

Walter Benjamin



REFLECTIONS

*Essays,
Aphorisms,
Autobiographical
Writings*

Translated by Edmund Jephcott

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*Edited and
with an Introduction
by Peter Demetz*

A Berlin Chronicle

For my dear Stefan

Now let me call back those who introduced me to the city. For although the child, in his solitary games, grows up at closest quarters to the city, he needs and seeks guides to its wider expanses, and the first of these—for a son of wealthy middle-class parents like me—are sure to have been nursemaids. With them I went to the Zoo—although I recall it only from much later, with blaring military bands and “Scandal Avenue” (as the adherents of *art nouveau* dubbed this promenade)—or, if not to the Zoo, to the Tiergarten. I believe the first “street” that I discovered in this way that no longer had anything habitable or hospitable about it, emanating forlornness between the shopfronts and even danger at the crossings, was Schillstrasse; I like to imagine that it has altered less than others in the West End and could even now accommodate a scene rising irresistibly from the mist: the saving of the life of “little brother.” The way to the Tiergarten led over the Herkules Bridge, the gently sloping embankment of which must have been the first hillside the child encountered—accentuated by the fine stone flanks of the lion rising above. At the end of Bandlerstrasse, however, began the labyrinth, not without its Ariadne: the maze surrounding Frederick William III and Queen Louise, who, rising sheer from the flower beds on their illustrated, Empire-style plinths, seemed as if petrified by the signs that a little rivulet inscribed in the sand. Rather than the figures, my eyes sought the plinths, since the events taking place on them, if less clear in their ramifications, were closer in space. But that a particular significance attaches to this Hohenzollern laby-

rinth I find confirmed even now by the utterly unconcerned, banal appearance of the forecourt on Tiergartenstrasse, where nothing suggests that you stand but a few yards from the strangest place in the city. At that time, it is true, it must have corresponded more than closely to what was waiting behind it, for here, or not far away, were the haunts of that Ariadne in whose proximity I learned for the first time (and was never entirely to forget) something that was to make instantly comprehensible a word that at scarcely three I cannot have known: love. Here the nursemaid supervenes, a cold shadow driving away what I loved. It is likely that no one ever masters anything in which he has not known impotence; and if you agree, you will also see that this impotence comes not at the beginning of or before the struggle with the subject, but in the heart of it. Which brings me to the middle period of my life in Berlin, extending from the whole of my later childhood to my entrance to the university: a period of impotence before the city. This had two sources. First was a very poor sense of direction; but if it was thirty years before the distinction between left and right had become visceral to me, and before I had acquired the art of reading a street map, I was far from appreciating the extent of my ineptitude; and if anything was capable of increasing my disinclination to perceive this fact, it was the insistence with which my mother thrust it under my nose. On her I lay the blame for my inability even today to make a cup of coffee; to her propensity for turning the most insignificant items of conduct into tests of my aptitude for practical life I owe the dreamy recalcitrance with which I accompanied her as we walked through the streets, rarely frequented by me, of the city center. But to this resistance in turn is due who knows how much that underlies my present intercourse with the city's streets. Above all, a gaze that appears to see not a third of what it takes in. I remember, too, how nothing was more intolerable to my mother than the pedantic care with which, on these walks, I always kept half a step behind her. My habit of seeming slower, more maladroit,

more stupid than I am, had its origin in such walks, and has the great attendant danger of making me think myself quicker, more dexterous, and shrewder than I am.

I have long, indeed for years, played with the idea of setting out the sphere of life—bios—graphically on a map. First I envisaged an ordinary map, but now I would incline to a general staff's map of a city center, if such a thing existed. Doubtless it does not, because of ignorance of the theater of future wars. I have evolved a system of signs, and on the gray background of such maps they would make a colorful show if I clearly marked in the houses of my friends and girl friends, the assembly halls of various collectives, from the "debating chambers" of the Youth Movement to the gathering places of the Communist youth, the hotel and brothel rooms that I knew for one night, the decisive benches in the Tiergarten, the ways to different schools and the graves that I saw filled, the sites of prestigious cafés whose long-forgotten names daily crossed our lips, the tennis courts where empty apartment blocks stand today, and the halls emblazoned with gold and stucco that the terrors of dancing classes made almost the equal of gymnasiums. And even without this map, I still have the encouragement provided by an illustrious precursor, the Frenchman Léon Daudet, exemplary at least in the title of his work, which exactly encompasses the best that I might achieve here: *Paris vécu*. "Lived Berlin" does not sound so good but is as real. And it is not just this title that concerns me here; Paris itself is the fourth in the series of voluntary or involuntary guides that began with my nursemaids. If I had to put in one word what I owe to Paris for these reflections, it would be "caution"; I should scarcely be able to abandon myself to the shifting currents of these memories of my earliest city life, had not Paris set before me, strictly circumscribed, the two forms in which alone this can legitimately—that is, with a guarantee of permanence—be done; and had I not forsworn the attempt to equal the first as firmly as I hope one day to realize the second. The first form was created in the work of Marcel Proust, and

the renunciation of any dalliance with related possibilities could scarcely be more bindingly embodied than in the translation of it that I have produced. Related possibilities—do they really exist? They would certainly permit no dalliance. What Proust began so playfully became awesomely serious. He who has once begun to open the fan of memory never comes to the end of its segments; no image satisfies him, for he has seen that it can be unfolded, and only in its folds does the truth reside; that image, that taste, that touch for whose sake all this has been unfurled and dissected; and now remembrance advances from small to smallest details, from the smallest to the infinitesimal, while that which it encounters in these microcosms grows ever mightier. Such is the deadly game that Proust began so dilettantishly, in which he will hardly find more successors than he needed companions.

How totally unlike this (the music at the Zoo) was some other park music that had begun to reach my ears at an earlier time. It came from Rousseau Island and drove the skaters looping and whirling on New Lake. I was among them long before I had any conception of the source of the island's name, not to mention the difficulty of his style. Through its position this ice rink was comparable to no other, and still more by virtue of its life through the seasons: for what did summer make of the rest? Tennis courts. But here, under the overhanging branches of the trees along the bank, stretched a lake connected to labyrinthine waterways, and now one skated under the little arched bridges where in summer one had leaned on balustrades, or on chains held by lions' mouths, watching the boats gliding in the dark water. There were serpentine paths near the lake and, above all, the tender retreats of lonely old men, benches for "adults only" at the edge of the sand pit with its ditches, where toddlers dig or stand sunk in thought until bumped by a playmate or roused by the voice of a nursemaid from the bench of command; there she sits, stern and studious, reading her novel and keeping the child in check while hardly raising an eyelid until, her labor done, she changes places with the nurse at the

other end of the bench, who is holding the baby between her knees and knitting. Old, solitary men found their way here, paying due honor, amid these scatterbrained womenfolk, among the shrieking children, to the serious side of life: the newspaper. Even if the girl I loved, after tarrying long on the paths of this garden, had left at last, there was nowhere I liked staying to think of her better than on a backless bench in one of those playgrounds, and I never swept the sand from where I was going to sit down. All these pictures I have preserved. But none would bring back New Lake and a few hours of my childhood so vividly as to hear once more the bars of music to which my feet, heavy with their skates after a lone excursion across the bustling ice, touched the familiar planks and stumbled past the chocolate-dispensing slot machines, and past the more splendid one with a hen laying candy-filled eggs, through the doorway behind which glowed the anthracite stove, to the bench where you now savored for a while the weight of the iron rails on your feet, which did not yet reach the ground, before resolving to unbuckle them. If you then slowly rested one calf on the other knee and unscrewed the skate, it was as if in its place you had suddenly grown wings, and you went out with steps that nodded to the frozen ground.

And then my fifth guide: Franz Hessel. I do not mean his book *On Foot in Berlin*, which was written later, but the *Celebration* that our walks together in Paris received in our native city, as if we were returning to harbor, the jetty still rising and falling as on waves under the feet of strolling seamen. The centerpiece of this *Celebration*, however, was the "Green Meadow"—a bed that still stands high above the couches spreading all around, on which we composed a small, complaisant, orientally pallid epilogue to those great, sleeping feasts with which, a few years earlier in Paris, the Surrealists had unwittingly inaugurated their reactionary career, thus fulfilling the text that the Lord giveth unto his own in sleep. On this meadow we spread out such women as still amused us at home, but

they were few. From beneath lowered lids our gaze often met, better than on drafty stairways, the palms, caryatids, windows, and niches from which the "Tiergarten mythology" was evolving as the first chapter of a science of this city. It prospered, for we had been astute enough to gather to us girls from the most latinate quarter and in general to observe the Parisian custom of residing in the *quartier*. True, the *quartier* in Berlin is unfortunately an affair of the well-to-do, and neither Wedding nor Reinickendorf nor Tegel bears comparison on this account with Ménilmontant, Auteuil, or Neuilly.

All the more gratifying, therefore, were marauding Sunday-afternoon excursions on which we discovered an arcade in the Moabit quarter, the Stettin tunnel, or liberty in front of the Wallner Theater. A girl photographer was with us. And it seems to me, as I think of Berlin, that only the side of the city that we explored at that time is truly receptive to photography. For the closer we come to its present-day, fluid, functional existence, the narrower draws the circle of what can be photographed; it has been rightly observed that photography records practically nothing of the essence of, for example, a modern factory. Such pictures can perhaps be compared to railway stations, which, in this age when railways are beginning to be out of date, are no longer, generally speaking, the true "gateways" through which the city unrolls its outskirts as it does along the approach roads for motorists. A station gives the order, as it were, for a surprise attack, but it is an outdated maneuver that confronts us with the archaic, and the same is true of photography, even the snapshot. Only film commands optical approaches to the essence of the city, such as conducting the motorist into the new center.

The fourth guide.* Not to find one's way in a city may well be uninteresting and banal. It requires ignorance—nothing more. But to lose oneself in a city—as one loses oneself in a forest—that calls for quite a different schooling. Then, sign-

* Benjamin is referring to Paris.—ED.

boards and street names, passers-by, roofs, kiosks, or bars must speak to the wanderer like a cracking twig under his feet in the forest, like the startling call of a bittern in the distance, like the sudden stillness of a clearing with a lily standing erect at its center. Paris taught me this art of straying; it fulfilled a dream that had shown its first traces in the labyrinths on the blotting pages of my school exercise books. Nor is it to be denied that I penetrated to its innermost place, the Minotaur's chamber, with the only difference being that *this* mythological monster had three heads: those of the occupants of the small brothel on rue de la Harpe, in which, summoning my last reserves of strength (and not entirely without an Ariadne's thread), I set my foot. But if Paris thus answered my most uneasy expectations, from another side it surpassed my graphic fantasies. The city, as it disclosed itself to me in the footsteps of a hermetic tradition that I can trace back at least as far as Rilke and whose guardian at that time was Franz Hessel, was a maze not only of paths but also of tunnels. I cannot think of the underworld of the Métro and the North-South line opening their hundreds of shafts all over the city, without recalling my endless *flâneries*.

The most remarkable of all the street images from my early childhood, however—more so even than the arrival of the bears, which I witnessed at the side of a nursemaid, or it may have been my French governess—more remarkable than the racecourse that passed Schillstrasse or ended there, is—it must have been about 1900—a completely deserted stretch of road upon which ponderous torrents of water continuously thundered down. I had been caught up in a local flood disaster, but in other ways, too, the idea of extraordinary events is inseparable from that day; possibly we had been sent home from school. In any case, this situation left behind an alarm signal; my strength must have been failing, and in the midst of the asphalt streets of the city I felt exposed to the powers of nature; in a primeval forest I should not have been more aban-

done than here on Kurfürstenstrasse, between the columns of water. How I reached the bronze lions' mouths on our front door with their rings that were now life belts, I cannot remember.

