Research Article

Vivian Liska*

Das Unabgeschlossene (das Glück). Walter Benjamin’s “Idea of Happiness”

https://doi.org/10.1515/opphil-2024-0009
received October 27, 2023; accepted April 23, 2024

Abstract: The considerable literature discussing Walter Benjamin’s “idea of happiness” points both to the important role it plays in his thought and, in this context, to the diversity of interpretations his elliptic style has generated. The pivotal role played by the term in Benjamin’s oeuvre from his early writings on language to his Passagenwerk originates in what has been regarded as his “dialectics of happiness.” While this is certainly a plausible diagnosis, a closer look at the wording of the relevant passages in Benjamin’s oeuvre reveals more nuanced and numerous manifestations of the indirectness that characterizes his approach to happiness. Benjamin invokes the term “happiness” (Glück) at crucial crossroads in his thought. It oscillates between potentiality and inaccessibility; individual and collective experience; commemoration and utopia, Eros and emancipation, concrete phenomena and abstract ideas, and last but not least between politics and theology. Equally striking are the divergent modes of expression in which Benjamin’s notion of happiness is articulated. They range from the inexpressible (das Ausdruckslose) to the most lyrical effusions. My talk will correlate Benjamin’s seemingly incommensurable invocations of happiness with the very detours, incompletions, and indirections in his writings about this state of being.

Keywords: happiness, Benjamin, memory, childhood, messianism

“Si peu doué pour le bonheur”¹ – “Little talent for happiness”: this headline of an article on Walter Benjamin in Le Monde from 1987 reflects the widespread association of the German-Jewish thinker’s life and thought with catastrophe, melancholy, and failure. This view of Benjamin as a despondent figure largely draws on accounts of his destitution, his restless wanderings in exile, and his suicide on the French-Spanish border after his failed flight from his Nazi pursuers. It rests, too, on frequently quoted passages from his work, such as the hopeless image of history as one big “heap of rubble” (Trümmerhaufen)² only barely set off by a messianic vision of unattainable redemption.

Yet the pervasive invocation of Benjamin as a prophetic doomsayer obscures that he was also a major, if elusive thinker of happiness.³ Benjamin’s idea of Glück appears in scattered, unsystematic, and paradoxical configurations, from laconic aphorisms to lyrical effusions that constitute some of the most poetic passages in his work. Grasping Benjamin’s “idea of happiness”⁴ is made more difficult by the intricate relations it

---

¹ See Benjamin’s “On the Concept of History” in Selected Writings IV, 392.
² That Benjamin speaks of an “idea” rather than a concept or notion in light of his reconfiguration of Plato’s doctrine of Ideas in the context of his anti-idealist and anti-historicist understanding of history. Hanssen, “Philosophy at Its Origin.” For a more general understanding of Benjamin’s use of “idea” Holz, “Idee.”

* Corresponding author: Vivian Liska, Department of Literature and Philosophy, University of Antwerp, Antwerp, Belgium, e-mail: vivian.liska@uantwerpen.be

Open Access. © 2024 the author(s), published by De Gruyter. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.
constructs between seeming oppositions: experience and potentiality, the individual and the collective, the momentary and the eternal. Happiness, for Benjamin, resides in a temporality that both condenses and evades past, present, and future, in spaces at the threshold between public and private, and in the interstices of memory, dream, and everyday life.

For Benjamin, happiness resists its hunters. A pursuit of happiness mistakes it for booty, a possession to be tracked, acquired, and stored. But Benjamin also rejects the opposite view that would make happiness a pure matter of fate. He opposes both the voluntarist understanding of happiness as a goal that can be directly attained through a willful quest and a deterministic view that subjects human existence to an inexorable, mythical destiny. Instead, he describes happiness as a gift bestowed in specific circumstances that calls for a pre-reflexive response in a state of heightened receptivity and alertness. Benjamin’s depiction of these occurrences proceeds by characteristic dialectic reversals, paradoxes, puzzling detours, and poetic images that demand interpretation and elide closure.

Benjamin reflects on happiness in various contexts, from his essays on literature to childhood memories, from his early writings on fate and character to his last texts on the philosophy of history. The diversity of contexts in which Benjamin evokes happiness makes the recurrence of certain semantic, temporal, and iconographic figures of thought all the more striking: taken together, they configure a counterintuitive affirmation of the transience of happiness and an elaborate relation between finite – even infinitesimal – phenomena and messianic fulfillment. These recurrent motifs convey the possibility of a momentary fullness of experience and a transitory agreement with the world that can be neither produced nor possessed, neither planned nor preserved, but that is nevertheless endowed with a redeeming power.

