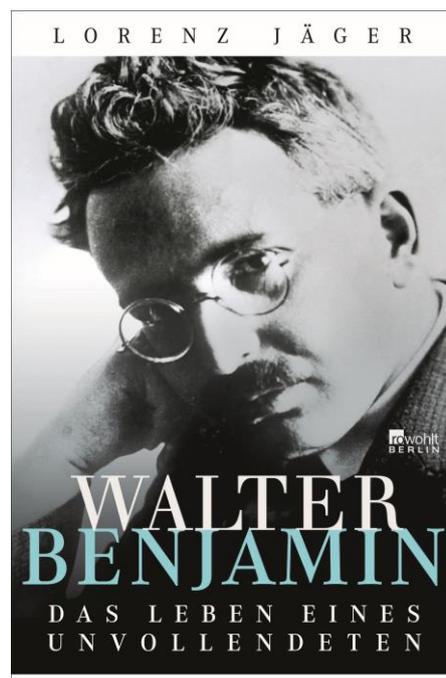
Lorenz Jäger
Walter Benjamin.
Das Leben eines Unvollendeten

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Lorenz Jäger
Walter Benjamin.
An Unfinished Life

Translated by David Burnett



Chapter 1

THE FORBIDDEN CHAMBER

BENJAMIN'S ROOTS

My good father had been in Paris.

Karl Gutzkow, Letters from Paris, 1842,

quoted by Benjamin in 1935

“In a big, old city there once lived a merchant. His house was in the oldest part of town, in a narrow filthy lane. And in this lane of ancient houses so old they could no longer stand on their own, each one leaning up against the other, the merchant’s house was the oldest. It was also the biggest. With its mighty vaulted doorway and its high, arched windows with purblind bull’s-eye panes, with its steep roof boasting an array of narrow little windows it looked rather odd – the merchant’s house, the last house on Mariengasse. The town was a pious one, and many of the houses had exquisite carvings of the Blessed Virgin or other saints above their doorways or on the eaves. On Mariengasse, too, every house had its saint. Only the merchant’s house stood bare and gray, completely unadorned.”¹

Thus begins the earliest existing piece of writing by Walter Benjamin, penned sometime after 1906. Benjamin was probably fourteen at the time. A merchant in a decidedly Christian environment – the author seems to be pointing out a certain cultural discrepancy. The merchant evidently has a different religion, for despite his being a resident of Mariengasse his house, unlike the others, is not adorned with saints. The house is conspicuous and “odd.” Its owner, too, stands out from the usual run of the city: “The merchant was no ordinary shopkeeper, selling clothes and spices to people – no! He had no dealings whatsoever with the poor and simple inhabitants of the lane. Day in, day out he sat in his large audit-office

with its high cabinets and long shelves, doing the books and adding sums. For his trade extended far across the seas, to distant and remote lands” – probably to the Levant or Spain and Portugal. In an environment marked by its age and which carries on its business in traditional channels, this merchant represents a different principle, the international: long-distance trade on a grand scale, the importing of exotic goods. The author is alluding to the man’s Jewishness.²

We do not learn what the merchant trades in, only that he’s absorbed in his work, that his life is calculation. A large-scale Jewish trader is sketched here in abstract and monumental fashion. Then suddenly the story takes a turn, into the mysterious and fairytale-esque. In the house there lives a girl: “The girl was not his daughter, but she lived with him, he raised her, and the child helped out at home. But no one really knew how she had come to live in the merchant’s house.”

The girl’s origins are just the first part of the riddle. The second does not bode well and sounds like Bluebeard the Knight, adopting the old motif of the forbidden chamber. “One day the merchant stood before the girl and told her that, as in the past, he would have to leave his homeland for a while. ‘I don’t know when I’ll be back,’ he said. ‘Take care of the house as always – but,’ he interrupted himself, ‘I see that you’re old enough now, you can do as you please in this house in my absence. Here, take the key.’ The girl, who until then had stood before him in silence, gazing wide-eyed at the colorful foreign flowers embroidered on the merchant’s garb, looked up and took the key. Then all of a sudden the merchant eyed her sternly. He spoke severely: ‘You know well enough that you are only allowed to use the keys to the pantry and the workrooms. Don’t ever be tempted to go to the upper floor. Do you understand?’ The girl assented timidly. Then the merchant bent down to kiss her and gave her another penetrating look before descending the stairs and leaving the house. The door

boomed shut behind him. The girl still stood on the stairs dreaming, regarding the big bunch of antique keys she was holding in her hand.”

