

On growing up.

Walter Benjamin, Martin Heidegger, Friedrich Nietzsche

Much as the study of the human brain benefits from a close examination of its development, the study of the human psyche and thought process has much to gain from an analysis of the thinker as he is growing up. It seems obvious, after all, that an individual's perception should be affected by his experiences. Our very understanding of the objects around us depends on our being able to name and categorize them, and to understand their interrelation. We understand buildings, shelves, and water-glasses because we understand gravity, and we understand complex social situations by having had experience with people. Most importantly, through interacting with the world and forming memories of it, we come to understand the boundaries of our mental and physical self. For that reason, a child who has not yet learned the delimitations of his existence uses his surroundings to gather meaning much as we use our memories.

Walter Benjamin's *Berlin Childhood around 1900* gives insight on the process by which the child narrows the generalizations with which he interprets the world around him. This maturation of perception and understanding brings with it an enhanced ability to deal with abstract concepts, to remove oneself from one's immediate situation and be able to consider it at a metaphorical distance. There is also, however, something lost in this increased systematization of thought. Though associative memory is useful for practical

applications, the wildly associative perception of a child provides for him a rich imagination and fantasy, an interpretive power beyond that offered by logical analysis.

Berlin Childhood laments the loss of this mental agility as much as it simply remembers.

Not yet having learned to think of himself and of others in a way characteristic of his time and place, little Walter is perhaps closer to the Nietzschean transcendence of his world than can be any person deliberately trying to return to his state. Indeed, he communicates with the world around him in a way that is closely reminiscent of Nietzsche's field theory of energy. The spaces of his mind and his imagination are sometimes even like those of Heidegger in his relationship to them. However, Walter uses language and objects in a way that is not at all in keeping with Heidegger's theories. For a young mind that has not yet been cluttered with experience and history, the metaphysical and historical context of an object and its noun are insignificant in comparison to the fantastical plotline he, personally, weaves around them.

Benjamin captures Walter at a state where he is not yet certain of the quality of his own existence, or of the language he uses to describe it. The lack of precision of words, however, holds in it a greater capacity for expression than does the original set of meanings. While the correct grouping of the words *Muhme Rehlen* holds its own background, for instance, the child's interpretation of them is fantastically more significant. The *mummerehlen* calls up not the academic reference to an "old nursery rhyme that tells of *Muhme Rehlen*," but an allusion to a mythical creature that manifests its traces in "the

diamond-shaped pattern... of barley groats or tapica,” that draws connections between various experiences. “The line is distorted,” as it has strayed far from its original meaning, “yet it contains all of childhood” just as Proust’s madeleine contained for him his memory of his. The child has not at this point learned to use language as a tool common to all that know it to some degree of sophistication. Instead, his words hold for him associations formed by his previous interactions with the situations containing them. In a sense, language becomes a vehicle for Proustian associative memory, as it is the first thing the child finds present in all of his encounters, and therefore the first thing he allows himself to generalize.

In this associative function of language, there is also a creative and transformative power that is lost once the meanings and implications of words become more standard. When Benjamin says that he “had learned to disguise [him]self in words, which really were clouds,” he speaks for a highly subjective idea of language that is disconnected from the mature and largely grammatical distinctions of subject and object, proper and common noun. To be able to imitate a piece of furniture and to allow it to “distort” is to give the furniture more power and presence than one would usually presume furniture to have. The child marks no separation between himself and the world of objects around him. Walter is, in fact, as much “distorted” by his surroundings as is the Muhme Rehlen’s line “distorted” by his misunderstanding of the words.

Walter’s use of language also includes a transformative component that affects people around him. “As far as I was concerned, [the street my aunt lived on] was not yet

named after Steglitz. It was the *Stieglitz*, the goldfinch, that gave it its name. And didn't my good aunt live in her cage like a talking bird?" Whereas most people will not be particularly concerned with the street names of their acquaintances unless they are particularly far into Cheapside, Walter uses this street name to associate with his aunt's presence a characterization of her personality, in terms of her knowledge of the people around her and her willingness to share it. This reappropriation of language does not require a modification of the constituent parts: the word, in this case is the same, and just its associations different. It is, however, arguably in a much more useful context than the originally intended one: the qualification of the aunt's personality is more evocative than her mere physical location.

