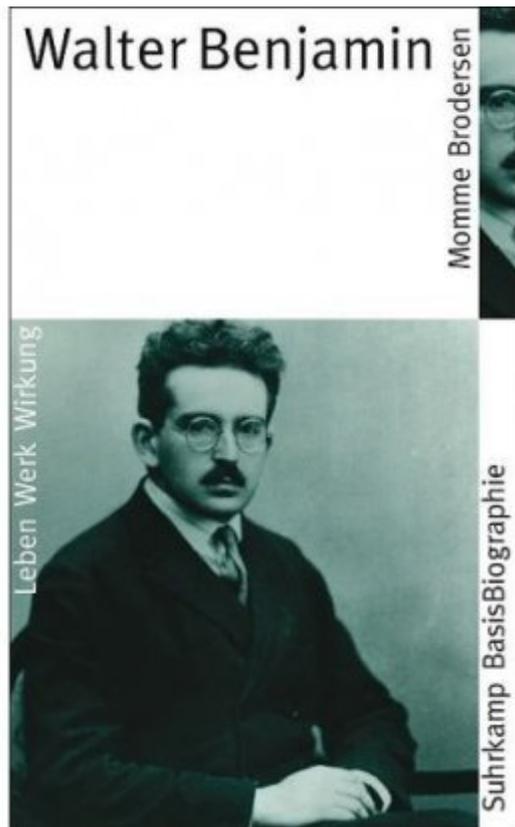


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PROTOCOL IV: WALTER BENJAMIN: 29 September 1928. Saturday. Marseilles.

**Translated by Scott J.
Thompson**

After long hesitation, took hashish at 7 o'clock in the evening. During the day I had been in Aix. I am taking down notes of what possibly follows only to determine whether it will take effect, as my solitariness hardly allows for any other supervision. Next to me a small child is crying, who disturbs me. I think that three quarters of an hour have already elapsed. And yet it has actually been only half an hour. Thus...

apart from a very mild absent-mindedness, nothing's happening. I lay upon the bed, read and smoked. All the while opposite me this glimpse of the ventre of Marseilles. (Now the images begin to take hold of me.) The street that I'd so often seen is like an incision cut by a knife.

Certain pages in Steppenwolf, which I read early this morning, were a final impetus to take hashish.

I definitely feel the effects now. Essentially negative, in that reading and writing are difficult for me. A good three quarters of an hour has transpired. No, it seems that much just won't come.

Just now the telegram from [Wilhelm] Speyer would have to come: "Work on novel finally given up" etc. It does one no good if, in spite of everything, disappointing news rains on the parade of the oncoming Rausch. But is it really only this sort? For a moment there was suspense as I thought, now [Marcel] Brion is coming up. I was intensely excited.

(Postscript during dictation: Things happened in the following way:

I lay upon the bed really with the absolute certainty that, in this city of hundreds of thousands, where only one person knew me, I would not be disturbed, when there was a knock at the door. That had never happened to me here at all. Nor did I make any move whatsoever to open it, but inquired about the matter without altering my position in the least. The valet: "Il y a un monsieur, qui voudrait vous parler." — "Faites le monter."

["A gentleman wishes to speak to you." --"Let him come up."]. I stood leaning against the bedposts, my heart palpitating. Really, it would have been quite remarkable to see Brion show up now. "Le monsieur", however, was the dispatch courier.)

The following written the next morning. Under thoroughly magnificent, mild after-effects which give me the

lightheartedness not to pay strict attention to the sequence. Of course, Brion didn't come. I finally left the hotel, for it seemed to me that no effects were apparent or else they were so weak as to overrule the precaution of staying in my room. First station, the café at the corner of Cannebière and Cours Belsunce. Viewed from the harbor, the one on the right and not my usual one. Now what? Only that sure benevolence, the anticipation of seeing people amiably disposed towards one. The feeling of loneliness quickly vanishes. My walking stick becomes especially delightful to me. The handle of a coffeepot suddenly looks very large and remains so. (One becomes so sensitive: afraid of being hurt by a shadow falling across paper. –Disgust disappears. One reads the slate on the pissoir.) I wouldn't be surprised if Mr. So-and-so came up to me. That he doesn't do so does not matter to me, either. But it's too loud for me there.