The fragment ends there. The merchant, a powerful figure, leaves a riddle in his wake. Rather than solving the riddle, the girl can only ponder it. All she can do is contemplate, and she contemplates objects more than people.

“I was born on July 15, 1892 in Berlin, the son of merchant Emil Benjamin and his wife Pauline, née Schoenflies. Both my parents are still alive. I am Mosaic by religion.”³ The riddle of the novella fragment is also Benjamin’s own. Emil Benjamin (1858–1926) had originally trained as a bank clerk and worked for some years at a bank in Paris. He later became a part owner of Rudolph Lepke’s Art Auction House, a prominent establishment in the Berlin art-dealing world, founded by Rudolph Lepke’s grandfather Nathan Levi Lepke. Emil Benjamin sold his share sometime after 1900 (the exact date is unknown). His paternal grandfather, Bendix Benjamin (1818–1885), was described as a “man of private means”⁴ and had previously worked as a merchant, with no indication of what line of business. His great grandfather Elias, later Emil, Benjamin (1769–1835), born into a wealthy merchant family, was a cloth retailer by profession.⁵ His maternal grandfather, Georg Schoenflies, was a tobacco and cigar manufacturer.

We are interested in Emil Benjamin’s occupation, of course, because he dealt in art. His being a businessman, on the other hand, was typical of German Jews at this time. Gershom Scholem says the following in his analysis of Jewish occupational statistics: “In 1907, out of every 100 members of the [Jewish] working population a little over 50 percent were engaged in trade and 21 percent in industry, as opposed to only about 7 percent in the liberal professions, and 1.5 percent in agriculture, animal husbandry and horticulture. Almost 20 percent declared themselves to be men of private means or did not list any occupation at all –

a surprisingly high percentage, which must have included those who engaged in financial transactions, i.e., usury, and were reluctant to state their line of work.”⁶

Benjamin himself made reference to the enigma of his father. In the autobiographical sketches of *Berlin Chronicles* he wrote: “The economic basis underlying the household of my parents was long enveloped in deepest mystery, well beyond my childhood and youth.” His father essentially had the “enterprising nature of a big businessman.” “Unfavorable influences are the reason he retired much too early from a business that probably would have suited his skills: Lepke’s art auction house, which was then still located on Kochstrasse and in which he was a partner.” After relinquishing his share in Lepke’s company, his father “increasingly invested his money in speculation.” It is telling that Benjamin attributes to his father the enterprising nature of a “big businessman,” and it almost sounds like a reproach when he then goes on to talk about the speculative investments that followed and which seemed to render any subsequent business activities unnecessary.⁷

If it is true that sons tend to choose a profession that allows them to penetrate the mystery of their fathers – to reframe for our purposes Freud’s theory of the Oedipus complex – then Benjamin’s life work was dedicated to solving the riddle of the merchant profession. His friend, the philosopher Ernst Bloch, characterized Benjamin’s book *One-Way Street* as follows: “It was a [...] grand opening of philosophy with the newest spring fashions of metaphysics in the display window.”⁸ The connection – or contrast – between the merchant home and “pious” neighbors found in the novella fragment returns in Benjamin’s reflections on “capitalism as a religion” when he writes: “Comparison between the images of saints in various religions and the banknotes of various states. The spirit that emanates from the ornamentation of the banknotes. Capitalism and law.”⁹ The topic runs through Benjamin’s work – into his late period and his portrayal of Charles Baudelaire as a poet of the material economy.



Walter Benjamin

Emil Benjamin was an art dealer and must have had the requisite business acumen, but he also had other cultural interests, as recorded by Scholem: “Already at an early age he seems to have assembled a large autograph collection, which Walter Benjamin told me about on numerous occasions. Pride of place in this collection was a large letter of Martin Luther.”¹⁰ Emil’s sister, Benjamin’s Aunt Friederike, was “one of the first graphologists to study under Crépieux-Jamin, and she was the one who apparently sparked and encouraged Benjamin’s interest in graphology.”¹¹

We can imagine the conversations that took place in this family, at least with regard to his father’s profession and personal history. Topics of discussion probably included business affairs, but also questions of art and perhaps even art theory – issues such as originals versus copies, forgeries and reproductions, or even the later quite famous notion of the “aura” of a work of art, which must have preoccupied an auctioneer. At least this was the opinion of Benjamin’s cousin, the philosopher Günther Anders, who was critical and even scornful of this concept: “The idea was taken from Lepke’s auction house, whose part owner was B.’s father. For he claims that a product could not be a reproduction; nay, that their irreproducibility is evident just by looking at them.”¹² The autograph collection of his father and the graphological passion of his aunt may have implicitly prompted questions in the young Walter Benjamin about the relationship between the written word and images, about the encroachment of writing in images, and about the unique character of images themselves – in sum the core elements, albeit isolated, of what would later become a larger theory of writing in the Baroque, as elaborated in his book *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*.

