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# Walter Benjamin

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SELECTED WRITINGS

VOLUME 2

1927-1934

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Translated by Rodney Livingstone  
and Others

Edited by Michael W. Jennings,  
Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith

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asking Montaigne's question in a circle of friends. For example, one of mine said, "The king is unmoved by the fate of those of royal blood, for it is his own." And another: "We are moved by much on the stage that does not move us in real life. To the king, this servant is only an actor." And a third: "Great suffering builds up and only breaks forth with relaxation. The sight of his servant was the relaxation."—"If this story had taken place today," said a fourth, "all the papers would claim that Psammenitus loved his servant more than his children." What is certain is that every reporter would find an explanation at the drop of a hat. Herodotus offers no explanations. His report is the driest. That is why this story from ancient Egypt is still capable of arousing astonishment and thought even after thousands of years. It resembles the seeds of grain that have lain hermetically sealed in the chambers of the Pyramids for thousands of years, and have retained their power to germinate to this very day.

### After Completion

The origin of great works has often been conceptualized in terms of the image of birth. This image is dialectical; it embraces the process from two sides. One is concerned with creative conception and affects the feminine side of genius. This feminine aspect comes to an end with the completion of the work. It sets the work in motion and then it dies. What dies in the master with the finished creation is that part of him in which it was conceived. Now, however—and this is the other side of the coin—the completion of the work is no dead thing. It is not achievable from outside; filing and tinkering does not bring it about. It is perfected in the interior of the work itself. And here, too, we may speak of giving birth. In the act of completion, the created thing gives birth once more to its creator. Not in its feminine aspect, in which it was conceived, but on its masculine side. Ecstatic, the creator overtakes nature, for he will now be indebted to a brighter source for the existence that he received for the first time from the dark depths of the maternal womb. His home is not where he was born; rather, he comes into the world where his home is. He is the masculine firstborn of the work that he had once conceived.

Written 1928–1933; unpublished in Benjamin's lifetime. *Gesammelte Schriften*, IV, 435–438. Translated by Rodney Livingstone.

### Notes

- See also the essay "Thought Figures" (section entitled "The Good Writer") in this volume.
- See also sections VI and VII of Benjamin's essay "Der Erzähler" (The Storyteller).

## Experience and Poverty

Our childhood anthologies used to contain the fable of the old man who, on his deathbed, fooled his sons into believing that there was treasure buried in the vineyard. They would only have to dig. They dug, but found no treasure. When autumn came, however, the vineyard bore fruit like no other in the whole land. They then perceived that their father had passed on a valuable piece of experience: the blessing lies in hard work and not in gold. Such lessons in experience were passed on to us, either as threats or as kindly pieces of advice, all the while we were growing up: "Still wet behind the ears, and he wants to tell us what's what!" "You'll find out [*erfahren*] soon enough!" Moreover, everyone knew precisely what experience was: older people had always passed it on to younger ones. It was handed down in short form to sons and grandsons, with the authority of age, in proverbs; with an often long-winded eloquence, as tales; sometimes as stories from foreign lands, at the fireside.—Where has it all gone? Who still meets people who really know how to tell a story? Where do you still hear words from the dying that last, and that pass from one generation to the next like a precious ring? Who can still call on a proverb when he needs one? And who will even attempt to deal with young people by giving them the benefit of their experience?

No, this much is clear: experience has fallen in value, amid a generation which from 1914 to 1918 had to experience some of the most monstrous events in the history of the world. Perhaps this is less remarkable than it appears. Wasn't it noticed at the time how many people returned from the front in silence? Not richer but poorer in communicable experience? And what poured out from the flood of war books ten years later was anything



but the experience that passes from mouth to ear. No, there was nothing remarkable about that. For never has experience been contradicted more thoroughly: strategic experience has been contravened by positional warfare; economic experience, by the inflation; physical experience, by hunger; moral experiences, by the ruling powers. A generation that had gone to school in horse-drawn streetcars now stood in the open air, amid a landscape in which nothing was the same except the clouds and, at its center, in a force field of destructive torrents and explosions, the tiny, fragile human body.