This freedom of language speaks against Heidegger's implication of a shared etymological tradition that gives words their life and subliminal significance. It is, of course, possible to analyze the expressions of a child in terms of their implied roots: "the Old High German word *thing*" will still mean "gathering" regardless of its author. There will always be a common implied set of meanings in language that comes from the process of the formation of the language being used. It does not make sense, however, to analyze a young child's language in terms of its historical context because a child's primary use of words will be too subjective to be effectively summarized by anything common to anyone outside of his direct sphere of interaction. Heidegger's understanding of language is too far removed from the intention of the speaker to truly be representative: the speaker becomes the combined historical tradition of the Western world.

In most applications, it may be useful to examine a historical context for the language being used, as it provides insight into the palpable meaning of the expressions. This approach is more applicable, however, when the person in question has enough experience with the language to be versed in its proper use. The condition of intelligibility does not apply to a child in the same way that it does to an adult for the simple reason that the child may not be trying to express the same thing. As a person grows older, his experience with language allows him to begin to participate in the tradition of its history. His use of words will reflect the way that he has been taught to use them, and intuitively therefore allow insight into the way he conceptualizes the ideas he is expressing. A child, however, will use language in a way that is personal to himself: in a sense, he can be said to use his own language and method of. Walter's *mummerehlen* has little to do with the *Mummer Rehlen* regardless of its etymological roots.

Of course, language is not the only thing allowing Walter his imaginative capacity: some elements of pure fantasy intercede without assistance. Nothing is only what it seems, in his world: the shadow of a wolf's jaws are "so vast and so gaping that they must have denoted the wolf Fenrir, which I, as world destroyer, set prowling in the... room." The hippopotamus at the zoo "dwelt in its pagoda like a tribal sorcerer on the point of merging bodily with the demon he serves." The presence of things novel to Walter's world inspire the creation of a story for their existence. There is a curious blending of dream and reality

that shapes the world around him to reflect the emotional content of thoughts that he perhaps cannot yet put into words.

Some visual hallucinations serve as better representations of Walter's feelings than can any collection of words. His feeling of being reprimanded for being late to school, for instance, is more succinctly served by the statement that "the clock in the schoolyard wore an injured look because of [his] offense" than it would have been by any verbal admission of guilt or penance. Modern-day expression of emotion is largely dependent on an ordered set of phrases that correspond to particular emotional states. These states can be crudely described with one-word labels that hold specific but complicated meanings. Using any one of them to describe a state of being requires a separate set of qualifications. Walter's method of visual analogy is no less accurate in describing his state of mind than is a detailed verbal description provided by someone more adult.

Implied in the use of fictional scenarios to describe his emotion is a closer relationship with the characters and objects involved than would be allowed by the adult psyche. The representation of mental states as physical occurrences is something that we tend towards only in metaphor, and yet it is quite commonplace in Walter's conception of self. It is possible that the child has not yet learned to make the distinction between himself and his surroundings to an extent that would allow him to disengage himself entirely from them. Walter's incomplete definition of the boundaries of his existence and of the existence of things around him is more evocative of a Nietzschean perception of fields of energy than it is of a more traditional distinction of subject and object. Thus, Walter finds himself

interacting directly with things that are not within the adult's domain of conscious thought. The snowflakes he observes through the window are not the symmetrical crystalline remnants of a distant cloud: they are individual in a way that one only truly comes to understand by studying many separate specimens, and yet that Walter intrinsically grasps. The white monotony of their congregation develops into bands of snowflakes with which Walter is able to ally himself "as intimately as possible."

Unlike the spontaneous and involuntary memories and associations experienced by Proust, however, Walter's incorporation of self into his surroundings has a strong voluntary component. Walter's transcendence stems from his extreme awareness of the pure physical presence of the things he interacts with: when he sees something for its intended purpose and not for its presence in and of itself, his transformation does not occur. "The dining table under which he has crawled turns him into the wooden idol of the temple," a mask that he cannot shake but with a violent "cry of self-liberation." Walter is able to deliberately forgo that arrangement by noticing the hiding places in his house for their virtue as hiding places alone. However, there is a primal quality to the "demon that has transformed [him]" that threatens to engulf him if he is not quick enough to escape, speaking to a power inherent in these objects that the child alone can recognize because he is not yet limited to perceiving things in terms of their purpose alone.