Finally, the collecting habits of his father (and his professional dealings with collectors) may have been the origin not only of Benjamin’s own passion for collecting but also for his theoretical interest in the figure of the collector, the subject of his late *Arcades Project* and an

entire bundle of Benjamin's notes. Adorno picked up on this in describing the external appearance of his friend: "His face was actually cut in a rather regular fashion. But he also had something – it is hard to find the right word for it – of an animal that stores provisions in its cheeks."¹³

Paris, the city where his father gained his first professional experience, must have been a frequent topic of conversation in the family as well. Over time it became one of Benjamin's primary concerns: "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century," "Paris, capitale du XIXe siècle" were the exposé titles of an unfinished book that we now know as the collection of fragments referred to as the *Arcades Project*. The capital of the nineteenth century is the city of his father.

Chapter 4

METAPHYSICS AND MESSIANISM

THE FIRST PHILOSOPHY

Metaphysics is driving him crazy.

His perception is no longer human,

but that of a madman entrusted to God.

Gershom Scholem on Benjamin, June 1918

“Benjamin was not what one would call handsome, but impressive with his unusually clear and high forehead.”¹ That’s how his friend Gershom Scholem described him. The great portrait photographer Gisèle Freund, who certainly had an eye for faces, saw him in a similar light: “His forehead was high and domed.”² Lisa Fittko, referring to his late years, spoke of his “highly intellectual scholar’s head,”³ an assessment confirmed by Adrienne Monnier: “His forehead was high and broad.”⁴

All of these descriptions are part of a venerable tradition dating back to antiquity, an almost set formula for describing the heads of philosophers as having a “lofty brow.” This is no mere kitchen-sink wisdom or physiognomic folk superstition. Paul Zanker explains the portrayal of the philosopher’s forehead in the fine arts, the emphasis on eyes and brow, as a way of emphasizing the intellectual’s being filled with spirit and God.⁵ Hans Förstl, a Munich psychiatrist, has shown that the lofty brow as an expression of great mental power retained its validity into the modern era, as seen in the busts of Goethe and Beethoven.⁶

Benjamin’s high forehead is surely that of a philosopher. But Scholem’s interpretation of Benjamin’s philosophy is curiously different from that of Adorno. Scholem believed that his friend was not just vaguely intellectual, philosophical or scholarly, but a true *metaphysician*.

“When I recall what we had in common [...], it turns out to be a number of things that are hard to overlook. I would define them in mere general terms as the single-minded pursuit of an intellectual aim, the rejection of our environment – essentially an assimilated German-Jewish middle class – and the positive affirmation of metaphysics.”⁷ Scholem emphatically rejected the notion that his friend was a mere “writer of literature.”

Adorno, on the other hand, tended to downplay the term metaphysics, preferring to talk about philosophy – the leitmotif of his character study – but he too seems to think that Benjamin’s external appearance said it all: “I never saw a person whose whole existence, inside and out, was so completely marked by the cerebral.” He speaks of the “unprecedented power of both his intellectual outlook and the consistency of his thinking.” It was only through Benjamin that it dawned on him “what philosophy had to be if it wanted to fulfil its promises.”⁸ Later, in the sixties, when debate ensued among Benjamin’s friends about the proper interpretation of his work, Adorno noted in opposition to the reading of Hannah Arendt: “H. A.’s main hypothesis: W. B. was not a philosopher. What kind of philosophy is that. It’s that of Mr. Heidegger ... etc. Show the philosophy in it. WB’s notion of critique is substantial only by virtue of its philosophical content. This critique, whose fulfilment elevates B above the ordinary, would otherwise lose its emphatic claim. Model of this. H. A. would like to revoke from him this very authority.”⁹

It was indeed a matter of authority. Metaphysics is the most demanding concept of philosophy imaginable. It claims that philosophy is called on to investigate the objective orders of the world, of being in its totality. This assertion seems foreign nowadays. It is the reason why Jürgen Habermas chose to call his own philosophical project “postmetaphysical thinking,” thus capturing the general sentiment about the possibilities of philosophy in this day and age. “One glance at our scientific, cultural and social context,” writes Habermas, “shows us that philosophers are no longer to be found among the poets and the thinkers.”

