Chapter 1

Life

A life displaced

An account of Benjamin's life is in many ways an account of the financial and intellectual obstacles Benjamin faced during the twenty years he became the foremost cultural critic of his generation. It is also an account of someone who traveled widely through Europe, from Capri to Spain to Moscow to the Arctic Circle and, above all, to the one place that kept such a hold on his critical imagination, Paris; it is an account of the person who came to know and correspond with most of the leading intellectuals and writers of his time – Rainer Maria Rilke, André Gide, Hugo von Hofmannstahl, Georges Bataille, Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Ernst Robert Curtius, Florens Christian Rang, Ernst Bloch, Bertolt Brecht, Gershom Scholem, Hannah Arendt, Paul Valéry, Hermann Hesse, André Malraux, the photographer Germaine Krull, among many others; of the person who translated Proust and Baudelaire; of the person who used a series of pseudonyms for publishing out of personal choice and political necessity – Ardor, C. Conrad, K. A. Stempflinger, Detlev Holz, Hans Fellner, J. E. Mabinn (an anagram of Benjamin), and O. E. Tal (an anagram of *lateo*: I am concealed); of the person who wrote for newspapers and journals, performed radio broadcasts; of the person whose writing spanned the autobiographical, the critical, the academic thesis, poetry, the short story, and radio plays for children; and finally of the person who collected toys and children's books in addition to his own extensive literary and philosophical library.

As this list indicates, Benjamin's life is the intellectual life of a generation and its cultural and historical contexts. The merely personal pales in comparison. Perhaps, we should expect no less from someone who famously declared his avoidance of the word "I" except in letters. For this reason, a biography of Benjamin is dominated by the history of his intellectual engagements and their intersection with the geographical displacements that defined his life as well as his friendships.

1892–1912 Berlin: childhood and school years

> My thinking always has Wyneken, my first teacher, as its starting point and always returns to him.

Walter Benjamin is born in Berlin on July 15, 1892, the first of Emil and Pauline Benjamin's three children – his brother Georg is born in 1895 and his sister Dora in 1901. His early years provide the privileges of an upper-middle-class childhood (a governess, schooled at home) at a time when Berlin is emerging as one of Europe's principal metropolitan centers. During his childhood, the family moves several times but remains within the upper-middle-class neighborhoods that arose to the west of central Berlin. Benjamin's childhood excursions out of these neighborhoods are always under the wing of his mother or governess with the result that he lacks the freedom to explore the city without constraint or oversight – a situation he draws attention to in his *Berlin Chronicle* when he looks back at these years as a time when he was "enclosed" in "the old and new West End" (*Chronicle*, *SW* 2, 599–600).

Benjamin's first move out of this sheltered situation occurs when, just before his ninth birthday, he is enrolled in one of Berlin's better secondary schools, the Kaiser Friedrich School. Prior to this Benjamin has only received private tutoring. His recollections of the Kaiser Friedrich School are not fond. When Benjamin recalls its classrooms, he writes that "little . . . has remained in my memory except those perfect emblems of imprisonment: the frosted windows and infamous carved wooden embattlements over the doors" (*Chronicle*, *SW* 2, 602). Indeed, the little he does remember takes the form of "catastrophic encounters." In addition, his time there is punctuated by illnesses resulting in the 1904 decision by his parents to withdraw him from the school.

In 1905, after several months without formal instruction, Benjamin is sent to a country boarding school in the town of Haubinda, several hundred miles southwest of Berlin. His parents see this country setting as an opportunity to improve his health. For Benjamin, it came to offer a far different opportunity.

The school in Haubinda was a progressive counter-cultural institution founded in 1901. While there he comes into contact with an educational reformer, Gustav Wyneken, who was on the teaching staff at that time. Wyneken's ideas on youth culture and the reform of youth education subsequently exert considerable influence on the young Benjamin. Wyneken advocated a curriculum based on what he called the solidarity of youth, an aspect Wyneken found in the drive towards spiritual and intellectual independence that youth naturally possessed. For Wyneken, development of this tendency is part of a larger project that aims at a cultural revolution of society through its youth. While the influence of Wyneken's educational theories is present in the essays Benjamin writes between 1910 and 1915, the major, immediate effect of Benjamin's time at Haubinda is the development of his interest in German literature and philosophy.