With this tremendous development of technology, a completely new poverty has descended on mankind. And the reverse side of this poverty is the oppressive wealth of ideas that has been spread among people, or rather has swamped them entirely—ideas that have come with the revival of astrology and the wisdom of yoga, Christian Science and chiromancy, vegetarianism and gnosis, scholasticism and spiritualism. For this is not a genuine revival but a galvanization. We need to remind ourselves of Ensor's magnificent paintings,<sup>1</sup> in which the streets of great cities are filled with ghosts; philistines in carnival disguises roll endlessly down the streets, wearing distorted masks covered in flour and cardboard crowns on their heads. These paintings are perhaps nothing so much as the reflection of the ghastly and chaotic renaissance in which so many people have placed their hopes. But here we can see quite clearly that our poverty of experience is just a part of that larger poverty that has once again acquired a face—a face of the same sharpness and precision as that of a beggar in the Middle Ages. For what is the value of all our culture if it is divorced from experience? Where it all leads when that experience is simulated or obtained by underdanded means is something that has become clear to us from the horrific nishmash of styles and ideologies produced during the last century—too clear for us not to think it a matter of honesty to declare our bankruptcy. Indeed (let's admit it), our poverty of experience is not merely poverty on the personal level, but poverty of human experience in general. Hence, a new kind of barbarism.

Barbarism? Yes, indeed. We say this in order to introduce a new, positive concept of barbarism. For what does poverty of experience do for the barbarian? It forces him to start from scratch; to make a new start; to make a little go a long way; to begin with a little and build up further, looking neither left nor right. Among the great creative spirits, there have always been the inexorable ones who begin by clearing a tabula rasa. They need a drawing table; they were constructors. Such a constructor was Descartes, who required nothing more to launch his entire philosophy than the single certitude, "I think, therefore I am." And he went on from there. Einstein, too, was such a constructor; he was not interested in anything in the whole wide world of physics except a minute discrepancy between Newton's equa-

tions and the observations of astronomy. And this same insistence on starting from the very beginning also marks artists when they followed the example of mathematicians and built the world from stereometric forms, like the Cubists, or modeled themselves on engineers, like Klee.<sup>2</sup> For just like any good car, whose every part, even the bodywork, obeys the needs above all of the engine, Klee's figures too seem to have been designed on the drawing board, and even in their general expression they obey the laws of their interior. Their interior, rather than their inwardness; and this is what makes them barbaric.

Here and there, the best minds have long since started to think in these terms. A total absence of illusion about the age and at the same time an unlimited commitment to it—this is its hallmark. It makes no difference whether the poet Bert Brecht declares that Communism is the just distribution of poverty, not of wealth, or whether Adolf Loos, the forerunner of modern architecture,<sup>3</sup> states, "I write only for people who possess a modern sensibility . . . I do not write for people consumed by nostalgia for the Renaissance or the Rococo." A complex artist like the painter Paul Klee and a programmatic one like Loos—both reject the traditional, solemn, noble image of man, festooned with all the sacrificial offerings of the past. They turn instead to the naked man of the contemporary world who lies screaming like a newborn babe in the dirty diapers of the present. No one has greeted this present with greater joy and hilarity than Paul Scheerbart.<sup>4</sup> There are novels by him that from a distance look like works by Jules Verne.<sup>5</sup> But quite unlike Verne, who always has ordinary French or English gentlemen of leisure traveling around the cosmos in the most amazing vehicles, Scheerbart is interested in inquiring how our telescopes, our airplanes, our rockets can transform human beings as they have been up to now into completely new, lovable, and interesting creatures. Moreover, these creatures talk in a completely new language. And what is crucial about this language is its arbitrary, constructed nature, in contrast to organic language. This is the distinctive feature of the language of Scheerbart's human beings, or rather "people"; for humanlikeness—a principle of humanism—is something they reject. Even in their proper names: Peka, Labu, Sofanti, and the like are the names of the characters in the book *Lesabéndio*, titled after its hero. The Russians, too, like to give their children "dehumanized" names: they call them "October," after the month of the Revolution; "Pyatiletka," after the Five-Year Plan; or "Aviakhim," after an airline. No technical renovation of language, but its mobilization in the service of struggle or work—at any rate, of changing reality instead of describing it.

