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If we were to divide all the existing descriptions of cities into two groups according to the birthplace of the authors, we would certainly find that those written by natives of the cities concerned are greatly in the minority. The superficial pretext—the exotic and the picturesque—appeals only to the outsider. To depict a city as a native would call for other, deeper motives—the motives of the person who journeys into the past, rather than to foreign parts. The account of a city given by a native will always have something in common with memoirs; it is no accident that the writer has spent his childhood there. Just as Franz Hessel has spent his childhood in Berlin. And if he now sets out and walks through the city, he has nothing of the excited impressionism with which the travel writer approaches his subject. Hessel does not describe; he narrates. Even more, he repeats what he has heard. Spazieren in Berlin is an echo of the stories the city has told him ever since he was a child—an epic book through and through, a process of memorizing while strolling around, a book for which memory has acted not as the source but as the Muse. It goes along the streets in front of him, and each street is a vertiginous experience. Each leads downward, if not to the Mothers, then at least to a past that is all the more spellbinding as it is not just the author’s own private past. As he walks, his steps create an astounding resonance on the asphalt. The gaslight shining down on the pavement casts an ambiguous light on this double floor. The city as a mnemonic for the lonely walker: it conjures up more than his childhood and youth, more than its own history.
What it reveals is the endless spectacle of flânerie that we thought had been finally relegated to the past. And can it be reborn here, in Berlin of all places, where it never really flourished? We should point out in reply that Berliners have changed. Their problematic national pride in their capital has started to yield to their love of Berlin as a hometown. And at the same time, Europe has witnessed a sharpening of the sense of reality, the awareness of chronicle, document, and detail. In this situation we see the arrival of someone who is just young enough to have experienced this change, and just old enough to have been personally acquainted with the last classics of flânerie: Apollinaire and Léautaud. The flâneur is the creation of Paris. The wonder is that it was not Rome. But perhaps in Rome even dreaming is forced to move along streets that are too well-paved. And isn’t the city too full of temples, enclosed squares, and national shrines to be able to enter undivided into the dreams of the passer-by, along with every paving stone, every shop sign, every flight of steps, and every gateway? The great reminiscences, the historical frissons—these are all so much junk to the flâneur, who is happy to leave them to the tourist. And he would be happy to trade all his knowledge of artists’ quarters, birthplaces, and princely palaces for the scent of a single weathered threshold or the touch of a single tile—that which any old dog carries away. And much may have to do with the Roman character. For it is not the foreigners but they themselves, the Parisians, who made Paris into the Promised Land of flâneurs, into “a landscape made of living people,” as Hofmannsthal once called it. Landscape—this is what the city becomes for the flâneur. Or, more precisely, the city splits into its dialectical poles. It becomes a landscape that opens up to him and a parlor that encloses him.

“Give the city a little of your love for landscape,” Fritz Hessel tells Berliners. They wanted only to see the countryside in their city. After all, didn’t they have the Tiergarten, that sacred grove of flânerie with its views of the sacred façades on the Tiergarten villas; of the tents from which you can see the leaves falling to the ground even more mournfully during the jazz than usual; and of the Neuer See, whose bays and wooded islands are engraved in the mind—the lake “where in winter we artfully traced big figure-eights in the ice like Dutchmen, and in autumn clambered down into a canoe from the wooden bridge by the boathouse with the lady of our choice, who took over the rudder”? But even if none of this existed, the city would still be full of landscape. Berliners would need only to see the sky stretched out above the arches of the elevated railway, as blue as over the mountain chains of the Engadine; to see how silence arises from the din as from the surf; to see how the little streets in the inner city reflect the times of day like a mountain hollow. Of course, the true life of the inhabitants—which fills the city to the brim and without which this knowledge would not exist—does not come cheaply. “We Berliners,” says Hessel, “must in-
habit our city much more fully." He undoubtedly wants this to be understood literally, and to be applied less to the houses than to the streets. For it is they that are the dwelling place of the eternally restless being who is eternally on the move, the being that experiences, learns, knows, and imagines as much between the houses as the individual between his four walls. For the masses as well as the flâneur, glossy enameled corporate nameplates are as good a wall-decoration as an oil painting is for the homebody sitting in his living room, or even better; the fire walls are their desks, the newspaper kiosk their library, letterboxes their bronze statuettes, benches their boudoir, and the café terrace the bay window from which they can look down on their property. Wherever asphalt workers hang their coats on iron railings, that's their hall; and the gateway that leads from the row of courtyards into the open is the entrance into the chambers of the city.

Even in Hessel's earlier, masterly "Vorschule des Journalismus" [Primer of Journalism], the question of what "dwelling" means could be seen as an underlying motif. Just as every tried-and-true experience also includes its opposite, so here the perfected art of the flâneur includes a knowledge of "dwelling." The primal image of "dwelling," however, is the matrix or shell—that is, the thing which enables us to read off the exact figure of whatever lives inside it. Now, if we recollect that not only people and animals but also spirits and above all images can inhabit a place, then we have a tangible idea of what concerns the flâneur and of what he looks for. Namely, images, wherever they lodge. The flâneur is the priest of the genius loci. This unassuming passer-by, with his clerical dignity, his detective's intuition, and his omniscience, is not unlike Chesterton's Father Brown, that master detective. You have to follow the author into the "Old West" of Berlin to get to know this side of him and see how he sniffs out the lares beneath the threshold, how he celebrates the last monuments of an ancient culture of dwelling. The last, because the cult of "dwelling" in the old sense, with the idea of security at its core, has now received its death knell. Giedion, Mendelssohn, and Le Corbusier are converting human habitations into the transitional spaces of every imaginable force and wave of light and air. The coming architecture is dominated by the idea of transparency—not just of space but also of the week, if we are to believe the Russians, who intend to abolish Sundays in favor of leisure-time shifts. But it should not be thought that a single reverential glance at traditional buildings is enough to reveal the entire antiquity of the "Old West" to which Hessel introduces his readers. Only a man in whom modernity has already announced its presence, however quietly, can cast such an original and "early" glance at what has only just become old.