Rides to the station in the rattling taxi, skirting the Landwehr Canal while, among the dirty cushions, the weekly evening gathering in the drawing room or the living room of my parents' apartment, which had just neared its end, for a week at least, was revived with stricken violence. And so it was not what impended that weighed so terrifyingly upon me, or even the parting from what had been, but that which still continued, persisted, asserting itself even in this first stage of the journey. The destination of such rides would usually have been the Anhalt Station—where you took the train to Suderode or Hahnenklee, to Bad Salzschlirf or—in the later years—to Freudenstadt. But now and again it was Arendsee, too, or Heiligendamm, and then you went by the Stettin Station. I believe it is since that time that the dunes of the Baltic landscape have appeared to me like a *fata morgana* here on Chausseestrasse, supported only by the yellow, sandy colors of the station building and the boundless horizon opening in my imagination behind its walls.

But this vista would indeed be delusive if it did not make visible the medium in which alone such images take form, assuming a transparency in which, however mistily, the contours of what is to come are delineated like mountain peaks. The present in which the writer lives is this medium. And in it he now cuts another section through the sequence of his experiences. He detects in them a new and disturbing articulation. First, his early childhood, enclosing him in the district where he lived—the old or the new West End, where the class that had pronounced him one of its number resided in a posture compounded of self-satisfaction and resentment that turned it into something like a ghetto held on lease. In any case, he was confined to this affluent quarter without knowing

of any other. The poor? For rich children of his generation they lived at the back of beyond. And if at this early age he could picture the poor, it was, without his knowing either name or origin, in the image of the tramp who is actually a rich man, though without money, since he stands—far removed from the process of production and the exploitation not yet abstracted from it—in the same contemplative relation to his destitution as the rich man to his wealth. The child's first excursion into the exotic world of abject poverty characteristically took written form (only by chance, perhaps, one of his first excursions to do so), being the depiction of a sandwich man and his humiliation at the hands of the public, who did not trouble even to take the leaflets he held out to them, so that the wretched man—thus the story ended—secretly jet-tisoned his entire consignment. Certainly a wholly unfruitful solution to the problem, already announcing the flight into sabotage and anarchism that later makes it so difficult for the intellectual to see things clearly. Perhaps the same sabotage of real social existence is to be found even later in my manner, already described, of walking in the city, in the stubborn refusal under any circumstances to form a united front, be it even with my own mother. There is no doubt, at any rate, that a feeling of crossing the threshold of one's class for the first time had a part in the almost unequalled fascination of publicly accosting a whore in the street. At the beginning, however, this was a crossing of frontiers not only social but topographical, in the sense that whole networks of streets were opened up under the auspices of prostitution. But is it really a crossing, is it not, rather, an obstinate and voluptuous hovering on the brink, a hesitation that has its most cogent motive in the circumstance that beyond this frontier lies nothingness? But the places are countless in the great cities where one stands on the edge of the void, and the whores in the doorways of tenement blocks and on the less sonorous asphalt of railway platforms are like the household goddesses of this cult of nothingness.

So on these erring paths the stations became my especial habitat, each with its outskirts like a city: the Silesian, Stettin, Görlitz stations, and Friedrichstrasse.

Just as there are, for children, fairy tales in which a witch or even a fairy holds a whole forest in thrall, as a child I knew a street that was ruled and occupied entirely by a woman, even though she was always enthroned in her bay window, one minute's walk from the house in which I was born: Aunt Lehmann. The stairs rose steeply to her room from just behind the hall door; it was dark on them, until the door opened and the brittle voice bid us a thin "good-morning" and directed us to place before us on the table the glass rhombus containing the mine, in which little men pushed wheelbarrows, labored with pickaxes, and shone lanterns into the shafts in which buckets were winched perpetually up and down. On account of this aunt and her mine, Steglitzer Strasse could henceforth, for me, never be named after Steglitz. A goldfinch [*Stieglitz*] in its cage bore greater resemblance to this street harboring the aunt at her window than the Berlin suburb that meant nothing to me. Where it joins Genthiner Strasse, it is one of the streets least touched by the changes of the last thirty years. In the back rooms and attics, as guardians of the past, numerous prostitutes have established themselves here, who, during the inflation period, brought the district the reputation of being a theater of the most squalid diversions. Needless to say, no one could ever determine on which stories the impoverished opened their drawing rooms, and their daughters their skirts, to rich Americans.

Climbing the stairs in this fashion,* with nothing before me but boots and calves, and the scraping of hundreds of feet in my ears, I was often seized—I seem to remember—by revulsion at being hemmed in by this multitude, and again, as on

* The beginning of this passage is missing in the manuscript; Benjamin is talking about his school experiences.—ED.

those walks in the city with my mother, solitude appeared to me as the only fit state of man. Very understandably, for such a mob of school children is among the most formless and ignoble of all masses, and betrays its bourgeois origin in representing, like every assembly of that class, the most rudimentary organizational form that its individual members can give their reciprocal relationships. The corridors, and the classrooms that finally came into view, are among the horrors that have embedded themselves most ineradicably in me, that is to say, in my dreams; and these have taken revenge on the monotony, the cold torpor that overcame me at each crossing of the classroom thresholds, by turning themselves into the arena of the most extravagant events. The backdrop was often the fear of having to take the *Abitur* again (under more unfavorable conditions), a position in which I had been placed by my own recklessness and folly. Undoubtedly, these rooms lend themselves to dreamlike representation; there is something nightmarish even in the sober recollection of the damp odor of sweat secreted by the stone steps that I had to hasten up five times or more each day. The school, outwardly in good repair, was in its architecture and situation among the most desolate. It matched its emblem, a plaster statue of the Emperor Frederick, which had been deposited in a remote corner of the playground (admittedly one favored by hordes engaged in martial games), puny and pitiful against a fire wall. According to a school legend it was, if I am not mistaken, a donation. This monument, unlike the classrooms, was never washed, and had acquired in the course of years an admirable coat of dirt and soot. It still stands today in its appointed place. But soot descends upon it daily from the passing municipal railway. It is far from impossible that my uncommon aversion to this railway dates from this time, since all the people sitting at their windows seemed enviable to me. They could afford to ignore the school clock that held sway above our heads, and quite unawares they cut through the invisible bars of our timetable cage. They could only be seen, incidentally, during

the breaks, for the lower panes of the classroom windows were of frosted glass. "Vagabond clouds, sailors of the skies" had for us the absolute precision that the verse holds for prisoners. Moreover, little about the actual classrooms has remained in my memory except these exact emblems of imprisonment: the frosted windows and the infamous carved wooden battlements over the doors. It would not surprise me to hear that the cupboards, too, were crowned with such adornments, not to mention the pictures of the Kaiser on the walls. Heraldic and chivalrous obtuseness shone forth wherever possible. In the great hall, however, it was most ceremoniously united with *art nouveau*. A crude, extravagant ornament stretched with stiff gray-green limbs across the paneling of the walls. References to objects were no more to be found in it than references to history; nowhere did it offer the eye the slightest refuge, while the ear was helplessly abandoned to the clatter of idiotic harangues. All the same, one of these occasions is perhaps noteworthy for the effect it had on me for years afterward. It was the leave-taking ceremony for those who had graduated. Here, as in several other places, I find in my memory rigidly fixed words, expressions, verses that, like a malleable mass that has later cooled and hardened, preserve in me the imprint of the collision between a larger collective and myself. Just as a certain kind of significant dream survives awakening in the form of words when all the rest of the dream content has vanished, here isolated words have remained in place as marks of catastrophic encounters. Among them is one in which for me the whole atmosphere of the school is condensed; I heard it when, having hitherto received only private tutoring, I was sent for my first morning, on a trial basis, to what was later to become the Kaiser Friedrich School, but at that time was still situated on Passauerstrasse. This word that still adheres in my mind to a phlegmatic, fat, unbecoming figure of a boy is the following: ringleader. Nothing else is left of this earliest school experience. It was re-enacted in similar form, however, some six years later, when I spent my first day in alien and

threatening circumstances in Haubinda and was asked by a tall, hostile-seeming lout who played a prominent part in the class whether my "old man" had already left. This common piece of schoolboy parlance was entirely unfamiliar to me. An abyss opened before me, which I sought to bridge with a laconic protest. Here in the great hall it was the verses with which the school choir began the farewell song to the leavers—"Brother now may we / your companions be / in the world so wide"—followed by something containing the words "loyally by your side"; at any rate these were the verses that enabled me year by year to take the measure of my own weakness. For no matter how palpably the abominable goings-on at school were daily before my eyes, the melody of this song seemed to surround the departure from this hell with infinite melancholy. But by the time it was addressed to me and my class it must have made little impression, for I remember nothing of it. More remarkable are some other verses that I heard once in the gymnasium dressing room after the lesson, and never forgot. Why? Perhaps because "Schulze"—as the imprudent boy who knew the lines was called—was rather pretty, perhaps because I thought them true, but most probably because the situation in which they were spoken, one of frenetic, military hyperactivity, was so utterly appropriate. "Loitering at the rear / you never need fear / neurasthenía."

If I write better German than most writers of my generation, it is thanks largely to twenty years' observance of one little rule: never use the word "I" except in letters. The exceptions to this precept that I have permitted myself could be counted. Now this has had a curious consequence that is intimately connected to these notes. For when one day it was suggested that I should write, from day to day in a loosely subjective form, a series of glosses on everything that seemed noteworthy in Berlin—and when I agreed—it became suddenly clear that this subject, accustomed for years to waiting in the wings, would not so easily be summoned to the lime-

light. But far from protesting, it relied on ruse, so successfully that I believed a retrospective glance at what Berlin had become for me in the course of years would be an appropriate "preface" to such glosses. If the preface has now far exceeded the space originally allotted to the glosses, this is not only the mysterious work of remembrance—which is really the capacity for endless interpolations into what has been—but also, at the same time, the precaution of the subject represented by the "I," which is entitled not to be sold cheap. Now there is one district of Berlin with which this subject is more closely connected than any other that it has consciously experienced. To be sure, there are parts of the city in which it was destined to have equally deep and harrowing experiences, but in none of them was the place itself so much a part of the event. The district I am talking of is the Tiergarten quarter. There, in a back wing of one of the houses standing nearest the municipal railway viaduct, was the "Meeting House." It was a small apartment that I had rented jointly with the student Ernst Joël. How we had agreed on this I no longer remember; it can hardly have been simple, for the student "Group for Social Work" led by Joël was, during the term in which I was president of the Berlin Free Students' Union, a chief target of my attacks, and it was precisely as leader of this group that Joël had signed the lease, while my contribution secured the rights of the "debating chamber" to the Meeting House. The distribution of the rooms between the two groups—whether of a spatial or a temporal character—was very sharply defined, and in any case, for me at that time only the debating group mattered.