To return to Scheerbart: he placed the greatest value on housing his "people"—and, following this model, his fellow citizens—in buildings befitting their station, in adjustable, movable glass-covered dwellings of the kind since built by Loos and Le Corbusier.<sup>6</sup> It is no coincidence that glass is such



a hard, smooth material to which nothing can be fixed. A cold and sober material into the bargain. Objects made of glass have no "aura." Glass is, in general, the enemy of secrets. It is also the enemy of possession. The great writer André Gide once said, "Everything I wish to own becomes opaque to me." Do people like Scheerbart dream of glass buildings because they are the spokesmen of a new poverty? But a comparison will perhaps reveal more than theory.<sup>7</sup> If you enter a bourgeois room of the 1880s, for all the coziness it radiates, the strongest impression you receive may well be, "You've got no business here." And in fact you have no business in that room, for there is no spot on which the owner has not left his mark—the ornaments on the mantelpiece, the antimacassars on the armchairs, the transparencies in the windows, the screen in front of the fire. A neat phrase by Brecht helps us out here: "Erase the traces!" is the refrain in the first poem of his *Lesebuch für Städtebewohner* [Reader for City-Dwellers]. Here in the bourgeois room, the opposite behavior became the norm. And conversely, the *intérieur* forces the inhabitant to adopt the greatest possible number of habits—habits that do more justice to the interior he is living in than to himself. This is understood by everyone who is familiar with the absurd attitude of the inhabitants of such plush apartments when something broke. Even their way of showing their annoyance—and this affect, which is gradually starting to die out, was one that they could produce with great virtuosity—was above all the reaction of a person who felt that someone had obliterated "the traces of his days on earth."<sup>8</sup> This has now been achieved by Scheerbart, with his glass, and by the Bauhaus, with its steel. They have created rooms in which it is hard to leave traces. "It follows from the foregoing," Scheerbart declared a good twenty years ago, "that we can surely talk about a 'culture of glass.' The new glass-milieu will transform humanity utterly. And now it remains only to be wished that the new glass-culture will not encounter too many enemies."

Poverty of experience. This should not be understood to mean that people are yearning for new experience. No, they long to free themselves from experience; they long for a world in which they can make such pure and decided use of their poverty—their outer poverty, and ultimately also their inner poverty—that it will lead to something respectable. Nor are they ignorant or inexperienced. Often we could say the very opposite. They have "devoured" everything, both "culture and people," and they have had such a surfeit that it has exhausted them. No one feels more caught out than they by Scheerbart's words: "You are all so tired, just because you have failed to concentrate your thoughts on a simple but ambitious plan." Tiredness is followed by sleep, and then it is not uncommon for a dream to make up for the sadness and discouragement of the day—a dream that shows us in its realized form the simple but magnificent existence for which the energy is lacking in reality. The existence of Mickey Mouse is such a dream for

contemporary man.<sup>9</sup> His life is full of miracles—miracles that not only surpass the wonders of technology, but make fun of them. For the most extraordinary thing about them is that they all appear, quite without any machinery, to have been improvised out of the body of Mickey Mouse, out of his supporters and persecutors, and out of the most ordinary pieces of furniture, as well as from trees, clouds, and the sea. Nature and technology, primitiveness and comfort, have completely merged. And to people who have grown weary of the endless complications of everyday living and to whom the purpose of existence seems to have been reduced to the most distant vanishing point on an endless horizon, it must come as a tremendous relief to find a way of life in which everything is solved in the simplest and most comfortable way, in which a car is no heavier than a straw hat and the fruit on the tree becomes round as quickly as a hot-air balloon. And now we need to step back and keep our distance.

We have become impoverished. We have given up one portion of the human heritage after another, and have often left it at the pawnbroker's for a hundredth of its true value, in exchange for the small change of "the contemporary." The economic crisis is at the door, and behind it is the shadow of the approaching war. Holding on to things has become the monopoly of a few powerful people, who, God knows, are no more human than the many; for the most part, they are more barbaric, but not in the good way. Everyone else has to adapt—beginning anew and with few resources. They rely on the men who have adopted the cause of the absolutely new and have founded it on insight and renunciation. In its buildings, pictures, and stories, mankind is preparing to outlive culture, if need be. And the main thing is that it does so with a laugh. This laughter may occasionally sound barbaric. Well and good. Let us hope that from time to time the individual will give a little humanity to the masses, who one day will repay him with compound interest.

Published in *Die Welt im Wort* (Prague), December 1933. *Gesammelte Schriften*, II, 213–219. Translated by Rodney Livingstone.