Now the demands which the hashish eater makes on time and space come into play. They are, as is well-known, absolutely regal. Versailles is not too great for one who has eaten hashish nor eternity too long-lasting. And in the background of these immense dimensions of the inner adventure, of absolute duration and the immeasurable spatial realm, a wonderful, blessed humor now lingers all the more agreeably with the contingencies of the spatio-temporal world. I am endlessly aware of this humor when I find out that the kitchen at Basso's and the entire upstairs have just closed the very moment I've sat down to tuck in eternity. All the same, the feeling afterwards that all this indeed remains forever, constant, lit up, well-patronized and full of life. Presently I must note how I happened to find a seat at Basso's. To me it was a matter of the view of the Old Port which one had from the upper storey. As I was passing by below I spied an unoccupied table on the balcony of the second floor. In the end, however, I only got as far as the first. Most of the tables by windows were occupied. So I walked over to quite a large one which seemed to have just become free. The moment I sat down, though, the disproportion became apparent to me: disgraceful to seat myself this way at such a large table, so I walked on through

the whole floor towards the opposite end to take a seat at a smaller table which had just then become visible.

But the meal was later. First, the little bar on the port. I was again on the verge of making a confused retreat, for I heard a concert, what's more a brass section, coming from that direction. I was just barely able to account for it as nothing more than a honking car horn. On the way to the vieux port [Old Port], already this wonderful lightness and determination in my stride, which turned the stony, irregular pavement of the large public square I crossed into the dirt of a country road which I, brisk wanderer, traveled by night. For I still avoided the Cannebière at this time, not being certain of my regular functions.

In that little port bar the hashish began to allow its truly canonical magic free reign with a primitive acuity which I had hardly experienced before. Namely, it began to make me a physiognomist, at any rate an observer of physiognomies, and I witnessed something quite unique in my experience: I became dead set on the forms in the faces around me, which were partly of a remarkable rawness and ugliness; faces which I generally would have avoided for two reasons: neither would I have wished to draw their attention to myself, nor would I have been able to bear their brutality. It was a seemingly advanced outpost, this port tavern. It was the one furthest in that direction which was still accessible without putting me in danger, and here in my rausch I had assessed it with the same certainty with which a deeply exhausted person understands how to fill a glass to the very brim without spilling a drop, whereas a person with refreshed senses would never be in a position to do so. It was still far enough away from the rue Bouterie, and yet no bourgeois were sitting there. At best there were a pair of petit bourgeois families from the neighborhood sitting next to some of the authentic harbor proletariat. I now grasped all at once how to a painter –has it not happened to Rembrandt and many others? –ugliness is the true reservoir of beauty, better than the receptacles of its treasure; just as the jagged mountain chain could appear with

all the interior Gold of the Beautiful sparkling from its folded strata, vistas and ranges. I particularly recall an infinitely bestial and vulgar face of one of the men, from which the "wrinkles of abandon" suddenly struck me. It was men's faces which appealed to me most. And now, too, I began the long sustained game in which an acquaintance surfaced up in front of me in each new face. Often I knew his name, often again not. The deception vanished as deceptions in dreams vanish, that is, not in shame and with oneself compromised, but rather untroubled and friendly like a being which has performed its obligation. Under these circumstances there could be no talk of loneliness; was I my own companionship? That certainly, though not quite so conspicuously. Nor do I know if that would have particularly pleased me. This, on the contrary, was no doubt more likely: I became my own shrewdest, most sensitive, most shameless pander, and procured for myself with the ambiguous certainty of one who is intimately acquainted with and has studied the desires of his customer. Then it began to take half an eternity until the waiter appeared. Rather, I couldn't wait for him to appear. I walked into the barroom and left the money on the table. Whether tips are customary in such a tavern, I don't know. I would have left something in any case, though, otherwise. Under hashish yesterday I was stingier; it wasn't until I grew fearful that my extravagances would attract attention that I really made myself conspicuous.