In 1907 Benjamin returns to Berlin and again enrolls at the Kaiser Friedrich School. Despite the obvious pressure to conform to the traditional curriculum and manner of instruction at Kaiser Friedrich, Benjamin retains what he learned at Haubinda:

> Since my return from Haubinda my philosophical and literary interests developed generally into a specifically aesthetic interest, a natural synthesis. I pursued this through an engagement partly with the theory of drama and partly with great plays, most notably those of Shakespeare, Hebbel and Ibsen; alongside the close study of Hamlet and Tasso I also pursued a thorough engagement with Hölderlin. Above all, these interests expressed themselves in the attempt to form my own judgment on literary issues.[1]

In addition to this study of literature, Benjamin now turns to philosophy "in order to obtain an overview of its problems and the systems of its great thinkers."[2] At the same time, he starts to address a major shortcoming of the classical curriculum at the Kaiser Friedrich School: its exclusion of any serious study of modern literature. As Benjamin recalls in 1913, the most modern writer taught was Kleist (1777–1811) but, perhaps more devastating for Benjamin, this teaching "did not concern itself with a serious relation to works of art."[3] As a result, Benjamin and a small group of friends form a weekly literary evening to discuss works and writers ignored by the school curriculum.

Benjamin's first published writings date from the last years of his secondary schooling. Several poems and some essays appear under the pseudonym "Ardor" in a school magazine entitled *Der Anfang* (The Beginning). The use of a pseudonym is apparently meant to shield Benjamin from reprisals by the school authorities on account of what he has written. At the same time,

the association of the word ardor with fervor, passion, and zeal points to those qualities of youth that Benjamin has learned to value under Wyneken's instruction at Haubinda. While these early writings can be seen as embodying such qualities, subsequent writings for this magazine (published during his early university years) show a willingness to advocate for Wyneken's educational reforms as well as theorize about education itself.

1912–1917 University, war, and marriage

> The only thing you get out of [Cohn's seminar on the *Critique of Judgment* and Schiller's aesthetics] is that you read the texts.

After completing his final examinations at the Kaiser Friedrich School in March 1912 and after a short trip to Italy, Benjamin enrolls at the Albert Ludwigs University in Freiburg im Breisgau in order to study philosophy. This first semester leaves much to be desired from an intellectual standpoint. Compared to his school years, and in particular to the weekly discussion meetings among his friends, Freiburg offers him little. In a letter from June of this year, Benjamin summarizes his expectations and experience at Freiburg: "it is impossible to harvest while one is plowing" (*C*, 16). Benjamin's studies at Freiburg clearly lack the engagement with the problems and issues posed by modern experience that have so attracted him during his school years. As a result, he not only takes up the question of school reform advocated by Wyneken but also decides to return to Berlin for the second semester of his university studies.

In October 1912, Benjamin enrolls at the Royal Wilhelm Friedrich University in Berlin. During his first semester there, he attends lectures by Ernst Cassirer, a neo-Kantian best known for his philosophy of symbolic forms, Benno Erdmann, also a Kantian philosopher, Adolph Goldschmidt, the German art critic and historian, Max Erdman, a leading Kantian scholar, and the social and economics philosopher Georg Simmel. He becomes more involved in the school reform movement and renews his contact with Wyneken even to the point of declaring himself his "strict and fanatical disciple" (*GB* 1, 64). He also secures election as president of the Free Students Association. Despite this commitment to the student movement in Berlin, Benjamin fails to win re-election as president in the spring of 1913 and, as a result, decides to return to Freiburg for the summer semester.

During his second semester in Freiburg, Benjamin attends lectures given by the neo-Kantian philosopher Heinrich Rickert, as does Martin Heidegger. Rickert's lectures do not captivate the young Benjamin, who reports: "I . . . just

sit and pursue my own thoughts in Rickert's seminar. After the seminar, Keller and I go to the Marienbad, agree with each other, and believe ourselves to be more incisive than Rickert" (*C*, 31). Benjamin continues his commitment to school reform while in Freiburg. He hopes it will have a greater reception in the setting where Wyneken's ideas were first received by university students. Instead, what he experiences are tensions about both the direction the movement should take and its involvement in politics and culture. These tensions surface prominently around the magazine *Der Anfang* – the same magazine of his school days which now appears in a regular edition from an established publisher. Benjamin's position is that *Der Anfang* "absolutely must remain a purely intellectual (not aesthetic or some such) publication, yet removed from politics." The difficulty of holding to this position becomes even clearer to Benjamin after his return to Berlin in September 1913.