My cosignatory, Ernst Joël, and I were on less than cordial terms, and I had no inkling of the magical aspect of the city that this same Joël, fifteen years later, was to reveal to me. So his image appears in me at this stage only as an answer to the question whether forty is not too young an age at which to evoke the most important memories of one's life. For this image is already now that of a dead man, and who knows

how he might have been able to help me cross this threshold, with memories of even the most external and superficial things? To the other threshold he had no access, and of all those who once had it I alone remain. I should never have thought that I should seek him by this topographical route. But if I call to mind the first trial run I made in this direction, more than ten years ago now, the earlier and more modest essay has the better of the comparison. It was in Heidelberg, during what was undoubtedly self-forgetful work, that I tried to summon up, in a meditation on the nature of the lyric, the figure of my friend Fritz Heinle, around whom all the happenings in the Meeting House arrange themselves and with whom they vanish. Fritz Heinle was a poet, and the only one of them all whom I met not "in real life" but in his work. He died at nineteen, and could be known in no other way. All the same, this first attempt to evoke the sphere of his life through that of poetry was unsuccessful, and the immediacy of the experience that gave rise to my lecture asserted itself irresistibly in the incomprehension and snobbery of the audience, who came to hear it at the house of Marianne Weber. No matter how much memory has subsequently paled, or how indistinctly I can now give an account of the rooms in the Meeting House, it nevertheless seems to me today more legitimate to attempt to delineate the outward space the dead man inhabited, indeed the room where he was "announced," than the inner space in which he created. But perhaps that is only because, in this last and most crucial year of his life, he traversed the space in which I was born. Heinle's Berlin was the Berlin of the Meeting House. He lived at this period in closest proximity to it, in a fourth-floor room on Klopstockstrasse. I once visited him there. It was after a long separation resulting from a serious dissension between us. But even today I remember the smile that lifted the whole weight of these weeks of separation, that turned a probably insignificant phrase into a magic formula that healed the wound. Later, after the morning when an express letter awoke me with the

words "You will find us lying in the Meeting House"—when Heinle and his girl friend were dead—this district remained for a period the central meeting place of the living. Today, however, when I recall its old-fashioned apartment houses, its many trees dust-covered in summer, the cumbersome iron-and-stone constructions of the municipal railway cutting through it, the sparse streetcars spaced at great intervals, the sluggish water of the Landwehr Canal that marked the district off from the proletarian quarters of Moabit, the splendid but wholly unfrequented cluster of trees in the Schlosspark Bellevue, and the unspeakably cruel hunting groups flanking its approach at the star-shaped intersection of roads—today this point in space where we chanced then to open our Meeting House is for me the strictest pictorial expression of the point in history occupied by this last true *élite* of bourgeois Berlin. It was as close to the abyss of the Great War as the Meeting House was to the steep slope down to the Landwehr Canal, it was as sharply divided from proletarian youth as the houses of this *rentiers'* quarter were from those of Moabit, and the houses were the last of their line just as the occupants of those apartments were the last who could appease the clamorous shades of the dispossessed with philanthropic ceremonies. In spite—or perhaps because—of this, there is no doubt that the city of Berlin was never again to impinge so forcefully on my existence as it did in that epoch when we believed we could leave it untouched, only improving its schools, only breaking the inhumanity of their inmates' parents, only making a place in it for the words of Hölderlin or George. It was a final, heroic attempt to change the attitudes of people without changing their circumstances. We did not know that it was bound to fail, but there was hardly one of us whose resolve such knowledge could have altered. And today, as clearly as at that time, even if on the basis of entirely different reasoning, I understand that the "language of youth" had to stand at the center of our associations. Nor do I know today of any truer expression of our impotence than the struggle

that seemed the pinnacle of our strength and our exuberance, even if the shadow of downfall, cast by the incomprehension of the audience, was seldom more palpable than on that evening. I think here of an altercation between Heinle and myself on an evening at the *Aktion*.^{*} Originally only a speech by me entitled "Youth" had been on the agenda. I took it for granted that its text should be known to our closest circle before it was delivered. Scarcely had this happened, however, when Heinle raised objections. Whether he wanted to speak himself, or to impose alterations on me that I refused—the upshot was an ugly quarrel into which, as always happens on such occasions, the whole existence of each participant was drawn—Heinle's side being taken by the youngest of the three sisters[†] around whom the most important events used to gravitate, as if the fact that a Jewish widow was living with her three daughters represented, for a group seriously intent upon the abolition of the family, an appropriate base from which to launch an attack. In short, the girl reinforced her friend's demands. But I was not prepared to yield, either. So it happened that on that evening at the *Aktion*, before an astonished but less-than-captivated audience, two speeches with the same title and almost exactly identical texts were delivered, and in truth the latitude within which the "Youth Movement" had to maneuver was no larger than the area bounded by the nuances of those speeches. Thinking about the two speeches today, I should like to compare them to the clashing islands in the legend of the Argonauts, the Symplegades, between which no ship can pass in safety and where, at that time, a sea of love and hatred tossed. Assemblies of bourgeois intellectuals were then far commoner than nowadays, since they had not yet recognized their limits. We may say, however, that we felt those limits, even if much time

^{*} *Die Aktion*, a political journal of revolutionary tendency, founded in 1911 by Franz Pfemfert, dedicated to the revolution in literature and the visual arts.—ED.

[†] Traute, Carla, and Rika Seligson.—ED.

was to pass before the realization matured that no one can improve his school or his parental home without first smashing the state that needs bad ones. We felt these limits when we held our discussions, at which the younger among us spoke of the brutalities they had to endure at home, in drawing rooms kindly made available by parents who at bottom thought no differently from those we wished to oppose. We felt them when we older members held our literary evenings in rooms at beerhouses that were never for a moment safe from the serving waiters; we felt them when we were obliged to receive our lady friends in furnished rooms with doors we were not at liberty to lock; we felt them in our dealings with owners of public rooms and with porters, with relations and guardians. And when, finally, after August 8, 1914, the days came when those among us who were closest to the dead couple did not want to part from them until they were buried, we felt the limits in the shame of being able to find refuge only in a seedy railway hotel on Stuttgart Square. Even the graveyard demonstrated the boundaries set by the city to all that filled our hearts: it was impossible to procure for the pair who had died together graves in one and the same cemetery. But those were days that ripened a realization that was to come later, and that planted in me the conviction that the city of Berlin would also not be spared the scars of the struggle for a better order. If I chance today to pass through the streets of the quarter, I set foot in them with the same uneasiness that one feels when entering an attic unvisited for years. Valuable things may be lying around, but nobody remembers where. And in truth this dead quarter with its tall apartment houses is today the junk room of the West End bourgeoisie.

That was the time when the Berlin cafés played a part in our lives. I still remember the first that I took in consciously. This was much earlier, immediately after my graduation. The Viktoria Café, where our first communal jaunt ended at three in the morning, no longer exists. Its place—on the corner of

Friedrichstrasse and Unter den Linden—has been taken by one of the noisiest luxury cafés of new Berlin, against which the earlier one, however luxurious it may have been in its day, stands out with all the magic of the age of chandeliers, mirrored walls, and plush comfort. This old Viktoria Café was on that occasion our last port of call, and we doubtless reached it a depleted group. It must have been more than half empty—at any rate I can discern, through the veils that mask the image today, no one apart from a few whores, who seemed to have the spacious café to themselves. We did not stay long, and I do not know whether I paid the Viktoria Café, which must have disappeared soon after, a second visit. The time had not yet arrived when the frequenting of cafés was a daily need, and it can hardly have been Berlin that fostered this vice in me, however well the vice later adapted itself to the establishments of that city, which leads far too strenuous and conscious a life of pleasure to know real coffeehouses. Our first café, accordingly, was more a strategic quarter than a place of siesta. And I have thus unmistakably revealed its name: as is well known, the headquarters of bohemians until the first war years was the old West End Café. It was in this café that we sat together in those very first August days, choosing among the barracks that were being stormed by the onrush of volunteers. We decided on the cavalry on Belle-Alliance Strasse, where I duly appeared on one of the following days, no spark of martial fervor in my breast; yet however reserved I may have been in my thoughts, which were concerned only with securing a place among friends in the inevitable conscription, one of the bodies jammed in front of the barracks gates was mine. Admittedly only for two days: on August 8 came the event that was to banish for long after both the city and the war from my mind. I often saw Heinle in the West End Café. We usually met there late, about twelve. I cannot say that we had close relations to the literary Bohemia whose days, or nights, were spent there; we were a self-contained group, the world of our “movement” was dif-

ferent from that of the emancipated people around us, and contacts with them were only fleeting. A mediator between the two sides for a period was Franz Pfemfert, editor of *Die Aktion*; our relations with him were purely Machiavellian. Else Lasker-Schüler once drew me to her table; Wieland Herzfelde, then a young student, was to be seen there, and Simon Guttmann, to whom I shall return; but the list here reaches the boundaries of our narrower world. I believe we were alien to the café; the feverish concentration induced by concern with so many rival actions, the organization of the Free Students' Union and the development of the debating chambers, the elaboration of our speeches in large assemblies of pupils, help for comrades in need, care for those imperiled by entanglements either of friendship or of love—all this set us apart from the sated, self-assured bohemians about us. Heinle was more closely acquainted with one or another of them, such as the painter Meidner, who drew him; but this connection remained unfruitful for us. Then, one day in Switzerland, I read that the West End Café had been closed. I had never been much at home in it. At that time I did not yet possess that passion for waiting without which one cannot thoroughly appreciate the charm of a café. And if I see myself waiting one night amid tobacco smoke on the sofa that encircled one of the central columns, it was no doubt in feverish expectation of the outcome of some negotiation at the debating chamber, or of one of the mediators who were brought into play when tensions had once again reached an unbearable pitch. I came to be on much more intimate terms with the neighboring café, which had its beginning during the period I now refer to. This was the Princess Café. In an attempt to create a "Physiology of Coffeehouses," one's first and most superficial classification would be into professional and recreational establishments. If, however, one leaves aside the most brazen entertainment places run along industrial lines, it becomes very noticeable that in the development of most hostleries the two functions coincide. A particularly tell-

ing example is the history of the Romanische Café from exactly the moment when the proprietor of the West End Café evicted his clientele. Very soon the Romanische Café accommodated the bohemians, who, in the years immediately after the war, were able to feel themselves masters of the house. The legendary, now-departed waiter Richard, distributor of newspapers—a hunchback who on account of his bad reputation enjoyed high esteem in these circles—was the symbol of their dominance. When the German economy began to recover, the bohemian contingent visibly lost the threatening nimbus that had surrounded them in the era of the Expressionist revolutionary manifestoes. The bourgeois revised his relationship to the inmates of the Café Megalomania (as the Romanische Café soon came to be called) and found that everything was back to normal. At this moment the physiognomy of the Romanische Café began to change. The "artists" withdrew into the background, to become more and more a part of the furniture, while the bourgeois, represented by stock-exchange speculators, managers, film and theater agents, literary-minded clerks, began to occupy the place—as a place of relaxation. For one of the most elementary and indispensable diversions of the citizen of a great metropolis, wedged, day in, day out, in the structure of his office and family amid an infinitely variegated social environment, is to plunge into another world, the more exotic the better. Hence the bars haunted by artists and criminals. The distinction between the two, from this point of view, is slight. The history of the Berlin coffeehouses is largely that of different strata of the public, those who first conquered the floor being obliged to make way for others gradually pressing forward, and thus to ascend the stage.

Such a stage, for Heinle and me, was the Princess Café, which we were in the habit of patronizing as occupants of private boxes. The latter should be taken almost literally, for this café, designed by Lucian Bernhard, an interior decorator and poster artist much in demand at that time, offered its

visitors an abundance of snug recesses, standing historically midway between the *chambres séparées* and the coffee parlors. The profession primarily served by this establishment is therefore clear. And when we visited it, indeed made it for a time our regular meeting place, it was certainly on account of the *cocottes*. Heinle wrote "Princess Café" at that time. "Doors draw coolness over through the song." We had no intention of making acquaintances in this café. On the contrary—what attracted us here was being enclosed in an environment that isolated us. Every distinction between us and the literary coteries of the city was welcome to us. This one, to be sure, more so than all others. And that certainly had to do with the *cocottes*. But this leads into a subterranean stratum of the Youth Movement, reached by way of an artist's studio in Halensee, to which we shall return. It is quite possible that S. Guttman, its occupant, met us here, too, from time to time. I have no recollection of it, just as in general, here more than elsewhere, the human figures recede before the place itself, and none of them is as vividly present to me as a forlorn, approximately circular chamber in the upper story, hung with violet drapery and illuminated with a violet glow, in which many seats were always empty, while on others couples took up as little space as possible. I called this amphitheater the "anatomy school." Later, when this epoch was long since closed, I sat long evenings there, close to a jazz band, discreetly consulting sheets and slips of paper, writing my *Origin of German Tragic Drama*. When one day a new "renovation" set in, turning the Princess Café into Café Stenwyk, I gave up. Today it has sunk to the level of a beerhouse.