The same at Basso's, with the order. First I ordered a dozen oysters. The man also wanted to know right then what was to be ordered for the following course. I indicated a standard something or other. Then he returned with the news that they were out of that. So I looked over the menu at the other courses under the same section, seemed about to order one when the name of another above it caught my eye, until I had reached the top of the list. It was not out of gluttony, though, but rather a quite pronounced politeness towards the entrées, which I didn't want to insult by disregarding them. In short, I got stuck on a pâté de Lyon. Lion pâté I thought, laughing facetiously as it sat before me nicely on a plate, and then

disdainfully: this delicate rabbit –or chicken meat– whatever it may be. To be sated on a lion would not have seemed at all out of proportion to my lion appetite. Besides, it was secretly all settled that I would go to another restaurant after I'd finished at Basso's (that was around 10:30) and have dinner a second time.

First, however, [was] the way to Basso's. I glided along the quayside and read one after another the names of the boats docked there. At the same time I was overcome by an incomprehensible cheerfulness, and I smiled in the face of all the first names of France there in a row. It seemed to me that the love which was promised to these boats along with their names was wonderful, beautiful and touching. Only one called Aero II, which reminded me of aerial warfare, did I pass over unaffably, just as I'd been forced to avert my glance from certain overly deformed faces in the bar which I'd just come from.

Upstairs at Basso's the tricks commenced for the first time when I looked down. The square in front of the port was, to put it best, like a palette on which I mixed the local colors at random, probing this way and that, irresponsibly if you will, but like a great painter who views his palette as an instrument. I was extremely reluctant to partake of the wine. It was a half bottle of Cassis, a dry wine. A piece of ice swam in the glass. It was, however, exquisitely compatible with my drug. I had chosen my table because of the open window through which I could glance down at the dark square. And when I did so from time to time it had the tendency to alter itself with each person who set foot on it, as if it formed a figure [in relation] to the person which, mind you, had nothing to do with how he saw it, but rather was closer to the view of the great portraitists of the 17th Century who cast persons of title in relief by positioning them in front of porticos and windows.

Here I must make this general remark: the solitariness of such a rausch has its shadow side. To speak of the physical aspect

alone, there was a moment in the port tavern when a severe pressure in my diaphragm sought release in humming. Furthermore, there's no doubt that many a beautiful and illuminating thing remains dormant. But on the other hand, the solitariness acts in turn as a filter; what one writes down the next day is more than an enumeration of sequential events. In the night the rausch stands out with prismatic edges against everyday experience. It forms a kind of figure and is more memorable than usual. I should say, it contracts and in so doing fashions the form of a flower.

To get closer to the riddle of bliss in rausch one must reconsider Ariadne's thread. What delight [there is] in the mere act of unwinding a skein. And this delight is quite profoundly related to the delight of rausch, as it is to the delight in creative work. We go forward: but in doing so not only do we discover the bends of the cavern in which we venture forth, but rather we savor this happiness of discovery by virtue of that other rhythmical bliss which comes from unraveling a skein. Such a certainty from the intricately wound skein that we unravel – is that not the happiness of at least every prose form of productivity? And under hashish we are prose beings savoring at the peak of our powers. De la poésie lyrique – pas pour un sou.

At a [public] square off the Cannebière where the rue Paradis runs into promenades, an all-engrossing sensation of happiness came over me which is harder to get a grasp of than everything prior to this point. Fortunately, in my newspaper I find the sentence: "By the spoonful one must draw sameness [das Gleiche] out of reality ". Numerous weeks prior to this I'd read a sentence by Johannes V. Jensen which seemed to say something similar: "Richard was a young man who had a sense for everything in the world of the same kind." This sentence had quite pleased me. It now enabled me to confront the political-rational sense that it had for me with yesterday's experience of a individual-magical one. Whereas Jensen's sentence meant for me that things are, as we certainly know, so thoroughly mechanized [and] rationalized that whatever