The snowflakes can hardly be said to be just snowflakes at this point: they have transcended their literal definition. Indeed, the child may be said to use words differently

by sheer virtue of having a different understanding of their objects. It is also at this point impossible to say that the child has a conception of objects that corresponds to Heidegger's four-fold, as Heidegger's definition of an object rests largely on its function. Heidegger's jug is a jug by virtue of containing and pouring out, while Benjamin's jug is likely to be the jug on his grandmother's table.

It is surprising how much Walter is able to perceive and think of at once: while he is paying careful attention to the snowflakes, he is also able to feel the greater consequences of the snowstorm. "Distance, when it snows, leads no longer out into the world by rather within," where the physical demarcation of one's environment presents an individual with the situational security necessary for him to allow his mind to expand into other geographic frontiers. Much as Virginia Woolf's candles draw reflections in the windows and bring together the guests at her dinner party into a finally cohesive whole, the white snow-shroud brings all of Walter's stories to crowd around him and "play familiarly among themselves, like the snowflakes," from the gathering of which he is able to wander freely among the distant lands he has imagined.

The books Walter reads and handles as a child are not to be merely read: they are entities in and of themselves, with landscapes of "ridges and terraces" and self-contained personalities. Walter's memories of the stories within them are very personal and quite physical in nature: one does not get the impression that he recalls characters frolicking in all of those diverse lands, but rather that he imagines his own presence in them. Perhaps he

is always somewhat present in those distant lands, with his “heart [that] has forever kept faith with the well-thumbed volumes.” As Heidegger allows for the perception and presence in space by his own peculiar sort of expansion that places him on both sides of his metaphorical door, Benjamin’s child is similarly present in all of the places that he has at some point imagined. The distinction to be made is that Walter’s presence in space is as much a presence in space that does not actually exist: boy’s books of old with “stormy goings-on” that exist in his dreams and yet are never opened are as much his dwelling place as is his physical inhabitation.

This subjectivity of perception, nevertheless, is not entirely lost in the process of one’s growing up. What is lost is more likely to be the reasoning behind a similar set of emotions. Walter’s regard of the postcards sent by his grandmother and his resulting perception of the places they came from are not so hard to understand. Though it may be difficult for a concretely-thinking person to look at the handwriting on a postcard and think that the “places as so entirely occupied by [his] grandmother that they become colonies of” her residence, the sentiment is easy to relate to: not having been to the locations depicted on the postcards, a person will likely draw his experience of them largely from these postcards. His thoughts and recollections of them, therefore, will be very much influenced by this initial experience with them. As an adult, one may use the logical train of thought to arrive at a conclusion more or less similar to the one that Walter experienced initially- it is, however, a conclusion as detached from actual experience as is the representation of a feeling in writing.

All of this is not to say that there is nothing gained from growing up. The gaining of experience over time allows the individual an understanding of himself and of the world around him that while likely beginning on an academic level, will hopefully eventually transcend to a true change in perspective. As one ceases to be a child, one learns to live by the laws of the world around him. It takes more time, however, to learn that the laws concerning thought and action are not the natural laws that mean “that something cannot also be something else ... that it is neither free nor the reverse, but merely thus or thus.”

There are certain aspects of life and human interaction that children do not understand whose true conception seems to come only with experience and time. The Cavalier’s song that Walter is promised to “understand when [he is] grown up” does not hold any meaning to him until he is older, for instance, and has learned about the meanings of love and death and how they apply to him. Benjamin describes this to be a semantic understanding, however, more than it is meaningful in any real way: “the empty grave and the heart weighed in the balance [are] two enigmas to which life still owes [him] the solution.” It is not to be doubted that having an understanding of the process of death, a lengthy contemplation of its effects on self and others, allows one a greater familiarity with the concept and perhaps even an acceptance of it. These are not, however, things that allow us to relate to its implications.

