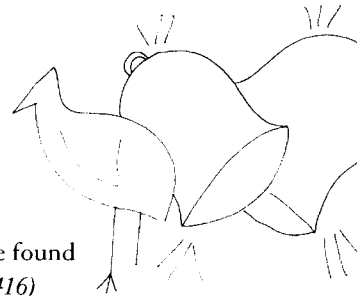




PARIS 2001

# paris sketches



1

fallen leaves spell ancient names in the flowing river  
mutating hieroglyphic history  
tells of footsteps

and with what intent they crossed these bridges  
drops of gold silently falling  
colour spreading out in the churning water  
past the grace of the saints and the rich  
while the bones of the poor reincarnated  
in (to the) feet of the man who – pieds nus  
sits on a bench at the edge of ile st louis  
reading yesterday's paper

2

pigeon missing a toe  
stump for its other foot  
it shan't last the winter  
bugs already crawling on its back  
not too far away bells are tolling

3

"All that can be found anywhere can be found  
in Paris" (*Victor Hugo, Arcades Project 416*)

It is absolutely clear why Paris captivated Walter Benjamin and spoke to him like no other city could. Paris streets, full of sounds, smells and sights, have a silent language made up of ghost sighs, remembered songs and blood washed away by the rain. In Paris, Benjamin found memory held in the stones. For him, it was a city of dreams and nightmares, frozen (and relatively unchanging in comparison with other cities such as Berlin) against the battering of time. It is a deep city, with many literal layers of undercity. Pedestrian ghosts stroll and nothing is ever lost; old Parises simply drained and burrowed deeper under the main boulevards. For all these reasons, the textured and fragmented Benjamin related beautifully to Paris.

The Convolutés are transporting, and a reader achieves *flânerie* by the sensual and imaginative foray into Benjamin's Paris.

les ruines: city of ruins -

Just like traces of former tenants linger in an apartment, history and the quotidian imprint the stones of a city. Paris is a white city turning grey over time as pollution and life condenses, covering the stone in filmy layers.

## In Paris, Benjamin found memory held in the stones.

The original stones are still while time imposes upon them. The eyes of a careful observer are able to penetrate the time deposits and perceive several layers of the city at once. Though every city is like this to some extent, Paris is particularly excellent at conveying its antiquity and its modernity at the same time. The unity in the stones freezes the general aesthetic of the city even as the human geography is ever changing. It is, therefore, possible to live both in the past and the present at the same time.

The notion that city life is constantly renewed in full awareness of that which previously occupied the space is a fundamental aspect of old cities. In a practical way, the ruins of other times, great men, saints and battles manifest in the names adorning the Paris streets. The city preserves by virtue of naming. There is a "...sensuality in street names..." (AP 517), for the names themselves tell a story. The map of the city is like a map to the collective soul of a society.

The ruins of Paris are different than those in other cities. They are not physically ruins. The cold stone stands firmly against the onslaught of time and holds memory rather than collapsing under it.

les rêves: dream city -

Paris, for Benjamin, is a dream city in two ways. Firstly, its structure "...is the realisation of the ancient dream of humanity, the labyrinth" (AP 430). In Paris he sees "the dream city – as an aggregate of all the building plans, street layouts, park projects, and street name systems that were never developed" (AP 410). On the simplest level, its meandering beauty sufficiently inspires Benjamin to conceive of Paris as dreamy. However, on a deeper level, Paris, for Benjamin, navigates the tension between dreaming and waking. Its poise in

this capacity is similar to the way it is perched on the precipice between modernity and antiquity.

Benjamin articulates a definite dichotomy between dreaming and waking. The twilights between sleeping and waking determine the impact of the dream. A new time space is required to hold and give life to the dream, for what it is may be lost forever depending on the manner in which it is recounted. Dreams move towards their

end just as waking life inevitably comes to dreaming, "the imminent awakening is poised, like the wooden horse of the Greeks, in the Troy of dreams" (AP 392), and it is lethal but essential in order to consummate the experience. A city with memory is able to play off this dialect and "...pass through and carry out *what has been* in remembering the dream! – Therefore: remembering and awaking are most intimately related" (AP 389).