They are no longer capable of being wise men and visionaries, who – like Heidegger – claim privileged access to the truth.”¹⁰

Let’s forget for a moment the author’s somewhat mocking tone when referring to poets, thinkers, “wise men and visionaries” – Heidegger included – with their “privileged access to the truth.” Metaphysics addresses the ultimate questions, in the assurance that reasonable answers can be found. In Scholem’s view, Benjamin in the early years of their friendship was “still a systematically oriented mind whose aim was to pen a system of philosophy, a metaphysics, for which he had all manner of designs. His metaphysical interest was his most significant trait and the most prominent talent or genius he had.” This impulse was alive in him later on, but had “fallen into dialectic disintegration.”¹¹

No title could have been more ambitious than the one a twenty-five-year-old Benjamin, not even a doctor of philosophy yet, chose as his metaphysical objective: “Program of the Coming Philosophy.” Originating as an exchange with Scholem, he drafted this program in November 1917. It essentially begins with a critique of Kant, whom the two friends had just been reading together. On May 6, 1918, Scholem noted in his diary: “Then we went for a walk and had a talk about Kant. He is sailing full speed ahead of me into his system. ‘Kant established an inferior experience.’ ”¹²

What was the nature of this inferior experience? It was committed above all to the separation of the subject and object of cognition, a distinction introduced by Descartes – on the one hand the thinking *res cogitans*, on the other (somewhere out there) the perceiving *res extensa* of the material world, although it is ultimately mysterious how the one relates to the other. Here, according to Benjamin, is the first problem in need of solving: “The task of the coming epistemology is to find for knowledge the sphere of total neutrality in regard to the terms object and subject; in other words, to investigate the autonomous, inherent sphere of

knowledge in which this concept in no way continues to denote the relationship between two metaphysical entities.” He goes on: “In as far as Kant and the neo-Kantians have overcome the notion of the object nature of the material world in itself being the cause of perceptions, the subject nature of the knowing consciousness must still be eliminated.”¹³

Benjamin is looking for indications that the conventional doctrine of the knowing subject is necessarily false: “We know of primitive peoples of the so-called preanimist stage that identify with sacred animals and plants, naming themselves after them; we know of lunatics who also sometimes identify with objects of perception, which are hence no longer *objecta*, situated across from them; we know of invalids who associate the physical sensations of their bodies with other beings rather than themselves, and clairvoyants who claim at any rate to receive the perceptions of others as their own.” There is a different epistemology at work here than that of Kant and Descartes.

With this aim – the need to conceive of a new relationship between subject and object, or to find a different concept of knowledge altogether – Benjamin advanced to the forefront of philosophy, even if no solution was in the offing when he wrote these lines in 1917. Ten years later, Martin Heidegger in his magnum opus *Being and Time* also returned to a pre-Cartesian understanding or perhaps went beyond Descartes in asserting that his premises resulted in a distorted picture. For in Being (*Dasein*), according to Heidegger, objects are basically familiar to us; a tool, for example, is not a foreign object but is *ready-to-hand*, is in a meaningful relationship of *concernful* practice. “A thing is essentially something ‘in order to...’ ”¹⁴ “The primary ‘what-for’ is a ‘for-the-sake-of-which.’ But the ‘for-the-sake-of-which’ always concerns the being of *Dasein*, which is essentially concerned *about* this being itself in its being.”¹⁵ Heidegger assumes that things happen in a context, in the practice of life, in which the apparently so mysterious communication between subject and object is always achieved because there is a context in which they interact. His favorite example is the

hammer: “The less we just stare at the thing called hammer, the more actively we use it, the more original our relation to it becomes and the more undisguisedly it is encountered as what it is, as a useful thing.”¹⁶ The hammer is not *present-at-hand* but *ready-to-hand*. “Readiness-to-hand is an ontological-categorical determination of beings as they are ‘in themselves.’”¹⁷ The ensemble of such interactions constitutes the *world*. Broadly speaking, deliberations of this sort could be understood as philosophical pragmatism, an American school of philosophy whose narrow circle remained quite foreign to Heidegger. Noteworthy here is that Heidegger nullified the subject-object metaphysics of knowledge so problematic to Benjamin.

Benjamin, to be sure, follows quite a different path. Not practice, as in the case of Heidegger, but fate is the context in which people and things encounter each other. “Fatefully” life can be “coupled to cards and to planets, and the wise woman uses a simple technique, placing this life in the guilt context by means of the most immediately calculable, the most immediately certain things (things unchastely pregnant with certainty). She thus discovers in signs something of the natural life in a person, which she tries to substitute for the abovementioned head; just as the person who goes to her resigns in favor of the guilty life in himself” – so writes Benjamin in his treatise “Fate and Character.”¹⁸