Never again has music possessed so dehumanized and shameless a quality as that of the two brass bands that tempered the flood of people surging torpidly along "Scandal Avenue" between the café restaurants of the Zoo. Today I perceive what gave this flow its elemental force. For the city dweller

there was no higher school of flirtation than this, surrounded by the sandy precincts of gnus and zebras, the bare trees and clefts where vultures and condors nested, the stinking enclosures of wolves, and the hatcheries of pelicans and herons. The calls and screeches of these animals mingled with the noise of drums and percussion. This was the air in which the glance of a boy fell for the first time on a passing girl, while he talked all the more zealously to his friend. And such were his efforts to betray himself neither by his eyes nor his voice that he saw nothing of her.

At that time the Zoological Garden still had an entrance by the Lichtenstein Bridge. Of the three gates it was the least frequented, and gave access to the park's most deserted quarter: an avenue that, with the milk-white orbs of its candelabras, resembled some deserted promenade at Wiesbaden or Pymont; and before the economic crisis had so depopulated these resorts that they seemed more antique than Roman spas, this dead corner of the Zoological Garden was an image of what was to come, a prophesying place. It must be considered certain that there are such places; indeed, just as there are plants that primitive peoples claim confer the power of clairvoyance, so there are places endowed with such power: they may be deserted promenades, or treetops, particularly in towns, seen against walls, railway level-crossings, and above all the thresholds that mysteriously divide the districts of a town. The Lichtenstein gate was really such a threshold, between the two West End parks. It was as if in both, at the point where they were nearest, life paused. And this daily desertion was the more keenly felt by one who remembered the dazzling approach to be seen on festal nights for a number of years from a doorway of the Adler ballrooms, which has fallen now into just such disuse as has this long-closed gate.

Language shows clearly that memory is not an instrument for exploring the past but its theater. It is the medium of

past experience, as the ground is the medium in which dead cities lie interred. He who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging. This confers the tone and bearing of genuine reminiscences. He must not be afraid to return again and again to the same matter; to scatter it as one scatters earth, to turn it over as one turns over soil. For the matter itself is only a deposit, a stratum, which yields only to the most meticulous examination what constitutes the real treasure hidden within the earth: the images, severed from all earlier associations, that stand—like precious fragments or torsos in a collector's gallery—in the prosaic rooms of our later understanding. True, for successful excavations a plan is needed. Yet no less indispensable is the cautious probing of the spade in the dark loam, and it is to cheat oneself of the richest prize to preserve as a record merely the inventory of one's discoveries, and not this dark joy of the place of the finding itself. Fruitless searching is as much a part of this as succeeding, and consequently remembrance must not proceed in the manner of a narrative or still less that of a report, but must, in the strictest epic and rhapsodic manner, assay its spade in ever-new places, and in the old ones delve to ever-deeper layers.

It is true that countless façades of the city stand exactly as they stood in my childhood. Yet I do not encounter my childhood in their contemplation. My gaze has brushed them too often since, too often they have been the *décor* and theater of my walks and concerns. And the few exceptions to this rule—above all St. Matthew's Church on St. Matthew's Square—are perhaps only apparently so. For did I as a child really frequent the remote corner where it stands, did I even know it? I cannot tell. What it says to me today it owes solely to the edifice itself: the church with the two pointed, gabled roofs over its two side aisles, and the yellow-and-ocher brick of which it is built. It is an old-fashioned church, of which

the same is true as of many an old-fashioned building: although they were not young with us and perhaps did not even know us when we were children, they have much knowledge of our childhood, and for this we love them. But I should confront myself at that age in quite a different way had I the courage to enter a certain front door that I have passed thousands upon thousands of times. A front door in the old West End. True, my eyes no longer see it, or the façade of the house. My soles would doubtless be the first to send me word, once I had closed the door behind me, that on this worn staircase they trod in ancient tracks, and if I no longer cross the threshold of that house it is for fear of an encounter with this stairway interior, which has conserved in seclusion the power to recognize me that the façade lost long ago. For with its columned windows it has stayed the same, even if within the living quarters all is changed. Bleak verses filled the intervals between our heartbeats, when we paused exhausted on the landings between floors. They glimmered or shone from panes in which a woman with nut-brown eyebrows floated aloft with a goblet from a niche, and while the straps of my satchel cut into my shoulders I was forced to read, "Industry adorns the burgher, blessedness is toil's reward." Outside it may have been raining. One of the colored windows was open, and to the beat of raindrops the upward march resumed.

Motto: O brown-baked column of victory
With children's sugar from the winter days.

I never slept on the street in Berlin. I saw sunset and dawn, but between the two I found myself a shelter. Only those for whom poverty or vice turns the city into a landscape in which they stray from dark till sunrise know it in a way denied to me. I always found quarters, even though sometimes tardy and also unknown ones that I did not revisit and where I was not alone. If I paused thus late in a doorway, my legs had become

entangled in the ribbons of the streets, and it was not the cleanest of hands that freed me.

Reminiscences, even extensive ones, do not always amount to an autobiography. And these quite certainly do not, even for the Berlin years that I am exclusively concerned with here. For autobiography has to do with time, with sequence and what makes up the continuous flow of life. Here, I am talking of a space, of moments and discontinuities. For even if months and years appear here, it is in the form they have at the moment of recollection. This strange form—it may be called fleeting or eternal—is in neither case the stuff that life is made of. And this is shown not so much by the role that my own life plays here, as by that of the people closest to me in Berlin—whoever and whenever they may have been. The atmosphere of the city that is here evoked allots them only a brief, shadowy existence. They steal along its walls like beggars, appear wraithlike at windows, to vanish again, sniff at thresholds like a *genius loci*, and even if they fill whole quarters with their names, it is as a dead man's fills his gravestone. Noisy, matter-of-fact Berlin, the city of work and the metropolis of business, nevertheless has more, rather than less, than some others, of those places and moments when it bears witness to the dead, shows itself full of dead; and the obscure awareness of these moments, these places, perhaps more than anything else, confers on childhood memories a quality that makes them at once as evanescent and as alluringly tormenting as half-forgotten dreams. For childhood, knowing no preconceived opinions, has none about life. It is as dearly attached (though with just as strong reservations) to the realm of the dead, where it juts into that of the living, as to life itself. How far a child has access to the past is difficult to tell, and depends on many things—time, environment, its nature and education. The limitation of my own feeling for the Berlin that is not circumscribed by a few facts about the Stratau Fair and Frederick in 1848—that is, for the topographical tradition

representing the connection with the dead of this ground—results entirely from the circumstance that neither of my parents' families were natives of Berlin. That sets a limit to the child's memory—and it is this limit, rather than childhood experience itself, that is manifest in what follows. Wherever this boundary may have been drawn, however, the second half of the nineteenth century certainly lies within it, and to it belong the following images, not in the manner of general representations, but of images that, according to the teaching of Epicurus, constantly detach themselves from things and determine our perception of them.

First of all, let no one think we were talking of a *Markt-Halle* [covered market]. No: it was pronounced "*Mark-Talle*," and just as these words were eroded by the habit of speech until none retained its original "sense," so by the habit of this walk all the images it offered were worn away, so that none of them conforms to the original concept of buying and selling.

Behind us lay the forecourt, with its dangerous, heavy swing doors on their whiplash springs, and we had now set foot on the flagstones, slippery with fish water or swill, on which you could so easily slip on carrots or lettuce leaves. Behind wire partitions, each bearing a number, were ensconced the ponderous ladies, priestesses of Venal Ceres, purveyors of all the fruits of field and tree, and of all edible birds, fishes, and mammals, procuresses, untouchable wool-clad colossi exchanging vibrant signs from booth to booth with a flash of their large mother-of-pearl buttons or a slap on their booming black aprons or their money-filled pouches. Did it not bubble and seethe below the hems of their skirts, and was this not the truly fertile ground? Did not a god of the market himself cast the goods into their laps: berries, crustaceans, mushrooms, chunks of meat and cabbage, invisibly cohabiting with those who abandoned themselves as they languidly and mutely eyed the unsteady procession of housewives who, laden with baskets

and bags, laboriously drove their brood before them along these slippery alleyways of ill repute. But if in winter the gas lamps went on in the early evening, you had at once a feeling of sinking, becoming aware, in this gentle gliding, of the depths of sea below the surface that heaved opaque and sluggish in the glassy waters.

The more frequently I return to these memories, the less fortuitous it seems to me how slight a role is played in them by people: I think of an afternoon in Paris to which I owe insights into my life that came in a flash, with the force of an illumination. It was on this very afternoon that my biographical relationships to people, my friendships and comradeships, my passions and love affairs, were revealed to me in their most vivid and hidden intertwinings. I tell myself it had to be in Paris, where the walls and quays, the places to pause, the collections and the rubbish, the railings and the squares, the arcades and the kiosks, teach a language so singular that our relations to people attain, in the solitude encompassing us in our immersion in that world of things, the depths of a sleep in which the dream image waits to show the people their true faces. I wish to write of this afternoon because it made so apparent what kind of regimen cities keep over imagination, and why the city, where people make the most ruthless demands on one another, where appointments and telephone calls, sessions and visits, flirtations and the struggle for existence grant the individual not a single moment of contemplation, indemnifies itself in memory, and why the veil it has covertly woven out of our lives shows the images of people less than those of the sites of our encounters with others or ourselves. Now on the afternoon in question I was sitting inside the *Café des Deux Magots* at *St.-Germain-des-Prés*, where I was waiting—I forget for whom. Suddenly, and with compelling force, I was struck by the idea of drawing a diagram of my life, and knew at the same moment exactly how it was to be done. With a very simple question I interro-

gated my past life, and the answers were inscribed, as if of their own accord, on a sheet of paper that I had with me. A year or two later, when I lost this sheet, I was inconsolable. I have never since been able to restore it as it arose before me then, resembling a series of family trees. Now, however, reconstructing its outline in thought without directly reproducing it, I should, rather, speak of a labyrinth. I am not concerned here with what is installed in the chamber at its enigmatic center, ego or fate, but all the more with the many entrances leading into the interior. These entrances I call primal acquaintances; each of them is a graphic symbol of my acquaintance with a person whom I met, not through other people, but through neighborhood, family relationships, school comradeship, mistaken identity, companionship on travels, or other such—hardly numerous—situations. So many primal relationships, so many entrances to the maze. But since most of them—at least those that remain in our memory—for their part open up new acquaintances, relations to new people, after some time they branch off these corridors (the male may be drawn to the right, female to the left). Whether cross-connections are finally established between these systems also depends on the intertwinements of our path through life. More important, however, are the astonishing insights that a study of this plan provides into the differences among individual lives. What part is played in the primal acquaintanceships of different people's lives by profession and school, family and travel? And above all: is the formation of the many offshoots governed in individual existence by hidden laws? Which ones start early and which late in life? Which are continued to the end of life and which peter out? "If a man has character," says Nietzsche, "he will have the same experience over and over again." Whether or not this is true on a large scale, on a small one there are perhaps paths that lead us again and again to people who have one and the same function for us: passageways that always, in the most diverse periods of life, guide us to the friend, the betrayer, the beloved,

the pupil, or the master. This is what the sketch of my life revealed to me as it took shape before me on that Paris afternoon. Against the background of the city, the people who had surrounded me closed together to form a figure. It was many years earlier, I believe at the beginning of the war, that in Berlin, against the background of the people then closest to me, the world of things contracted to a symbol similarly profound. It was an emblem of four rings. This takes me to one of the old Berlin houses on the Kupfergraben. With their plain, genteel façades and their wide hallways, they may have stemmed from the Schinkel period. In one of them lived at that time a prominent antique dealer. He had no display window. You had to go into his apartment to admire, in a number of showcases, a selection of prehistoric brooches and clasps, Lombard earrings, late Roman neck chains, medieval coins, and many similar valuables. How my friend A. C.* had tracked him down I do not know. But I remember distinctly the engrossment with which, under the impression of Alois Riegl's *Late Roman Art Industry*, which I had recently studied, I contemplated the breastplates made from sheet gold and garnet-adorned bracelets. There were, if I am not mistaken, three of us: my friend, his fiancée at that time or Frau Dorothea J., and me. C. asked to see rings—Greek and Renaissance cameos, rings from the imperial period, usually work carved in semiprecious stone. Each of the four that he finally purchased is imprinted unforgettably on my mind. Except for one that I have lost sight of, they are still today with those for whom they were intended that morning. One, a bright-yellow smoky topaz, was chosen by Dorothea J. The workmanship was Grecian and depicted in a tiny space Leda receiving the swan between her parted thighs. It was most graceful. I was less able to admire the amethyst that the donor, Ernst S[choen], selected for our mutual friend: a fifteenth- or sixteenth-century Italian had carved a profile in it which Lederer claimed to be that of Pompey. I was quite differently affected,