today is particular lies hidden in the nuances only, the insight yesterday was completely different, namely, I saw nuances alone; and they were the same. I became inwardly engrossed in the pavement in front of me. By means of a kind of salve – magic salve- that I glossed it over with, so to speak, this very same pavement could have been Parisian pavement. One often talks about stones for bread. Here these stones were the bread of my imagination, which thereupon had suddenly become voracious to taste that same something of all locales and countries. During this phase as I sat in the dark, the chair against the wall of a house, there were fairly isolated moments of [an] obsessive character [**Suchtcharakter**]. I was immensely proud to think of sitting in Marseilles here on the street in a hashish rausch ; certainly who else shared my rausch here, on this evening, how few. As though I were not capable of sensing the danger of approaching misfortune and loneliness, the hashish was ever to remain. In this thoroughly intermittent stage a nearby nightclub's music, which was following me, played an extraordinary rôle. [It] was peculiar how my ear made a point of not recognizing "Valencia" as "Valencia". [Gustav] Glück [\[16\]](#) drove past me in a taxi. It was a fleeting moment. It had been strange, just as, earlier, [Erich] Unger [\[17\]](#) had suddenly emerged out of the shadows of the boat on the quay from the form of a harbor dead beat and pimp. And when I discovered some such literary figure again at a nearby table at Basso's, I said to myself that I had finally found out what literature was good for. But there were not only familiar figures. Here in the stage of the deepest reverie, two figures – philistines, vagrants, who knows – passed by me as "Dante and Petrarch". "All men are brothers." Thus began a train of thought which I can no longer follow. But its final segment was certainly much less banal than its first, and led perhaps into animal imagery. But that was at a stage other than the one at the port, from which I find the short note: "Acquaintances only and beauties only " –namely, the passers-by.

"Barnabus" stood on an electric tram which briefly came to a stop in front of the square where I was sitting. To me, though,

the sad and desolate story of Barnabus seemed no bad destination for a tram outward bound for the city limits of Marseilles. Around the door of a dance-hall a very beautiful scene was taking place. Every now and then a Chinese man in blue silk pants and luminous rose-colored jacket emerged. That was the doorman. Girls made themselves conspicuous in the doorway. I was in a very contented mood. It amused me to see a young man with a girl in a white dress coming out and to jump to the conclusion: "She gave him the slip in there in her chemise and he's claiming her back to him again. That's it." The thought of sitting here in a center of every revelry flattered me, and by "here" I was not referring to the city but to the little, by no means eventful spot where I was sitting. But the manner in which the events occurred was such that the outward appearance touched me with a magic wand and I became engulfed in a dream about it. At such times people and things behave like those stage props and mannequins made out of elder pulp in the glazed tin-foil crate, which become galvanized by rubbing the glass and with each movement involuntarily enter into the most bizarre relationships.

The music, which meanwhile continued to blare and subside, I called the straw scourge of jazz. I've forgotten the reasons with which I permitted myself to tap my foot to the beat. That goes against my upbringing, and it did not happen without inner conflict. There were times when the intensity of the acoustic impressions crowded out all the others.

Most of all, it was the din of voices, and not the streets, which drowned out everything in the little port bar. The strangest thing about this noise of voices was that it sounded entirely like dialect. The people of Marseilles suddenly did not speak a good enough French to me, you might say. They had stopped short at the dialect stage. That phenomenon of alienation, which may be implied, and which Kraus has formulated with the fine adage "The closer one looks at a word, the further away it looks back" appears to refer to things here, too. At any

rate I find among my entries the astonished note: "How things resist one's glances."

The effects wore off when I crossed the Cannebière and finally turned the corner to have just a little ice cream in a small Café des Cours Belsunce. It was not far from that other, first café of this evening where the lover's bliss which the contemplation of some fringe ruffling in the wind imparted suddenly convinced me that the hashish had begun to take effect. And when I recall this state, I'd like to think that hashish, in relation to nature, possesses the force and power of persuasion to allow us to recapture the great squandering of one's own existence, which we savor when we're in love. For when we are in love for the first time and our existence slips like gold coins through nature's fingers, which cannot hold on to them and must lavishly spend them in order to obtain the new being, the newborn, then, without hoping or expecting a thing, she flings us with both hands full toward existence.

-Translated by Scott J. Thompson

FOOTNOTES:

[16] Trans. note: Gustav Glück was a director of the foreign department of the **Reichskreditgesellschaft** [Reich loan association] in the years before Hitler. Concerning his friendship to Benjamin, see Gershom Scholem's *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*, NY: Schocken, 1981, pp. 179-180, 231.

[17] Trans. note: Erich Unger (1887-1952) had been part of the Neopathetisches Kabarett and the circles surrounding the modern German kabbalist Oskar Goldberg. See Scholem, *op. cit.*, pp. 96-97, 108.

Posted by mattgonzalez