

Ben's Fairy Tales

Whimsical twists exist everywhere in Walter Benjamin's fantastic newly translated collection: an ill empress considers a set of scales which she deems as fine enough to weight the world; a lovestruck baron has gone bankrupt by renting a palace solely to see its mysterious madame; a man with the name "Elephant" revealed as the origin of the animal's name. Benjamin unfolded his theory of fairy tales in his essay "The Storyteller" (1936), after which this collection is named, writing that "the first true storyteller is, and will continue to be, the teller of fairy tales". This short story collection explores the themes of dreams and fantasy, landscape and travel, and play and pedagogy.

The collection is, like the late nineteenth-century Parisian arcade was to its author, a phantasmagoria. It extends an enigmatic world with uncanny creatures and suspenseful happenings between the conscious and the subconscious, between utopia and dystopia, between images and words, and between the ordinary and the exotic.

The first section contains portraits of dreams and fantasies. A desperate nightwalker encounters a speaking rock in forest. A dwarf confronts twelve images emblematic of his unrealised desires in a New Year's Eve gala. Snippets of childhood and families telling of Benjamin's attachments in exile turn up as dreams – or texts in his archive of memory. He wrote these fragments between 1906 and 1912, with some pieces from late 1920s and 1930s. The non-linear narratives of these dreams, to a certain extent, anticipate the modernist aesthetics before the onset of European modernism. They

find echo in canonical works such as the mythical parody in *Ulysses*, the dystopian city in *The Waste Land*, and the *flâneuse* in *Mrs Dalloway*. These stories, with their emphases on dreams, archetypes, and folktales, also illustrate his longstanding adherence to the Jungian idea of the “collective consciousness” which appears in *The Arcades Project* (Belknap, 1999).

The centre of the collection is a series of travelogue and journeys through lands and seas. Benjamin was a sickly child when he was small, so going onto the streets of Berlin was most exciting. Such “erotic tensions of modern city life,” as the translators highlight in the Introduction of the volume, never left him. In the late 1910s, he travelled to Bern, Capri, Moscow, Ibiza, and Paris; some of these would become places in which to set his stories. The narrator in “The Cactus Hedge”, for instance, recounts the metamorphosis of an ancient cactus hedge which inspired an Ibizan’s crafting of Negro masks. Aimless strollers or suspicious stalkers are ubiquitous in this central section, in which Benjamin shows that city spaces are allegorical locations with embedded meanings, as in “The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire.”

The last section, “Play and Pedagogy” are new evidence for reconsidering Benjamin’s conventional image as a writer “mired” in hyper-academism. In these stories, he emerges as an educator with a keen interest in riddle, brainteaser, and play. This section reflects a recent interest in Benjamin’s pedagogical, playful side, as exemplified by other recent publications of translated archive materials like *Radio Benjamin* (Verso, 2014) and *Walter Benjamin’s Archive* (Verso, 2015).

Benjamin had a sustained interest in word puzzles and rebuses: In the First World War, Benjamin and his wife, Dora, corresponded with Gershom Scholem, their friend, who was under observation in the army by encrypted letters; in 1938, his imprisoned brother, Georg, sent some riddles through his sister-in-law, Hilde, to Benjamin as birthday present.

Stories in “Play and Pedagogy” also testify to the lasting influence of Benjamin’s early years’ boarding school mentor and educator, Gustav Wyneken. Wyneken promoted a doctrine of Youth Culture, which purported that the young were more spiritually, morally, and intellectually superior to the old, and the youth were hence expected to equip themselves with a full range of artistic culture and scientific knowledge. Benjamin’s confidence in the youth’s creativity and intelligence is marked in the collected responses to his radio challenges in “Fantasy Sentences” and “Radio Games.”

In order to subsist during exile, Benjamin got a job to broadcast a series of 20 minute programmes entitled *Youth Hour* on German radio between November 1929 and March 1932. These included interactive radio programmes for children. He gave them keywords to write poetry; the children would then send their works to Benjamin in the following week to be read out in the programmes:

Corner – emphasis – character – drawer – flat

On the corner – he said it with emphasis – I saw a character that was flat like a drawer.

Benjamin's interest in nurturing children's creativity to challenge conventional linguistic rules is evident in his word games in these programmes, while the interest in opening multiple possibilities and interpretations in language would later be developed in seminal works such as *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1928), which presents a defence for allegory against symbolism.

From Virginia Woolf to T.S. Eliot, the early writings of modernists have always been overshadowed and underrated. The publication of this collection follows the recent archival turn in modernist studies. This collection invites readers to reconsider Benjamin not only as an established theorist, but also as a creator imagining a world of tradition, hopes, and wisdom during a time of persecution. It would particularly engage both novice and experienced Benjaminians, but would also interest those who simply enjoy stories. The volume alters reader's way of receiving Benjamin as a critic known for his dense and elusive writings. By highlighting his childishness, the collection brings fore Benjamin's eccentricities to bear on his prophetic vision of a philosopher.

The Storyteller: Tales Out of Loneliness by Walter Benjamin, illustrations by Paul Klee, is translated and edited by Sam Dolbear, Esther Leslie, and Sebastian Truskolaski and published by Verso (240pp, £9.09)

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