* Alfred Cohn.—ED.

however, by the last two rings. One was intended for me, but only as a very temporary owner; it was really destined to reach, through me, my then fiancée, Grete R[adt]. It was the most fascinating ring I have ever seen. Cut in a dark, solid garnet, it portrayed a Medusa's head. It was a work of the Roman imperial period. The proustite mounting was not the original. Worn on the finger, the ring seemed merely the most perfect of signet rings. You only entered its secret by taking it off and contemplating the head against the light. As the different strata of the garnet were unequally translucent, and the thinnest so transparent that it glowed with rose hues, the somber bodies of the snakes seemed to rise above the two deep, glowing eyes, which looked out from a face that, in the purple-black portions of the cheeks, receded once more into the night. Later I tried more than once to seal with this stone, but it proved easy to crack and in need of the utmost care. Shortly after giving it away, I broke off my relationship with its new owner. My heart had already gone with the last of the four rings, which the giver had reserved for his sister. And certainly this girl was the true center of the circle's fate, though years were to elapse before we realized it. For apart from her beauty—itsself not dazzling, but inconspicuous and without luster—she had nothing that seemed to destine her for the center of the stage. And in fact she never was the center of people but, in the strictest sense, of fates, as if her plantlike passivity and inertia had arranged the latter—which, of all human things, seem the most subject to vegetal laws—concentrically about her. Many years were needed before what at that time was in part beginning to unfold in its seed, and in part still dormant, emerged in its ramifications to the light of day: the fate by virtue of which she, who stood in a relation to her brother that by its tenderness filled to the very edge the limits of sisterly love, was to form a liaison with her brother's two closest friends—with the recipient of the ring with the head of Pompey and with me—to find her husband finally in the brother of the woman who married her own

brother as her second husband*—and she it was, on the day I am speaking of, who received from me the ring with the Medusa's head. It cannot have been many days later that I sent after the lapis lazuli with the lute wreathed in foliage engraved in it—after the fourth ring and to its wearer—this sonnet: To your finger constantly encircled †

The treasure-dispensing giant ‡ in the green pine forest or the fairy who grants one wish—they appear to each of us at least once in a lifetime. But only Sunday's children remember the wish they made, and so it is only a few who recognize its fulfillment in their own lives. I know of such a wish that was fulfilled for me, and would not claim it to be wiser than those of children in fairy tales. It goes back to my early childhood, and arose in me in connection with the lamp that on dark winter mornings at half past six was carried through my doorway and cast the shadow of our nursemaid on the ceiling. The fire was lit in the stove and soon, amid reddish reflections, the grating was marked out on the bare floor. When the temperature—the nightly warmth from my bed and the morning warmth from the fire—had made me doubly drowsy, it was time to get up. Then I had no other wish than to finish my sleep. This wish accompanied me throughout the whole of my school days. Its inseparable attendant, however, was fear of being late. I can still feel today, when I pass the Savignyplatz, the dread with which, stepping into Carmerstrasse, where I lived, I read my judgment in the spellbound space between the ten and the twelve on the repulsive clock-face. The wish that animated me on such winter days, and even later, when, in an extremity of fatigue, I rose from the

* Julia Cohn married Fritz Radt, whose sister, Grete Radt, became the wife of Alfred Cohn.—ED.

† The sentence breaks off without punctuation at the end of a page, and the continuation is no doubt missing. The sonnet is likely to have been by Benjamin but has not been preserved.—ED.

‡ See Hauff's fairy tale, "The Cold Heart."—ED.

couch in the afternoon because of a gymnastics class, had been fulfilled. Only I did not always recognize this fulfillment when yet another of my attempts to find a place of work, in the bourgeois sense of the word, had come to grief.

There is one other sound that, thanks to the decades in which it neither passed my lips nor reached my ears, has preserved the unfathomable mystery that certain words from the language of adults possess for children. It was not long ago that I rediscovered it, and indeed a number of indivisible finds of this nature have played a large part in my decision to write down these memories. My parents being wealthy, we moved every year, before I went to school and perhaps later, too, notwithstanding other occasional summer trips, into summer residences not far from home. First it was Potsdam, later Neubabelsberg. Whereas the latter period still survives in a number of images, of which I may perhaps have more to tell—the night of the great burglary when my parents locked themselves in my room, the hours I stood fishing beside my father on the bank of Lake Griebnitz, the visit to Peacock Island that brought the first great disappointment of my life, because I could not find the peacock feathers in the grass as I had been promised—by contrast, the summer months in Potsdam have wholly vanished, unless I may situate the asparagus cutting—my first and only agricultural passion—as far back as the garden on the Brauhausberg. And I have thus divulged the word in which, like countless rose petals in a drop of Rose Malmaison, hundreds of summer days, forfeiting their form, their color, and their multiplicity, are preserved in their scent. The word is Brauhausberg. To approach what it enfolds is almost impossible. These words that exist on the frontier between two linguistic regions, of children and of adults, are comparable to those of Mallarmé's poems, which the conflict between the poetic and the profane word has as it were consumed and made evanescent, airy. Likewise the word Brauhausberg has lost all heaviness, no longer contains

a trace of a brewery [*Brauhaus*], and is at the most a hill swathed in blue that rose up each summer to give lodging to me and my parents.

The economic basis on which the finances of my parents rested was surrounded, long past my childhood and adolescence, by deepest secrecy. Probably not only for me, the eldest child, but also for my mother. And it is certain that such a state of affairs was the rule in a Jewish family, and no doubt in very many Christian ones as well. More curious is the fact that consumption, too, was wrapped in some of the mystery that so deeply shrouded income and fortune. I remember, at any rate, that the mention of certain suppliers—"sources," as they were called—always took place with the solemnity befitting an initiation. There are, it is true, distinctions to be drawn. The purveyors who met the daily household needs no more belonged to that secret circle than did the Berlin firms of long-standing repute that my mother visited when she took me and the younger children "to town." On such occasions it was as certain that our suits would be bought at Arnold Müller's, shoes at Stiller's, and suitcases at Mädler's, as that at the end of these commissions our hot chocolate with whipped cream would be ordered at Hillbrich's. These shopping places were strictly preordained by tradition—quite unlike the connections with traders, which were my father's responsibility. My father possessed at base, along with a number of inhibitions stemming not only from his decency but also from a certain civic worthiness, the entrepreneurial nature of a big-business man. Unfavorable influences brought about his very premature retirement from an enterprise that was probably by no means ill-suited to his capacities, the Lepke art auction, in which he was a partner. When he had relinquished his share in the firm, he concerned himself increasingly with speculative investments of his capital, and it would not surprise me if the interest he took in household transactions was far keener from this time on. What is certain

is that the suppliers he henceforth searched out were indirectly connected with his investments. If, therefore, from my mother's shopping excursions, a traditional and as it were official image of the Berlin commercial world emerged, the hints and instructions of my father gave rise to an unknown and slightly sinister one, the prestige of which derived as much from the authoritarian resonance that these names carried at the family table as from the fact that these firms, unlike the others, were never seen by me. At their head, so to speak, was the Lepke auction room itself, with which my father not only had connections but from which, from time to time, he also brought home a purchase. I doubt that this commerce was an altogether happy one, with the exception perhaps of his carpet buying. Shortly before his death he told me that he could distinguish the qualities of a pile with the ball of his foot, if his soles were suitably thin. In my childhood, however, what impressed me most was to imagine the gavel blows with which my father accompanied the auction. Later, when he had withdrawn from Lepke's, this gavel always lay on his desk. Even if I never heard the rap of this gavel, there is another sound that became indissoluble from the image of my father's power and grandeur—or, rather, from those of a man in his profession. It is, implausible as it may seem, the noise made by the knife that my mother used to spread the rolls that my father took to his work in the morning, when it was scraped for the last time, to remove the butter still adhering to it, against the crisp surface of the cut roll. This signal prelude to the labor of my father's day was no less exciting to me than, in later years, the sound of the bell that announced the start of a performance at the theater. Apart from this, the real token of my father's profession in our apartment was a Moor, almost life-size, who stood on a gondola reduced to one-thirtieth of its size, holding with one hand an oar that could be taken out, and lifting on the other a golden bowl. This work of art was made of wood, the Moor black, the gondola and oar glowing in many colors beneath the varnish. The whole, however, was so ur-

gently oriented toward its companion piece that I cannot tell today whether a second Moor, whom I imagine with it, really stood there originally or is a creature of my imagination. So much for Lepke's art auction. There was, besides, a further purveyor of artwork—at least as far as bronzes were concerned; it was the firm of Gladenbeck. Whether the choice was affected here, too, by more intimate commercial ties, I do not know. Such was certainly the case, however, with our supply of mouthwash, hydrogen peroxide obtained in huge bottles from the "Medicinal Stores," of which my father was a director. Less transparent, on the other hand, was the state of affairs regarding the Stabernack firm, which for years held an uncontested monopoly of installations in our apartment. Here the intermediate party was perhaps a certain company of building contractors, one of whose directors, Herr Altgelt, filled the role of partner in countless telephone conversations with my father, and whose name has stayed in my memory because his son was a member, and one of the most inglorious, of my class. Leaving aside mealtime conversations, it was only the telephone that intimated to us the occult world of business and traders. My father telephoned a great deal. He, whose outward manner seems to have been almost always courteous and pliable, possessed perhaps only on the telephone the bearing and decisiveness corresponding to his sometimes great wealth. In conversations with mediating agencies this energy not infrequently grew vociferous, and the "serious side of life," which was embodied tangibly in my father's activity, found in the altercations with the telephone operators its true symbol. The telephone first came into use during my childhood. I have therefore known it nailed in some corner of the corridor, whence, shrilling from the darkness, it augmented the terrors of that Berlin apartment with the endless passage leading from the half-lit dining room to the back bedrooms. It became a truly infernal machine when my school friends phoned in the prohibited period between two and four. But not all my

father's mysterious transactions were carried out by telephone. From earliest times he had had—like many husbands who do not always find life easy in marriage—a tendency to address himself independently to certain branches of the domestic economy. Thus he had connections in the provinces, principally in the vicinity of Hamburg, which frequently called him away on business. The house was regularly plied from this source with Holstein butter, and in autumn with teal. Wine, on the other hand, was catered for by a Berlin firm, whose share certificates were also in my father's possession: this was the Central Wine Distributors, who were trying out new methods of calculation in the wine business. Finally these names became entwined, in the parental discussions, with others in which the traditions of the middle-class Berlin of that time converged from both sides: for notarial attestation Oberneck was consulted, operations were performed by Rinne, dancing instruction was entrusted to Quaritsch, the family doctor was Renvers, at least as long as he lived in the same building.* Joseph Goldschmidt was our banker. But as for me, I was most lastingly affected by a reckless attempt that my father embarked upon one evening to bring even the family's amusements into the harmony with his business enterprises that he had been able to establish for all its other needs. For when, about 1910, on Lutherstrasse in the West End, a consortium erected the building that now houses the Scala as an "Ice Palace," my father, with a sizable stake, was among their number. Now one evening, I do not know whether it was the opening date or later, my father conceived the idea of taking me there. The Ice Palace, however, was not only the first artificial ice rink to be seen in Berlin, but also a thriving nightclub. So it happened that my attention was held far less by the convolutions in the arena than by the apparitions at the bar, which I was able to survey at my ease from a box in the circle. Among these was a prostitute in a very tight-fitting

* Professor R. Renvers lived at 24 Nettelbeckstrasse.—ED.

white sailor's suit, who, without my having been able to exchange a word with her, determined my erotic fantasies for years to come.