## Notes

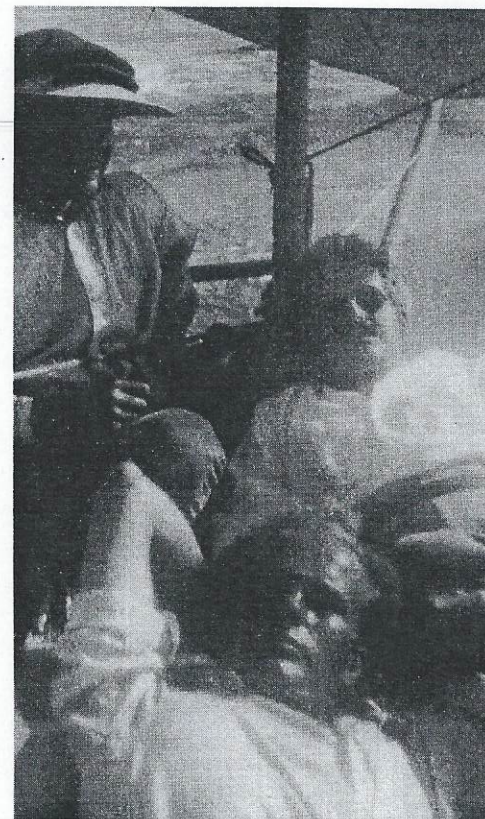
1. James Sydney Ensor (1860–1949) was a Belgian painter and printmaker whose works are known for their troubling fantasy, explosive colors, and subtle social commentary.
2. Paul Klee (1879–1940), Swiss painter, was associated in the teens with the group *Der Blaue Reiter*, which formed around Wassily Kandinsky. Klee was an instructor in the painting workshop at the Bauhaus between 1921 and 1931.
3. Adolf Loos (1870–1933), Austrian architect, was an important precursor of the



- International Style. An influential essayist and social commentator, his attack on ornament drew broad attention in Europe before World War I.
4. Paul Scheerbart (1863–1915), German author, produced poetry and prose oriented toward a gently fantastic science fiction. In 1919, Benjamin wrote an unpublished review of his novel *Lesabéndio* (1913). Scheerbart's book *Glasarchitektur* (Glass Architecture), produced in collaboration with the architect Bruno Taut, was one of the inspirations for the present essay.
  5. Jules Verne (1828–1905), French author, wrote remarkably popular novels which laid much of the foundation for modern science fiction.
  6. Le Corbusier (pseudonym of Charles-Edouard Jeanneret; 1887–1965) was a Swiss architect and city planner whose designs combine the functionalism of the modernist movement with a bold, sculptural expressionism.
  7. Compare the following passage with "Short Shadows (II)," in this volume.
  8. J. W. von Goethe, *Faust, Part II*, lines 11,583–84: "The trace of my days on earth cannot perish in eons."
  9. Compare the fragment "Mickey Mouse" (1931), in this volume.

## The Author as Producer, 1934

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and justify them. This task would of course be insoluble if their behavior really were—as radio managers and especially presenters like to imagine—more or less impossible to calculate, or simply dependent upon the content of the programs. But the most superficial reflection proves the opposite. No reader has ever closed a just-opened book with the finality with which the listener switches off the radio after hearing perhaps a minute and a half of a talk. The problem is not the remoteness of the subject matter; in many cases, this might be a reason to keep listening for a while before making up one's mind. It is the voice, the diction, and the language—in a word, the formal and technical side of the broadcast—that so frequently make the most desirable programs unbearable for the listener. Conversely, for the same reason but very rarely, programs that might seem totally irrelevant can hold the listener spellbound. (There are speakers who can hold your attention while reading weather forecasts.) Accordingly, it is the technical and formal aspects of radio that will enable the listener to train himself and to outgrow this barbarism. The matter is really quite obvious. We need only reflect that the radio listener, unlike every other kind of audience, welcomes the human voice into his house like a visitor. Moreover, he will usually judge that voice just as quickly and sharply as he would a visitor. Yet no one tells it what is expected of it, what the listener will be grateful for or will find unforgivable, and so on. This can be explained only with reference to the indolence of the masses and the narrowmindedness of broadcasters. Not that it would be an easy task to describe the way the voice relates to the language used—for this is what is involved. But if radio paid heed only to the arsenal of impossibilities that seems to grow by the day—if, for example, it merely provided from a set of negative assumptions a typology of comic errors made by speakers—it would not only improve the standard of its programs but would win listeners over to its side by appealing to them as experts. And this is the most important point of all.