The tensions surrounding *Der Anfang* reflect strategic differences within the school reform movement (as well as the pull of the different groups advocating reform). These differences emphasize Benjamin's tendency to seek a purer, more philosophical understanding. In a letter from 1913, he expresses this as "a purity of spirit" but, at the same time, recognizes that such an understanding runs the risk of being restricted by its own goals:

> To be young does not mean so much serving the spirit as awaiting it . . . the concept of youth culture should simply be illumination that draws even the most remote spirit to its light. For many people, however, Wyneken . . . will be merely a "movement." They will have committed themselves and will no longer see the spirit where it manifests itself as freer and more abstract. This constantly reverberating feeling for the abstractness of pure spirit I would like to call youth. (*C*, 54–55)

The purity of idea and spirit Benjamin expresses here provides an important index to his intellectual development at this time. What Benjamin sees in Wyneken is the idea of youth as something to be preserved. Even when Benjamin breaks with Wyneken in 1915 after Wyneken expresses support for German participation in the First World War, his separation takes the form of trying to preserve this purity of idea even though, as he later recognizes, it was bound to fail (*Chronicle*, *SW* 2, 605).

Benjamin confronts other movements at this time, most notably Zionism. His encounter with this movement occurs in August 1912 when another student attempts to convert him to political Zionism while he is on vacation in Poland. Although Benjamin will eventually reject a politically based Zionism, during the next two years he does engage in a correspondence with Ludwig Strauß, a student Benjamin knew from Freiburg, about the significance and purpose of

Zionism as well as his relation to it. In one of these letters, from October 1912, Benjamin strongly critiques Zionists and distinguishes their position from the experience of being Jewish:

> Their [the Zionists] personality was not inwardly determined in any way by Jewishness: they propagate Palestine but drink like Germans. Perhaps these people are necessary but they are the last people who should talk of the Jewish experience. They are brutes (*Halbmenschen*). Have they ever reflected upon schools, literature, the inner life, and the state in a Jewish way? (*GB* 1, 72)

While Benjamin strongly rejects Zionism with these words, it is also clear that he attaches considerable significance to the experience of being Jewish – even to the point of associating such an experience with the questions that attracted him the most during his formative school and university years. Indeed, in the same letter, he observes that there is something in Wyneken's ideas that permits "a close inward influence on himself and other Jews" (*GB* 1, 71). Here, as in the break with Wyneken in 1915, Benjamin preserves what has become significant for him. He rejects movements that seek simpler, concrete resolutions to the kinds of issues he will treat with greater historical complexity in the years ahead.

In late spring of 1914, Benjamin's letters begin to mention a love interest in Grete Radt, the sister of Fritz Radt, a fellow student in Berlin. Benjamin speaks fondly of her as the "only person who sees and comprehends me in my totality" (*C*, 66). In July, after returning to Berlin, he announces his engagement to Grete. Alongside this development in his personal life, 1914 also marks Benjamin's first experience with personal loss. At Freiburg, he has developed a close friendship with another student, Fritz Heinle, whose poetry he champions and seeks to have published in the journal *Der Anfang*. In 1914, Heinle and another student who has been active in the youth movement, Rika Seligson, commit suicide four days after the German invasion of Belgium. Their suicide takes place in the room that Benjamin and his friends in the youth movement have been using for their meetings. The choice of location underlines the ideals of youth and the denial of these ideals by the advent of war. With Heinle's and Seligson's death the enthusiasm he and his friends expressed when they initially sought to enlist together to fight in the war evaporates. This double suicide leads to a period of depression for Benjamin. He finds little to interest him as he resumes his university studies in Berlin. At the next call-up of his age group, Benjamin fakes suffering from palsy in order to avoid conscription. He is successful and receives a year's deferment.

In 1915, Benjamin begins a friendship with Gershom Scholem that will continue for the rest of his life – one of the few relationships he sustains for

such a period of time even though it will have its difficult moments in the 1930s. With Scholem, Benjamin again experiences the pull of Zionism and his Jewish identity, topics on which they frequently converse. At the same time, his attachment to Grete Radt remains strong. In the fall of 1915, he follows her to Munich where she is enrolled at the Ludwig-Maximilian University. Benjamin also enrolls there but, beyond his love interest in Grete, Munich provides little stimulation. The university, he reports, is worse than Berlin – and Benjamin does not have a high opinion of Berlin. Although Benjamin continues to contemplate an academic career well into the 1920s, the conflicted relation he will display towards academic study is already present in these years, most notably in his repeated characterization of the university as a place of intellectual failure rather than achievement – a letter from this time even indicts the contemporary university as "a swamp" (*C*, 74).