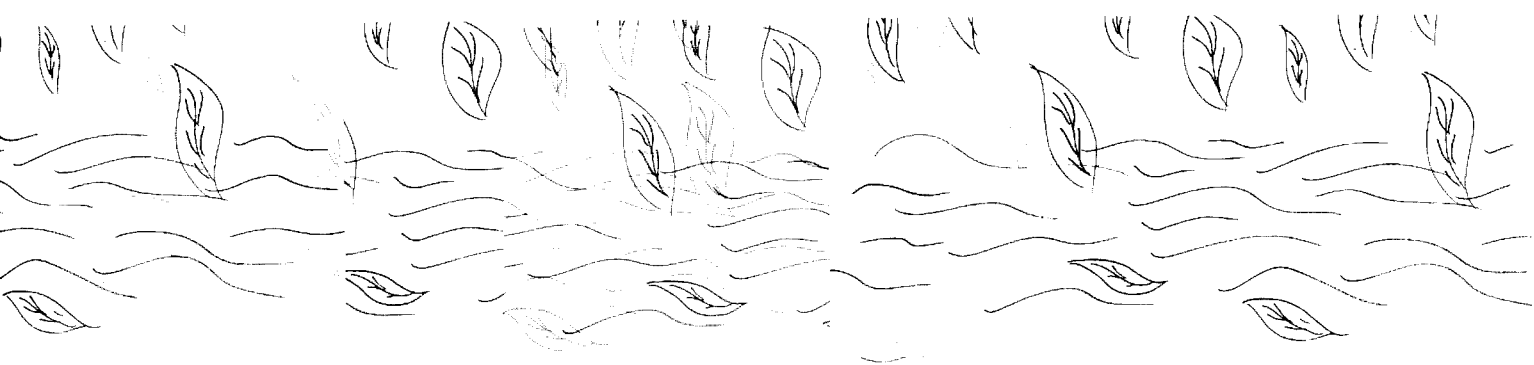
By holding memory, twilight and the ambiguity between dreams and reality get prolonged. Paris becomes the city of dreams because out of all these dialectical paradoxes that it embraces, it weaves a pale, labyrinthine arcadia for daytime strollers and sojourning dreamers.

le monde souterrain/outremonde: underworld –

Recently, "[p]olice in Paris...discovered a fully equipped cinema-cum-restaurant in a large and previously uncharted cavern underneath the capital's chic 16th arrondissement...[there are] miles of tunnels and catacombs underlying Paris [that] are essentially former quarries..." (*The Guardian*, 8<sup>th</sup> of September, 2004). Obviously Benjamin did not know about this particular underground cinema. I bring this up simply to demonstrate that Paris continues to be a city with a profoundly mysterious underside.

These depths gorge the imagination and open upon extreme mythological possibilities. There is a legend that one could always see the stars in the Parisian undercity as there was a tiny hole in a slab of stone from which the light of the upper city shone through (AP 90).

Hugo writes that "[c]ities, like forests, have their dens in which all their vilest and most terrible monsters hide" (Hugo in AP 415). Though not necessarily always



monstrous, ghosts haunt Paris. The most obvious kind of ghost is that of the dead who stalk the living, provoking fear of mortality and a fissure in rationality. To live in Paris is to share space with memories and ghosts, as names of the dead who were famous in life are inscribed everywhere, not only in cemeteries, but on buildings where the living live and work. Catacombs run the expanse of the city and the vigilant stones keep traces of the blood of the fallen.

There is even a “city of the dead, Père Lachaise... which is modeled on the necropolises of the ancient world. This veritable urban establishment – with its stone houses for the dead and its profusion of statues...represent the dead as living – [and] is conceived throughout as a continuation of the city of the living” (Stahl, AP 415). The seams between life and death are thin in Paris even above ground, because they must confront one another daily.

Benjamin was conscious of a Parisian undercity in which his footsteps echoed, but moreover, he was sensitive to how this kind of depth impacted the Paris daily life. As a collector, he managed to piece together fragments of a Parisian mythology. The past functioned in a ghostlike capacity in the present. In the same manner – Benjamin’s Paris serves as ghost stories for the Paris of today.

le ville gelée:

eternal recurrence (return) and the frozen city-  
It is no surprise that Benjamin devoted an entire convolute to the idea of the eternal return. For him it was the “...*fundamental* form of the *urgeschichtlichen*, mythic consciousness (mythic because it does not reflect)” (AP 119). It is even less surprising that Paris made him think about it. It is a city full of statues, which freeze mythology and history and are forever watching. Their vacant eye sockets scan new lovers, new poets and everything both oblivious and conscious of their gaze. It is the perfect place to hold desperately onto time and let it pass knowing that it shall come again: “in the idea

of eternal recurrence, the historicism of the nineteenth century capsizes. As a result, every tradition, even the most recent, becomes the legacy of something that has already run its course in the immemorial night of the ages” (AP 116). This is the culmination of the argument that one can find anything in Paris, one has always been able to and still can.

Benjamin wrote from a time that was in dramatic flux. Revolution seemed inevitable. War was on the horizon. The entire social order was on the brink of crumbling “the notion of eternal recurrence appeared at a time when the bourgeoisie no longer dared count on the impending development of the system of production which they had set going” (AP 117). But Paris was still frozen, fixed in a time that gracefully contained all times before. Revolutions and wars were in the bones beneath the city and in the building blocks of the language and geography. Paris remained a beautiful haven for people like Benjamin, “[b]ecause the essence of the mythical event is return...the hell of eternal damnation has perhaps impugned the ancient idea of eternal recurrence at its most formidable point, substituting an eternity of torments for the eternity of a cycle” (AP 119). Benjamin did not understand eternal recurrence as a curse, rather he embraced life as a flâneur, waking, walking, savouring, sleeping.

Benjamin was drawn magnetically to Paris because it fulfilled his need to be both dreaming and awake at the same time as well as to live in a world that both moved and stood still.

In addition, Paris is a city that is full of collective memory, yet at the same time maintains an intensely personal relationship with all those who seek one. Though several of the things Benjamin loved about the city, notably the arcades themselves, are gone, the sentiments that drew him there and the ghosts with whom he was acquainted are most certainly still there.

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