In those early years I got to know the "town" only as the theater of purchases, on which occasions it first became apparent how my father's money could cut a path for us between the shop counters and assistants and mirrors, and the appraising eyes of our mother, whose muff lay on the counter. In the ignominy of a "new suit" we stood there, our hands peeping from the sleeves like dirty price tags, and it was only in the confectioner's that our spirits rose with the feeling of having escaped the false worship that humiliated our mother before idols bearing the names of Mannheimer, Herzog and Israel, Gerson, Adam, Esders and Mädler, Emma Bette, Bud and Lachmann. An impenetrable chain of mountains, no, caverns of commodities—that was "the town."

There are people who think they find the key to their destinies in heredity, others in horoscopes, others again in education. For my part, I believe that I should gain numerous insights into my later life from my collection of picture postcards, if I were able to leaf through it again today. The main contributor to this collection was my maternal grandmother, a decidedly enterprising lady, from whom I believe I have inherited two things: my delight in giving presents and my love of travel. If it is doubtful what the Christmas holidays—which cannot be thought of without the Berlin of my childhood—meant for the first of these passions, it is certain that none of my boys' adventure books kindled my love of travel as did the postcards with which she supplied me in abundance from her *farflung* travels. And because the longing we feel for a place determines it as much as does its outward image, I shall say something about these postcards. And yet—was what they awakened in me longing? Did they not have far too magnetic an attraction to leave room for a wish to travel to the places

they showed? For I was there—in Tabarz, Brindisi, Madonna di Campiglio, Westerland, when I gazed, unable to tear myself away, at the wooded slopes of Tabarz covered with glowing red berries, the yellow-and-white-daubed quays at Brindisi, the cupolas of Madonna di Campiglio printed bluish on blue, and the bows of the "Westerland" slicing high through the waves. Visiting the old lady in her carpeted window alcove, ornamented with a little balustrade and looking out onto the Blumeshof, it was hard to imagine how she had undertaken long sea voyages or even camel rides under the direction of Stangel's Travel Bureau. She was a widow; three of her daughters were already married when I was small. I can tell nothing about the fourth, but a good deal about the room that she occupied in her mother's apartment. But perhaps I must first say something about the apartment as a whole. With what words am I to circumscribe the almost immemorial feeling of bourgeois security that emanated from these rooms? Paradoxical as it may sound, the idea of that particular protectedness seems to relate most directly to their shortcomings. The inventory that filled these many rooms—twelve or fourteen—could today be accommodated without incongruity in the shabbiest of secondhand furniture shops. And if these ephemeral forms were so much more solid than those of the *art nouveau* that superseded them—what made you feel at home, at ease, comfortable, and comforted in them was the non-chalance with which they attached themselves to the sauntering passage of years and days, entrusting their future to the durability of their material alone, and nowhere to rational calculation. Here reigned a species of things that was, no matter how compliantly it bowed to the minor whims of fashion, in the main so wholly convinced of itself and its permanence that it took no account of wear, inheritance, or moves, remaining forever equally near to and far from its ending, which seemed the ending of all things. Poverty could have no place in these rooms where even death had none. They had no space for dying—which is why their owners died in a sanatorium, while

the furniture went straight to the secondhand dealer. Death was not provided for in them—that is why they were so cozy by day, and by night the theater of our most oppressive dreams. It is for this reason that, when I think of this house—it was number 10 or 12 Blumeshof—in which were spent so many of my childhood's happiest hours, such as when I was allowed, to the sound of piano études, to browse in *Darling's Diversions* in an armchair—I am met on its threshold by a nightmare. My waking existence has preserved no image of the staircase. But in my memory it remains today the scene of a haunting dream that I once had in just those happy years. In this dream the stairway seemed under the power of a ghost that awaited me as I mounted, though without barring my way, making its presence felt when I had only a few more stairs to climb. On these last stairs it held me spellbound. The rooms in this apartment on the Blumeshof were not only numerous but also in some cases very large. To reach my grandmother at her window I had to cross the huge dining room and attain the farthest end of the living room. Only feast days, and above all Christmas Day, could give an idea of the capaciousness of these rooms. But if, when this day came, it seemed as though it had been awaited all the year long in the front rooms, there were other occasions that brought other parts of the apartment to life: a visit by a married daughter unlocked a long-disused wardrobe; another back room opened to us children when the grownups wished to take their afternoon nap at the front of the house, and another part again was animated by the piano lessons received by the last daughter to remain at home. The most important of these remote, less-frequented rooms, however, was the loggia. Perhaps this was because, being the least furnished, it was least suited to the sojourn of adults, or because muted street noises came in, or finally because it opened onto the back courtyards with children, domestic servants, hurdy-gurdy men, and porters. But of these it was more often the voices than the forms that were to be described from the loggia. Moreover, the courtyards of a residential quarter as

genteel as this never really bustled with activity; something of the composure of the rich people whose work was being done there seemed to have permeated this work itself, and everything seemed to await the Sleeping Beauty slumber that descended here on Sundays. For this reason Sunday was properly the day of the loggia—Sunday, which none of the other rooms could ever quite contain, as if they were damaged. Sunday seeped out of them; only the loggia, looking out onto the yard with the carpet rails and the other loggias with their bare walls of Pompeian red, could hold it, and not a chime of the cargo of bells with which the churches—the Twelve Apostles, St. Matthew's, and the Emperor William Memorial Church—slowly loaded it throughout the afternoon, slipped over its balustrade; all remained piled high till evening. As I have already indicated, my grandmother did not die in the Blumeshof; nor did the other, who lived opposite her in the same street and was older and more severe, my father's mother. So the Blumeshof has become for me an Elysium, an indefinite realm of the shades of deceased but immortal grandmothers. And just as imagination, having once cast its veil over a district, is apt to adorn its edges with incomprehensible, capricious frills, so, in the course of decades and to this day it made of a long-established grocer's store situated near this house but on Magdeburgerstrasse, to one driving past without ever having set foot inside, a monument to an early-departed grandfather, solely because the first name of its owner, like his, was Georg.

But is not this, too, the city: the strip of light under the bedroom door on evenings when we were "entertaining." Did not Berlin itself find its way into the expectant childhood night, as later the world of William Tell or Julius Caesar invaded the night of an audience? The dream ship that came to fetch us on those evenings must have rocked at our bedside on the waves of conversation, or under the spray of clattering plates, and in the early morning it set us down on the ebb of the

carpet beating that came in at the window with the moist air on rainy days and engraved itself more indelibly in the child's memory than the voice of the beloved in that of the man, the carpet beating that was the language of the nether world, of servant girls, the real grownups, a language that sometimes took its time, languid and muted under the gray sky, breaking at others into an inexplicable gallop, as if the servants were pursued by phantoms. The courtyard was one of the places where the city opened itself to the child; others, admitting him or letting him go, were railway stations. On departure, their openings were a panorama, the frame of a *fata morgana*. No distance was more remote than the place where the rails converged in the mist. Returning home, however, all was different. For the lamps still burned in us that had shone in isolation from courtyard windows often without curtains, from staircases bristling with filth, from cellar windows hung with rags. These were the back yards that the city showed me as I returned from Hahnenklee or Sylt, only to close upon them once more, never to let me see or enter them. But those five last fearful minutes of the journey before everyone got out have been converted into the gaze of my eyes, and there are those perhaps who look into them as into courtyard windows in damaged walls, in which at early evening a lamp stands.

Among the postcards in my album there are a number of which the written side has lasted better in my memory than the picture. All bear the handsome, legible signature "Helene Pufahl." She was my first teacher. Long before I knew of classes at school, I was brought by her into close relationship to the children of my "class," in the sense of the word that I was to become acquainted with only two decades later. And that it was high on the social scale I can infer from the names of the two girls from the little circle that remain in my memory: Ilse Ullstein and Luise von Landau. What order of nobility these Landaus belonged to I do not know. But their name had an immense attraction for me and—I have grounds to sup-

pose—for my parents. Yet this is hardly the reason why their name has remained undimmed in my mind until today; rather, it is the circumstance that this was the first name on which I consciously heard fall the accent of death. That was, as far as I know, not long after I had grown out of the little private circle. Later, each time I passed the Lützow Ufer, my eyes sought her house, and when, toward the end of my school days, I wrote my first philosophical essay, with the title "Reflections on the Nobility," beside that of Pindar with which I started, the alluring name of my first schoolmate stood unuttered. Fraülein Pufahl was succeeded by Herr Knoche, whom I had to confront quite alone. He was the preschool teacher from the school for which my parents later intended me. His instruction does not appear to have entirely agreed with me. At any rate, I performed on occasion magical rites directed against his person, and I still remember the feeling of omnipotence that came over me one day on the Herkules Bridge on receiving the news that Herr Knoche had canceled the next day's class. At that time I knew to what I might attribute this, but today, sadly, I have forgotten the magic formula. More than in his private appearances, Herr Knoche impressed me in the classroom lessons I had with him later, when I had started school. They were enlivened by frequent intermezzi for thrashing. Herr Knoche was a zealous exponent of the cane. He was also entrusted with our singing instruction. And it was in a singing lesson that he showed me one of the shut gates that we all know from our childhood, behind which, we were assured, the way to later, real life lay open. We were practicing the cuirassier's song from *Wallenstein's Camp*. "To horse, trusty friends, to horse and away/to the field of freedom and valiance,/ where a man's worth more than dust and clay/and the heart's still weighed in the balance." Herr Knoche wanted the class to tell him what these last words actually meant. No one, of course, could give an answer. It was one of those artful questions that make children obtuse. Our discomfiture seemed most agreeable to Herr Knoche, who said pointedly, "You'll under-

stand that when you are grown up." Now I am grown up; I am today inside the gate that Herr Knoche showed me; but it is still firmly shut. I was not to make my entrance through that portal.