By early 1916, Benjamin's engagement to Grete gives way to his developing relationship with Dora Pollack who has separated from her husband Max. Prior to the war, Benjamin has known both Max and Dora through the youth movement in Berlin. This will be one of several amorous relationships Benjamin eventually pursues amongst his circle of friends. While his interest in Dora develops he also begins to receive intellectual recognition. In June, Martin Buber invites him to contribute to his journal, *Der Jude*, but Benjamin declines on the grounds that the theory of language he is then developing precludes the kind of link between writing and politics that Buber advocates through this journal. The theory of language Benjamin refers to here is the subject of the essay "On Language as Such and on the Languages of Man" he completes this same year. In this refusal to contribute, there reappears a characteristic Benjamin has already displayed in his break with Wyneken: an uncompromising commitment to a purity of thinking that resists predetermined expectations.

In late 1916, Benjamin is again subject to a draft review after having already received two deferments (he had obtained a second deferment in 1915 after drinking an excessive amount of coffee the night before his fitness for duty is to be evaluated). This time he is declared fit for duty but manages to avoid service after suffering an attack of sciatica. Having avoided the draft, Benjamin remains enrolled as a student in Munich but he excuses himself from all courses in November 1916 and only registers for one course during the summer semester of 1917 – ostensibly in order to retain library privileges. During this time, he continues to work on his translations of Baudelaire and begins the study of a nineteenth-century work on the Kabbalah he has received from Scholem. The projects Benjamin pursues this year involve topics that he will return to through much of his subsequent career. As such, 1917 marks the beginning of the more strongly philosophical, literary, and critical direction that characterizes his

best-known early publications. The year 1917 also marks a new beginning in his personal life; in April, he and Dora are married.

1917–1925 Pursuit of an academic career

> In many periods, there has been sterile scholarship, certainly more sterile than in our own time, the shamelessness of scholarly study is however modern.

In the fall of 1917, Benjamin enrolls at the University of Berne in order to undertake a doctoral dissertation. This decision also has a welcome consequence: by studying in Switzerland, Benjamin will no longer have to worry about being drafted for military service. The subject Benjamin pursues for his dissertation is the philosophical basis of the theory of criticism developed within German Romanticism, most notably in the work of Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis. The intertwining of philosophical and literary interests that will characterize much of his academic writing in the coming years is strongly present in this project, as is an abiding interest in the formation of the modern concept of criticism. Benjamin's first semester of doctoral study is also marked by the writing of "On the Program of the Coming Philosophy," an unpublished essay in which Benjamin proclaims the need to preserve what is essential in Kant's thought while undertaking the attempt to attain an "epistemological foundation for a higher concept of experience" (*SW* 1, 102). The struggle between academic life and his own interests resurfaces in Berne. Benjamin is forced to wonder if his work on the dissertation "is not wasted time" (*C*, 136). Despite this concern, he produces a draft of the dissertation by April 1919 and then defends it in June. Benjamin judges the dissertation to be "a pointer to the true nature of romanticism" that does not, however, "get to the heart of romanticism" (*C*, 139–40). The reason for this failing is the need to provide "the expected complicated and conventional scholarly attitude," an attitude he distinguishes from a "genuine" scholarly attitude. This sense of a mismatch between his interests and formal academic expectations is now mixed in with the precarious financial situation in which he and Dora find themselves as well as the new responsibility of caring for Stefan Rafael, their only child, born in April 1918. Despite the willingness of his doctoral dissertation advisor to supervise further research, their financial situation, compounded by rising inflation, puts an end to any possibility of pursuing his academic studies in Berne.

To eventually secure an academic position, Benjamin will have to write a second dissertation in order to receive what is called the Habilitation – without

the Habilitation it is impossible to obtain a teaching position in the German university system. The Habilitation also requires the support of a university advisor, a condition that proves to be the greatest obstacle Benjamin faces. By March 1920, Benjamin has still not secured the requisite support. Compounding this problem, their financial situation has worsened to such an extent that they have no choice but to move in with Benjamin's parents in Berlin. However, tensions between Benjamin and his parents soon compel them to move out. They manage to support themselves until September but are then forced to move back in again with Benjamin's parents.