Fragment written no later than November 1931; unpublished in Benjamin's lifetime. *Gesammelte Schriften*, II, 1506–1507. Translated by Rodney Livingstone.

## Mickey Mouse

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From a conversation with Gustav Glück and Kurt Weill.<sup>1</sup>—Property relations in Mickey Mouse cartoons: here we see for the first time that it is possible to have one's own arm, even one's own body, stolen.

The route taken by Mickey Mouse is more like that of a file in an office than it is like that of a marathon runner.

In these films, mankind makes preparations to survive civilization.

Mickey Mouse proves that a creature can still survive even when it has thrown off all resemblance to a human being. He disrupts the entire hierarchy of creatures that is supposed to culminate in mankind.

These films disavow experience more radically than ever before. In such a world, it is not worthwhile to have experiences.

Similarity to fairy tales. Not since fairy tales have the most important and most vital events been evoked more unsymbolically and more unatmosphärically. There is an immeasurable gulf between them and Maeterlinck or Mary Wigman.<sup>2</sup> All Mickey Mouse films are founded on the motif of leaving home in order to learn what fear is.<sup>3</sup>

So the explanation for the huge popularity of these films is not mechanization, their form; nor is it a misunderstanding. It is simply the fact that the public recognizes its own life in them.

Fragment written in 1931; unpublished in Benjamin's lifetime. *Gesammelte Schriften*, VI, 144–145. Translated by Rodney Livingstone.



## Notes

1. Gustav Glück (1902–1973), perhaps Benjamin's closest friend during the 1930s, was director of the foreign section of the Reichskreditgesellschaft (Imperial Credit Bank) in Berlin until 1938. He was able to arrange the transfer to Paris of the fees Benjamin received from his occasional contributions to German newspapers until 1935. In 1938 Glück emigrated to Argentina; after World War II, he was a board member of the Dresdner Bank.
2. Maurice Maeterlinck (1862–1949), Belgian writer and dramatist, was one of the leading figures of the Symbolist movement at the end of the nineteenth century. He was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1911. Mary Wigman (1886–1973) was one of the greatest German dancers of the twentieth century. A pupil of Emile Jaques-Dalcroze, she developed her own school in Dresden and Leipzig, creating expressionist solo and group dances that were mainly performed without music except for percussion accompaniment. The idea was that the shape of the dance would emerge from the dancer's own rhythmic movement.
3. This refers to a fairy tale by the Brothers Grimm—"The Boy Who Left Home in Order To Learn the Meaning of Fear"—which also served as a principal theme in Wagner's version of the Siegfried legend.

## In Almost Every Example We Have of Materialist Literary History

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In almost every example we have of materialist literary history, what we find is a thick-skinned tracing out of the lines in the works themselves, whose social content—if not social tendency—lies partly on the surface. In contrast to the sociologist's detective-like expectation, which this method above all others might be expected to satisfy, is almost always disappointed.

Literary history burdened by value judgment. The scientific value of the theory of the fame of great works.

The enjoyability of all works of art: not simply because they can be explained but because—thanks to these explanations—they become the repositories not only of abstract or specific truth-contents, but of truth-contents that are shot through with material contents.

For the true critic, the actual *judgment* is the ultimate step—something that comes with a struggle after everything else, never the basis of his activities. In the ideal case, he forgets to pass judgment.

On the point that criticism is internal to the work: in the case of great works, art is merely a transitional stage. They were something else (in the course of their gestation) and become something else again (in the state of criticism).

Fragment written in 1931; unpublished in Benjamin's lifetime. *Gesammelte Schriften*, V, 172. Translated by Rodney Livingstone.

# E xperience

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The character type that learns by experience is the exact opposite of the gambler as a type.

Experiences are lived similarities.

There is no greater error than the attempt to construe experience—in the sense of life experience—according to the model on which the exact natural sciences are based. What is decisive here is not the causal connections established over the course of time, but the similarities that have been lived.

Most people have no wish to learn by experience. Moreover, their convictions prevent them from doing so.

That experience and observation are identical has to be shown. See the concept of “romantic observation” in my dissertation.<sup>1</sup>—Observation is based on self-immersion.

Fragment written in 1931 or 1932; unpublished in Benjamin’s lifetime. *Gesammelte Schriften*, VI, 88–89. Translated by Rodney Livingstone.

## Notes

1. See Volume 1 of the present edition, pp. 147–148.