As lights on a foggy night have around them gigantic rings, my earliest theatrical impressions emerge from the mist of my childhood with great aureoles. At the very beginning is a "monkey theater" that played perhaps on Unter den Linden and at which I appeared, as I remember, heavily escorted, as neither parents nor grandmother was prepared to forgo witnessing the effect on me of my first theatrical performance. True, the source of the light, the actual happening on the stage, I can no longer discern in so much luminous haze. A pinkish-gray cloud of seats, lights, and faces has obliterated the pranks of the poor little monkeys on the stage. And while I can recount the sequence of theatrical events in the following six or seven years, I can say nothing more of them—neither of the *Ladies' Man* I saw at the Spa Theater at Suderode; nor of the *William Tell* that, as is customary, initiated me to the Berlin stage; nor of the *Fiasco*, with Matkowsky, that I saw at the Schauspielhaus or the *Carmen*, with Destinn, at the Opera. The latter two performances my grandmother had taken under her wing; hence not only the dazzling program but also the imposing circle seats. And yet more fondly than to them, my mind goes back to the *William Tell*, because of the event that preceded it, the highly hermetic nature of which is still undimmed, while nothing remains in my memory of the same evening's performance. It must have been in the afternoon that a difference of opinion arose between myself and my mother. Something was to be done that I did not like. Finally, my mother had recourse to coercion. She threatened that unless I did her bidding I should be left at home in the evening. I obeyed. But the feeling with which I did so, or rather, with which, the threat hardly uttered, I measured the two opposed forces and instantaneously perceived how enormous was the preponderance of the other side, and thus my silent indig-

nation at so crude and brutal a procedure, which put at stake something totally disproportionate to the end—for the end was momentary whereas the stake, the gratitude for the evening that my mother was about to give me, as I know today and anticipated then, was deep and permanent—this feeling of misused and violated trust has outlived in me all that succeeded it that day. Many years afterward it was proved a second time how much more significant and enduring the anticipation of an event can be than what actually ensues. As a boy I longed for nothing more than to see Kainz. But his guest performances in Berlin were during school time. As the advance bookings in the morning offered the only possibility of procuring seats at prices commensurate with my pocket money, my wish was denied for years. My parents, at any rate, did nothing to advance its fulfillment. One day—whether because the advance bookings were on a Sunday or for another reason—I was able after all to be one of the first at the ticket office, which was already that of the theater at the Nollendorfplatz. I see myself standing at the box office and—as if memory wanted to prelude the approaching main theme—waiting there, sure enough, but not buying my ticket. At this point memory pauses, and only picks up its thread again when I am mounting the stairs to the circle in the evening, before the performance of *Richard II*. What is it that imposes once again on memory, at the door of the auditorium, a "so far and no further"? True, I see before me a scene from the drama, but entirely cut off, without my knowing whether it is really from this performance or from another, any more than I know whether I saw Kainz or not; whether his appearance was canceled or whether the disappointment of finding him less great than I had believed him annulled, with the image of his acting, the whole evening. So I confront uncertainty wherever I follow my earliest theatrical memories, and in the end I can no longer even distinguish dream from reality. This is true of a dark winter evening when I went with my mother to a production of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. I really saw this

opera, in a kind of people's theater. It was a noisy, cheerful evening, but all the more silent was the journey there, through a snow-covered, unknown Berlin spreading about me in the gaslight. It stood in the same relation to the city I knew as that most jealously guarded of my postcards, the depiction of the Halle Gate in pale blue on a darker blue background. The Belle-Allianceplatz was to be seen with the houses that frame it; the full moon was in the sky. From the moon and the windows in the façades, however, the top layer of card had been removed; their contrasting white disrupted the picture, and one had to hold it against a lamp or a candle to see, by the light of windows and a lunar surface parading in exactly the same illumination, the whole scene regain its composure. Perhaps that evening the opera we were approaching was the source of light that made the city suddenly gleam so differently, but perhaps it was only a dream that I had later of this walk, the memory of which has displaced what previously stood in for reality.

The architect of the Kaiser Friedrich School must have had something on the order of Brandenburg brick Gothic in mind. At any rate, it is constructed in red brick work and displays a preference of motifs commonly found at Stendal or Tangermünde. The whole, however, gives a narrow-chested, high-shouldered impression. Rising close by the precincts of the municipal railway, the building exudes a sad, spinsterish primness. Even more than to the experiences I had within, it is probably to this exterior that I should attribute the fact that I have not retained a single cheerful memory of it. Nor, since leaving, have I ever had the idea of going back. Of the walk to school I have already spoken. But if the portal had been reached just in time, or there was no longer sufficient time—and the nightmarish things to come did not weigh too heavily—to allow me to buy at the adjoining stationer's another piece of plasticine, a protractor, or, at the very beginning, wafers and the little ribbons used to attach blotting sheets to exercise-

book covers—if finally the wrought-iron door, which the janitor was allowed to open only ten minutes before school started, was still closed—how melancholy and oppressed must this wait at the door have been, under the arch of the municipal railway, which crossed Knesebeckstrasse at this point, if nothing of it comes back to me besides the compulsion incessantly to remove my cap, to pay attention to myself, when another of the teachers passed, who were permitted to enter, of course, at any time they pleased.

Only today, it seems to me, am I able to appreciate how much hatefulness and humiliation lay in the obligation to raise my cap to teachers. The necessity of admitting them by this gesture into the sphere of my private existence seemed presumptuous. I should have had no objection to a less intimate, and in some way military display of respect. But to greet a teacher as one would a relation or a friend seemed inordinately unfitting, as if they had wanted to hold school in my home. From this alone it can be seen how little school was ever able to win me over. And if I experienced the antiquated forms of school discipline—caning, change of seats, or detention—only in the lower forms, nevertheless the terror and the pall they placed me under in those years never lifted from me. I find this not only in the importance attached to promotion to the next form and to the four reports brought home each year, but also in smaller but more telling details. Above all in the unfathomable shock or, rather, bewilderment into which I was plunged by interruptions in the continuity of teaching—such as excursions to the country, games, and above all the great annual competition between the schools of Greater Berlin to decide the best team at prisoner's base. Needless to say, I never belonged to the school team, which seldom met with success. But in the mobilization of the whole school that took place on such occasions, I, too, was involved. The matches were normally played in May or June, on some field or drill ground in the vicinity of the Lehrter station. As a rule, the weather was blazing hot. Nervously I lighted at the Lehrter station, un-

certainly I set off in the direction I vaguely remembered, and found myself at last, with mixed feelings of relief and repugnance, amid some alien troop of schoolboys. From now on bewilderment was uninterrupted: whether I had to look for my own school party, or sought a resting place in the shade, whether I had to reach a stall without crossing the field in order to buy fruit for breakfast, or congregate, while avoiding any appearance of indifference, around one of the gentlemen who made known the day's results, or finally, although I had not understood these results, exchange with my school fellows during the homeward journey observations on the course of the game. Yet what made these sporting occasions most hated and most repellent of all was not their multitudinous attendance but their site. The broad, unfrequented avenues leading to it were flanked by barracks, barracks bordered the playing field, the field was a parade ground. And on those days the feeling never left me that if for only a moment I relaxed my vigilance, permitted myself only the briefest well-being in the shade of a tree or before a sausage vendor's stand, I should fall in ten years' time irredeemably into the power of this place: I should have to become a soldier. The Kaiser Friedrich School stands close by the municipal railway yard at the Savignyplatz. At the Savignyplatz station you can look down into its playground. And because, once liberated from it, I frequently took the opportunity to do this, it now stands before me quite uselessly, similar to one of those Mexican temples that were excavated much too early and inexpertly, their frescoes having been long effaced by rain by the time the excavation of the ceremonial implements and papyri, which might have thrown some light on these images, could at last seriously begin. So I have to make do with what is resurrected only today, isolated pieces of interior that have broken away and yet contain the whole within them, while the whole, standing out there before me, has lost its details without trace. The first fragment to reappear is what was certainly, throughout my whole time at school, the idlest of my perceptions: the molding, crowned

with crenelations, above the classrooms. And perhaps that is not so difficult to explain. For everything else that came within my visual field sooner or later became of use to me, became associated with a thought or a notion that swept it along into the sea of oblivion. Only this narrow molding, cast out innumerable times by the healthy beat of everyday waves until it was left stranded like a shell on the shore of my daydreaming. And there I now come across it. I pick it up and question it like Hamlet addressing the skull. It is, as I have said, a molding representing a row of battlements. What is visible between them, therefore, is not empty space but the same wood, only beveled and notched. The intention was certainly to remind the onlooker of a castle. What he was to do with the recollection was another question. In any event, this molding reinforced the idea of the dense mass divined in the morning behind the closed doors: the class at lessons. Over the doors leading to the arts-and-crafts rooms it became the emblem of a certain guildlike solidity. On the classroom cupboard I encountered it again, but how much more emphasis it had on the identically shaped cupboards standing along the faculty-room wall. In the first, second, and third forms, in the vicinity of the many little coats and caps on their racks, its impact was lost; but in the upper classes it acquired an allusion to the *Abitur* that was soon to crown the labors of their members. Yet never more than a shadow of meaning and reason passed across it in such places, and it remained, with the unspeakable gray-green ornaments adorning the wall of the hall, and with the absurd bosses and scrolls of the cast-iron balustrades, the refuge of all my minutes of terror and my nightmares. Nothing, however, could compare with the molding, unless it were the bell that shrilly marked the beginning and end of lessons and breaks. The timbre and duration of this signal never varied. And yet how different it sounded at the beginning of the first and at the end of the last period—to circumscribe this difference would be to lift the veil that seven years of school cast ever more tightly over each of the days that composed them. In the

winter the lamps were often still on when it rang, but it was bereft of coziness, offering as little shelter as the light the dentist shines into the mouth on which he is about to operate. Between two peals of the bell lay the break, the second precipitating the shuffling, chattering uproar with which the mass of pupils, streaming through only two doors, surged up the narrow stairway from floor to floor. These staircases I have always hated: hated when forced to climb them in the midst of the herd, a forest of calves and feet before me, defenselessly exposed to the bad odors emanating from all the bodies pressing so closely against mine, hated no less when, arriving late, passing deserted corridors, I hastened up them quite alone to the very top, arriving breathless in the classroom. If that happened before the teacher's hand was on the door handle, even though he might be quite near, you got in unseen. But woe if the door was already shut—however wide open those next to it might still be, and even if above or below some time passed before the bang of a shutting door announced the start of a lesson, and no matter how harmlessly the eye of a strange teacher approaching along the corridor brushed you—the judgment was ineluctable within, once you had plucked up courage to open it.

In one of the streets I passed along on my endless wanderings I was surprised, many years earlier, by the first stirring of my sexual urge, under the oddest circumstances. It was on the Jewish New Year's Day, and my parents had made arrangements for me to attend some divine celebration. Probably it was a service at the reformed synagogue, which my mother, on grounds of a family tradition, held in some sympathy, whereas my father's upbringing inclined him more to the orthodox rite. However, he had to give way. For this visit to the synagogue I had been entrusted to a relative whom I had to fetch on my way. But whether because I had forgotten his address or because I was unfamiliar with the district, it grew later and later without my drawing nearer to my goal. To make my way inde-

pendently to the synagogue was out of the question, since I had no idea where it was. This bewilderment, forgetfulness, and embarrassment were doubtless chiefly due to my dislike of the impending service, in its familial no less than its divine aspect. While I was wandering thus, I was suddenly and simultaneously overcome, on the one hand, by the thought "Too late, time was up long ago, you'll never get there"—and, on the other, by a sense of the insignificance of all this, of the benefits of letting things take what course they would; and these two streams of consciousness converged irresistibly in an immense pleasure that filled me with blasphemous indifference toward the service, but exalted the street in which I stood as if it had already intimated to me the services of procurement it was later to render to my awakened drive.