Among the plebs deorum of the caryatids and Atlases, Pomonas and putti, that Hessel reveals to the reader, his favorites are those once dominant figures that have now been reduced to penates—unassuming household gods
on dusty landings, in nameless hall niches, the guardians of rites of passage who once served as presiding spirits every time someone stepped over a wooden or metaphorical threshold. He is unable to tear himself away from them, and their power wafts over him even when their images have long since vanished, or have become unrecognizable. Berlin has few gates, but he is familiar with the lesser transitions, those that separate the city from the surrounding lowland, or one district from another: building sites, bridges, urban railway overpasses, and squares. They are all honored here and recorded, to say nothing of the transitional hours, the sacred twelve minutes or seconds of microcosmic life, that correspond to the Twelfth Nights of the macrocosm and can seem the opposite of sacred at first sight. “The tea dances of Friedrichstadt also have their instructive hour before opening time—the hour when the lights are dimmed, the instruments are still in their cases, and the ballet mistress is eating a snack and chatting with the wardrobe girl or the waiter.”

Baudelaire is the source of the cruel aperçu that the city changes faster than a human heart. Hessel’s book is full of consoling leave-taking formulas for Berlin’s inhabitants. It is a genuine manual of leave-taking. And who would not be inspired to take his departure if his words could strike to the heart of Berlin, as Hessel does with his Muses from Magdeburer Strasse? “They have long since vanished. Like quarry stones, they stood there decorously holding their ball or pencil, those that still had hands. Their white, stone eyes followed our footsteps, and the fact that these heathen girls gazed at us has become a part of our lives.”

And: “We see only what looks at us. We can do only ... what we cannot help doing.” The philosophy of the flâneur has never been more profoundly grasped than in these words of Hessel’s. Once, when he was walking through Paris, he saw women conciègres sitting and sewing in the cool doorways in the afternoon. He felt they looked at him like his nurse. Nothing is more revealing about the difference between the two cities—Paris, his late, mature hometown, and Berlin, his early, strict home—than the fact that this great city walker was soon noticed and regarded with suspicion by Berliners. This is why he entitles the first chapter of his book “The Suspect.” In it we can gauge the extent of the prevailing resistance to flânerie in Berlin, and see with what bitter and threatening expressions both things and people pursue the dreamer. It is here, not in Paris, where it becomes clear to us how easy it is for the flâneur to depart from the ideal of the philosopher out for a stroll, and to assume the features of the werewolf at large in the social jungle—the creature of whom Poe has given the definitive description in his story “The Man of the Crowd.”

So much for the “Suspect.” Chapter 2, however, is entitled “I Am Learning.” Now, “learning,” too, is one of the author’s favorite words. Writers mostly call it “studying,” when they describe their attitude to a city; yet a
whole world separates these words. Anyone can study, but learning is something you can only do if you are there for the duration. Hessel has an overriding love of the enduring, an aristocratic distaste for nuances. There is a kind of experience that craves the unique, the sensational, and another kind that seeks out eternal sameness.\textsuperscript{9} “Paris,” it was said years ago, “is the narrow latticework balcony in front of a thousand windows; the red, tin cigar in front of a thousand tabacs; the zinc counter in the little bar; the concierge’s cat.” In much the same way, the flâneur memorizes lists like a child, insisting like an old man on the truth of what he knows. We now have a similar register for Berlin, a comparable Egyptian Dream Book for those who are awake. And if a Berliner is willing to explore his city for any treasures other than neon advertisements, he will grow to love this book.


Notes

1. A reference to Goethe’s \textit{Faust, Part II}, Act 1, in which Faust visits “the Mothers,” vaguely defined mythological figures, in search of the secret that will enable him to discover Helen of Troy. The phrase has now entered into proverbial speech, evoking the search for the ultimate mysteries of life.

2. “Tiergarten” refers to the large park in the center of Berlin, to the neighborhood surrounding it, and to the zoo which gives the park its name. The Neuer See is a large lake in the park.


4. The English author G. K. Chesterton (1874–1936) was best-known for his “Father Brown” novels, which use the figure of the sleuthing priest to mix detective fiction and social analysis.

5. The “Old West” is the west-central area of Berlin that was built up before the city expanded into the wealthier sections of the “New West.” \textit{Lares}, in the ancient Roman pantheon, were household protective deities.

6. Sigfried Giedion (1888–1968) was a Swiss architect and theorist whose book \textit{Bauen in Frankreich} (Construction in France) exerted a deep influence on Benjamin. Erich Mendelsohn (1887–1953) was a German architect best known for his “expressionist” work in northern Germany. Le Corbusier (pseudonym of Charles-Edouard Jeanneret; 1887–1965) was one of the twentieth century’s most influential architects. Born in Switzerland, he became part of the first generation of practitioners of the International Style. His work combined stark functionalism with bold, expressionistic elements.

7. A reference to the revision, in autumn of 1929, of the Soviet calendar: the week was abolished as a unit of temporal measurement and replaced by staggered four-day shifts for workers. The revision failed to have the desired effect on
industrial production, and the Soviet Union returned to the Gregorian calendar in 1940.

8. *Plebs deorum* is Latin for “the mob of the gods”—that is, the multitude of lesser deities. Pomona is the Roman goddess of fruit.

9. Benjamin here distinguishes *Erlebnis*, a single, noteworthy experience, from *Erfahrung*, “experience” in the sense of learning from life over an extended period.