Despite these financial troubles, Benjamin still pursues his plan to obtain the Habilitation. He also embarks on other literary and critical projects, notably his long essay on Goethe's novel, *The Elective Affinities*. As many commentators have pointed out, there is considerable irony to be attached to Benjamin's work on Goethe's novel at this time since Benjamin's personal life begins to resemble the tangled relationships of Goethe's characters. Early in 1921, Benjamin's marriage unravels. Dora falls in love with one of their friends, Ernst Schoen. In April, Benjamin falls in love with Jula Cohn, the sister of a friend from his days at the Kaiser Friedrich School. Scholem recalls that both "were convinced that they had now experienced the love of their lives" (*Friendship*, 115–16). During the summer, Benjamin continues his relationship with Jula in Heidelberg. While there, he attempts to gain acceptance as a student for the Habilitation but despite his confidence that he has done everything necessary, he is refused in November 1922. During the two months he spends in Heidelberg, Benjamin also attends lectures by the literary critic Friedrich Gundolf, one of the main figures in the literary circle surrounding the poet Stefan George. Despite Gundolf's literary and critical reputation (Gundolf's 1916 book on Goethe has been regarded as an important rediscovery of Goethe), Benjamin is not impressed. Benjamin later makes Gundolf's critical approach, and with it the approach of the George School, the target of an uncompromising critique in his essay on Goethe's *Elective Affinities*. Benjamin's harshness is an attempt to bring down the reigning critical orthodoxy in Germany at this time while establishing his own voice and a different mode of critical interpretation. However, when the essay is finally published in 1928, it receives little attention.

In 1921, Benjamin announces a new project: the launch of a journal to be named after a drawing by Paul Klee which Benjamin had bought in the spring of that year, the "Angelus Novus" – a drawing Benjamin will keep with him through his remaining years in Germany and subsequent exile. Benjamin's stated aim in this journal is to "restore criticism to its former strength" by recognizing its foremost task, namely, to "account for the truth of works," a task he considers "just as essential for literature as for philosophy" (*SW* 1,

293). The primacy Benjamin gives to this task recognizes the centrality of criticism as the means by which the modern age makes its claim to historical significance.

As Benjamin attempts to bring this project to fruition during 1922, he strikes up a friendship with the conservative Christian intellectual Florens Christian Rang, whom he had first met in Berlin in 1918. This friendship is one of the incongruities Benjamin often displays. Scholem explains it as an attraction of opposites (*Friendship*, 116), yet Benjamin's reverence for Rang goes beyond this cliché. In a 1923 letter, Benjamin proclaims, in all sincerity, that Rang represents "genuine Germanness" (*C*, 214), a remark that shows how strong Benjamin's ties to a German identity are at this time. For Benjamin, this identity cannot be divorced from what is essential to his critical and intellectual interests. More practically, Rang is instrumental in introducing Benjamin to Hugo von Hofmannstahl, the leading literary figure of this time. Hofmannstahl quickly recognizes Benjamin's significance and helps secure the publication of his essay on Goethe's *Elective Affinities*.

In late 1922, Benjamin renews his efforts to obtain the Habilitation, spurred on by an ultimatum from his father that "any further support would be contingent on [Benjamin] taking a job in a bank" (*C*, 201). In December, he goes to Frankfurt to explore possibilities there but finds little encouragement. The difficulty of Benjamin's situation weighs on him and, at the beginning of 1923, he suffers from depression. Despite his slim prospects at Frankfurt, he remains determined to write the second dissertation in the belief that it would be "better to be chased off in disgrace than to retreat" (*C*, 209).

Finding a university and a faculty willing to take on his project – a study of little-read plays from the Baroque period – is just one of the many problems Benjamin experiences in 1923. His living conditions have not improved and Jula turns out not to be the love of his life. In spite of their affairs, Dora and Benjamin remain friends and, out of financial need, continue a shared living arrangement (although this will change by November). Their situation affects them heavily. Benjamin speaks of "the misery into which we are increasingly dragged" (*C*, 209). Dora becomes ill. In addition, external conditions are bleak: the Weimar Republic has collapsed, inflation is rampant, and above all else there is the "paralyzing effect" of the "decline of the university" (*C*, 209). With so much falling apart, Benjamin contemplates following his friend Scholem to Palestine but, barely two months later, declares that Palestine is "neither a practical nor a theoretical possibility" (*C*, 216). In spite of all this hardship, 1923 marks one of the most significant years in Benjamin's intellectual journey. He experiments with a different kind of writing, one no longer defined by academic literary and critical demands. This writing will produce the volume entitled