We had our "summer residences" first at Potsdam, then at Babelsberg. They were outside, from the point of view of the city; but from that of the summer, inside: we were ensconced within it, and I must disengage my memories of it, like moss that one plucks at random in the dark from the walls of a cave, from its sultry, humid glimmer. There are memories that are especially well preserved because, although not themselves affected, they are isolated by a shock from all that followed. They have not been worn away by contact with their successors and remain detached, self-sufficient. The first such memory appears when I speak of these summer days: it is an evening in my seventh or eighth year. One of our maidservants stands a long while at the wrought-iron gate, which opens onto I know not what tree-lined walk. The big garden, where I have been roaming in overgrown border regions, is already closed to me. It is time to go to bed. Perhaps I have sated myself with my favorite game, shooting with the rubber bolts of my "Eureka" pistol, somewhere in the bushes by the wire fence, at the wooden birds, which, struck by a bolt, fell backward out of the painted foliage to which they were attached by strings. The whole day I had been keeping a secret to myself: the dream of

the previous night. It had been an eerie one. A ghost had appeared to me. The site of its operations did not, in exact truth, really exist, but had nevertheless a very strong resemblance to one known, tantalizing, and inaccessible to me, namely the corner of my parents' bedroom that was separated from the rest of the chamber by an arch hung with a heavy, faded-violet curtain, and in which my mother's dressing gowns, house dresses, and shawls were suspended. The darkness behind the curtain was impenetrable, and this corner was the sinister, nocturnal counterpart of that bright, beatific realm that opened occasionally with my mother's linen cupboard, in which, piled up on the shelves, edged with white trimming and bearing a blue-embroidered text from Schiller's "The Bell," lay the sheets, tablecloths, napkins, and pillowcases. A sweet lavender scent came from the brightly colored silk sachets hanging on the inside of the cupboard doors. These were the hell and paradise into which the ancient magic of hearth and home, which had once been lodged in the spinning wheel, had been sundered. Now my dream had risen from the evil world: a ghost busying itself at a trestle draped with a profusion of silken fabrics, one covering another. These silks the ghost was stealing. It did not snatch them up or carry them away, it did nothing with or to them that was actually visible and distinguishable, and yet I knew it stole them, just as in legends people who discover a spirits' banquet know that these dead beings are feasting, without seeing them eat or drink. It was this dream that I had kept secret. And in the night that followed it I noticed, half asleep, my mother and father coming quietly into my room at an unusual hour. I did not see them lock themselves in; when I got up next morning there was nothing for breakfast. The house had been stripped of everything. At midday my grandmother arrived from Berlin with the bare necessities. A numerous band of burglars had descended on the house in the night. Fortunately the noise they made gave an indication of their number, so that my mother had succeeded in restraining my father, who, armed only with a pocketknife,

had wanted to confront them. The dangerous visit had lasted almost until morning. In vain my parents had stood at the window in the first light, signaling to the outside world: the band had departed at their leisure with the baskets. Much later they were caught, and it emerged that their organizer, a murderer and criminal with many previous convictions, was a deaf-mute. It made me proud that I was questioned about the events of the previous evening—for a complicity was suspected between the housebreakers and the maidservant who had stood at the gate. What made me even prouder, however, was the question why I had kept silent about my dream, which I now, of course, narrated at length as a prophecy.

What my first books were to me—to remember this I should first have to forget all other knowledge of books. It is certain that all I know of them today rests on the readiness with which I then opened myself to books; but whereas now content, theme, and subject matter are extraneous to the book, earlier they were solely and entirely in it, being no more external or independent of it than are today the number of its pages or its paper. The world that revealed itself in the book and the book itself were never, at any price, to be divided. So with each book its content, too, its world, was palpably there, at hand. But, equally, this content and world transfigured every part of the book. They burned within it, blazed from it; located not merely in its binding or its pictures, they were enshrined in chapter headings and opening letters, paragraphs and columns. You did not read books through; you dwelt, abided between their lines, and, reopening them after an interval, surprised yourself at the spot where you had halted. The rapture with which you received a new book, scarcely venturing a fleeting glance between its pages, was that of the guest invited for a few weeks to a mansion and hardly daring to dart a glance of admiration at the long suites of state rooms through which he must pass to reach his quarters. He is all the more impatient to be allowed to withdraw. And so each year scarcely

had I found the latest volume of the *New Companion of German Youth* when I retreated completely behind the ramparts of its cover, which was adorned with coats of arms, and felt my way into the spy or hunting story in which I was to spend the first night. There was nothing finer than to sniff out, on this first tentative expedition into the labyrinth of stories, the various drafts, scents, brightnesses, and sounds that came from its different chambers and corridors. For in reality the longer stories, interrupted many times to reappear as continuations, extended through the whole like subterranean passages. And what did it matter if the aromas that rose from the tunnels high into the air, where we saw globes or waterwheels glisten, mingled with the smell of the gingerbread, or if a Christmas carol wove its halo around the head of Stephenson glimpsed between two pages like an ancestral portrait through a door crack, or if the smell of the gingerbread joined with that of a Sicilian sulfur mine that suddenly burst upon us in a full-page illustration as in a fresco. But if I had sat for a while immersed in my book and then went back to the table bearing the presents, it no longer stood almost imperiously over me as it had when I first entered the Christmas room; rather, I seemed to be walking on a small platform that led down to it from my fairy castle.

Anyone can observe that the duration for which we are exposed to impressions has no bearing on their fate in memory. Nothing prevents our keeping rooms in which we have spent twenty-four hours more or less clearly in our memory, and forgetting others in which we passed months. It is not, therefore, due to insufficient exposure time if no image appears on the plate of remembrance. More frequent, perhaps, are the cases when the half-light of habit denies the plate the necessary light for years, until one day from an alien source it flashes as if from burning magnesium powder, and now a snapshot transfixes the room's image on the plate. Nor is this very mysterious, since such moments of sudden illumination are at the same

time moments when we are beside ourselves, and while our waking, habitual, everyday self is involved actively or passively in what is happening, our deeper self rests in another place and is touched by the shock, as is the little heap of magnesium powder by the flame of the match. It is to this immolation of our deepest self in shock that our memory owes its most indelible images. So the room in which I slept at the age of six would have been forgotten had not my father come in one night—I was already in bed—with the news of a death. It was not, really, the news itself that so affected me: the deceased was a distant cousin. But in the way in which my father told me, there lay [text breaks off]

With the joy of remembering, however, another is fused: that of possession in memory. Today I can no longer distinguish them: it is as if it were only a part of the gift of the moment I am now relating, that it, too, received the gift of never again being wholly lost to me—even if decades have passed between the seconds in which I think of it.

The first great disappointment of my life reached me one afternoon on Peacock Island. I had been told on the way there that I should find peacock feathers in the grass. Scarcely had I heard this when, with the speed of a spark leaping between two charged systems, a close connection must have been formed in me between the name of these islands and the peacock feathers. It was not that the spark took a roundabout path by way of the image of the peacock. This had no part in the process. And so my reproachful dismay as I scoured the turf so vainly was not directed against the peacocks that I saw strutting up and down, but, rather, against the soil of the island itself, which was a peacock island yet bore no peacock earth. Had I found the feather I craved in the grass, I should have felt as if I were expected and welcome at this spot. Now the island seemed to have broken a promise. Certainly the peacocks could not console me. Were they not there for everybody to see? And I was to have had something intended only for me,

concealed from all others, to be found in the grass only by me. This disappointment would not have been so great had it not been Mother Earth herself who had inflicted it on me. Similarly, the bliss at having, after much toil, at last learned to ride a bicycle would have been less sweet had not Mother Earth herself let me feel her praise. One learned to ride in those days—it was the heyday of bicycle racing—in large halls specially established for the purpose. These halls did not however, have the snobbish character of the later ice palaces or indoor tennis courts; rather, they resembled skating rinks or gymnasiums, and bespoke a mentality for which sport and open air were not inseparable as they are today. It was the era of “sporting costumes” that, unlike our present track suits, did not yet seek to adapt the body to immediate needs, but, rather, to define the particular sport as sharply as possible and isolate it from all others, just as those halls cut it off from nature and other exercises. The sport, as it was practiced in those halls, still had about it all the eccentricities of its beginnings. On the asphalted floor, moving under the supervision of trainers among the ordinary tricycles for gentlemen, ladies, and children, were constructions with front wheels ten times larger than their small rear wheels, their airy seats probably occupied by artistes rehearsing a number. The orchard at Glienicke, the broad, ceremonious promenade of Schloss Babelsberg, the narrow, concealed pathways of our summer garden, the shady ways through the foliage leading down to Lake Griebnitz at the places where there were jetties—all this I annexed to my domain, completing in an instant in fantasy the work of countless walks, games, and outings, kneeling in my nuptials with the ground as a dynast conquers endless territories by means of a single felicitous union.

I have talked of the courtyards. Even Christmas was fundamentally a festival of the courtyards. There it began with the barrel organs, which stretched the week before the festival with chorales, and there it ended with the Christmas trees, which,

bereft of feet, leaned in the snow or glistened in the rain. But Christmas came, and all at once, before the eyes of the bourgeois child, it divided his city into two mighty camps. These were not the genuine ones, in which the exploited and their rulers lie irreconcilably opposed. No, it was a camp posed and arranged almost as artificially as the cribs composed of paper or wooden figures, but also as old and as honorable: Christmas came and divided the children into those who shuffled past the booths on Potsdam Square and those who, alone, indoors, offered their dolls and farm animals for sale to children of their age. Christmas came and with it a whole, unknown world of wares, [breaks off]

The *déjà vu* effect has often been described. But I wonder whether the term is actually well chosen, and whether the metaphor appropriate to the process would not be far better taken from the realm of acoustics. One ought to speak of events that reach us like an echo awakened by a call, a sound that seems to have been heard somewhere in the darkness of past life. Accordingly, if we are not mistaken, the shock with which moments enter consciousness as if already lived usually strikes us in the form of a sound. It is a word, tapping, or a rustling that is endowed with the magic power to transport us into the cool tomb of long ago, from the vault of which the present seems to return only as an echo. But has the counterpart of this temporal removal ever been investigated, the shock with which we come across a gesture or a word as we suddenly find in our house a forgotten glove or reticule? And just as they cause us to surmise a stranger who has been there, there are words or gestures from which we infer that invisible stranger, the future, who left them in our keeping. I was perhaps five years old. One evening—I was already in bed—my father appeared, probably to say good night. It was half against his will, I thought, that he told me the news of a relative's death. The deceased was a cousin, a grown man who scarcely concerned me. But my father gave the news with details, took the oppor-

tunity to explain, in answer to my question, what a heart attack was, and was communicative. I did not take in much of the explanation. But that evening I must have memorized my room and my bed, as one observes exactly a place where one feels dimly that one will later have to search for something one has forgotten there. Many years afterward I discovered what I had "forgotten," a part of the news that my father had broken to me in that room: that the illness was called syphilis.

One-Way Street

(SELECTION)

This street is named
Asja Lacis Street
after her who
as an engineer
cut it through the author

FILLING STATION

The construction of life is at present in the power of facts far more than of convictions, and of such facts as have scarcely ever become the basis of convictions. Under these circumstances true literary activity cannot aspire to take place within a literary framework—this is, rather, the habitual expression of its sterility. Significant literary work can only come into being in a strict alternation between action and writing; it must nurture the inconspicuous forms that better fit its influence in active communities than does the pretentious, universal gesture of the book—in leaflets, brochures, articles, and placards. Only this prompt language shows itself actively equal to the moment. Opinions are to the vast apparatus of social existence what oil is to machines: one does not go up to a turbine and pour machine oil over it; one applies a little to hidden spindles and joints that one has to know.

BREAKFAST ROOM

A popular tradition warns against recounting dreams on an empty stomach. In this state, though awake, one remains under