The little boy’s admiration of Luise von Landau and her subsequent death were not things that he, as a child, could fully comprehend. To compensate, he created a monument

for her in his imaginative interpretation of “the flowerbed on the riverbank,” a space “resplendent and inviolable” as his memory of her. As Walter was growing up, he “never set foot” on that distant and inviolable flower bank. He came back to it later, presumably having some greater understanding of his feelings, and yet was not able to glean any greater consolation. When he came to “pass quite close to the flowerbed,” or to look love and death in the face, “it seemed to bloom less often.” His academic insight and dissection of spiritual phenomena gave him no real comfort, until he came to realize that understanding the Cavalier’s song did not give him any insight into its true meaning.

In some sense, little Walter’s relationship to love was as sophisticated as it could get. Walter understood very early the difference between idealistic expectation and the realities of his world. “How much was promised by the name ‘Court Hunters’ Lane,’ and how little it held. How often I searched in vain among the bushes” for something that only there in imagination, and how often one finds himself disappointed by looking in another person for something that one may only truly find within himself. Walter learns the inaccessibility of his ideals by being unable to reach the statues and crocuses of which he comes to be enamored. He learns that the object of his true affections is unattainable, and that his attempts to reach it will more likely than not fail to bring him the satisfaction he imagines. As a child, he cannot dream to walk up to his beloved statue because there is a stream in the way- and he cannot stray from his governess to explore the Luise’s flowerbed. “Thus, coldly, the princely had to rest upon the beautiful” that was not to be

reached. What is a physical reality translates to a mental one as well: the unattainable is, after all, unattainable.

As an adult, Walter attempted to push the boundaries of his dominion and explore the flowerbed, “but now it seemed to bloom less often... and no longer did it know the name which we had once together honored.” The unattainable was no less unattainable for attempts to attain it: indeed, the thing Walter came to forget as an adult is that it was he who “wove together [this garden plot] so intimately with the beloved name.” The knowledge and understanding gained during his maturation in some cases served to undermine understanding that was already present.

Though Nietzsche speaks of the individual in terms of a field of energy that interpenetrates all the energy fields around it, he allows for a limitation of one’s existence through the process of expansion and contraction. A child who is just begging to explore the world around him will not have yet established the balance between these two functions of his self, and is thus able to lose himself with unfathomable ease. In terms of perception, the child will generalize with insufficient specificity. Not yet aware of the full background of the words he uses, he creates his own associative language that serves him just as well. The child, therefore, finds himself in a world quite different from that of the adults, and only gradually introduces common terms that will lead him to a theoretically more enlightened state.

Growing up, while it allows the child to understand on a very mechanical level the workings of the world around him, does not allow any more true insight into its motivations and thoughts than was present in the child initially. What a child has lost in his maturation is what philosophy attempts to gain through years of deep and arduous thought. How long did it take Nietzsche to come up with the idea that all objects interact with each other, and all have the same basic capacity and power to affect change? A child will understand this, inherently, before he learns the names and interactions of the objects he encounters.

Of course, an understanding of the world is insufficient in and of itself, as a child does not yet possess the tools to be able to explain the more contrived interactions around him that are just as important by virtue of their presence. Heidegger's language comes to be useful in this situation, as it allows a common context for the expression of thoughts coming from different sources. The problem is that the etymological understanding of language is limited in range to the subset of its users and audience who are likely to find it relevant. A child who uses words in his own manner may very well find it more convenient to express himself with images and fantastical plotlines the moral of which we may be left to ponder, and in this may even speak with greater specificity.

It is, however, obviously not possible to express everything with images, and even less possible to create parables with morals corresponding to each message that one wishes to convey. What growing up really allows the individual, then, is the power of abstraction from his immediate context by use of a standardized set of tools in his perception and his

language. Some perceptual delicacies are lost in the acquisition of these tools, and perhaps fewer are gained. The process allows the individual to begin to recapture his original, inherent manner of thought and perception in a way that becomes directly applicable to both the physical and metaphysical aspects of his surroundings. What is lost in fantasy is made up by a more precise expression of emotion, and what is lost in associativity is compensated by the accumulation of memories that converse among each other in a similar way. The adult, thus, is able to remain fundamentally the same person as the child, but looks out through a different, ever-adjustable mask.

MIT OpenCourseWare
<http://ocw.mit.edu>

21L.709 Studies in Literary History: Modernism: From Nietzsche to Fellini
Fall 2010

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <http://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.