1 Habermas and Agamben on Benjamin’s “Idea of Happiness”

Two of Benjamin’s most prominent contemporary critics, Jürgen Habermas and Giorgio Agamben, offer contrasting interpretations of Benjamin’s “idea of happiness” and its relation to redemption. In his seminal essay “Bewusstmachende oder rettende Kritik. Die Aktualität Walter Benjamins” (Walter Benjamin. Consciousness-Raising or Redemptive Critique), Habermas writes, “In the tradition that traces back to Marx, Benjamin was one of the first to throw into relief a further aspect of the concepts of exploitation and progress that goes beyond economics and politics: “Along with concerns of hunger and oppression ..., with living standard and freedom,” that goes beyond economics and politics: “Along with concerns of hunger and oppression ..., with living standard and freedom,” Benjamin reminds us of the desire for happiness. Here, Habermas distinguishes between Benjamin’s messianic idea of redeemed humanity and Ideologiekritik, the leftist, emancipatory demystification of the false bourgeois consciousness. He sees Benjamin as a conservative-revolutionary critic who wants to rescue semantic potentials from the past that point to a fulfilled future. Ever a proponent of the Enlightenment and social democratic progressivism, Habermas remains critical of what he deems to be Benjamin’s totalizing “idea of happiness,” which he considers useless for political praxis. Yet Habermas concedes that this idea offers one significant contribution to critical thought in modernity: it raises doubts – as Habermas insists, “for a moment” – that even in a fully enlightened, emancipated world, in which equal distribution of goods and freedom from domination is achieved, something could be lacking, and that is happiness. Benjamin reminds us of the possibility of empty progress and meaningless emancipation. Against this emptiness, Benjamin attempts to save meanings acquired in tradition and to rescue the “semantic potentials” of the past that are about to be lost in the modern world. But this rescue, Habermas insists, is relevant only in the cultural realm. In political terms, Benjamin’s “claim to happiness” does not provide the consciousness-raising critique required to overcome “the repression...
anchored in institutions." This task, Habermas believes, would be overburdened and obstructed by expectations of total happiness. Thus, Benjamin’s Aktualität, the relevance of his thought for the present, does not reside in his “idea of happiness” and cannot be recuperated for the politics of our times.

Giorgio Agamben, by contrast, situates Benjamin’s “idea of happiness” at the center of his political thought. In his essay “Walter Benjamin and the Demonic: Happiness and Historical Redemption,” Agamben – for decades the Italian editor of Benjamin’s collected works – radicalizes Benjamin’s legacy and performs the most sweeping recovery of his revolutionary-messianic thinking to date. Agamben claims precisely the theological–political nexus and the notion of redemption that Habermas rejects as the mystifying dimension in Benjamin’s thought. Against Scholem, Derrida, and to some extent Arendt, Agamben recuperates aspects of Benjamin’s messianic thinking, foregrounds its destructive impulses, and intensifies its dialectic relation to redemption. Agamben reads Benjamin’s “idea of happiness” as desire that manifests itself in emptying and clearing away tradition, in making room for “what has never happened.” This anarchic destruction is aimed, in terms Agamben borrows from Marx, at “happily separating from the past.” This, Agamben believes, would interrupt the status quo of a world in which procrastination and deferral along the lines of a Kantian “infinite task” have created a “paralyzed messianism.” In this way alone, humanity can be liberated from the paralysis in which it is caught. If Habermas highlights Benjamin’s intent to save “semantic potentials from the past,” Agamben insists that “the radicality of Benjamin’s thought” lies in procedures whose task is “not to shelter but to purify, to rip out of context, to destroy.” According to Benjamin, Agamben writes, “to redeem the past is not to restore its true dignity, to transmit it to anew as an inheritance for future generations.” “For Benjamin,” Agamben states, “what is at issue is an interruption of tradition in which the past is fulfilled and thereby brought to its end once and for all.” It is in this sense that redemption involves destruction: “What cannot be saved is what was, the past as such. But what is saved is what never was, something new.” Remembrance does not attempt to preserve the past as a precious treasure but liberates it from its weight by “saving what never happened.” What is thereby saved are all the possibilities that were missed or discarded and that constitute what Agamben calls “the historical and wholly actual homeland of humanity.”

In opposite ways, both Habermas and Agamben attribute completeness, fulfilment, and totality to Benjamin’s “idea of happiness.” Habermas regards the very demand of Glück as politically counterproductive since its totalizing demands disregard actual progress, the improvements in economic conditions and gains in freedom, and fail to provide tools for a more just organization of society. For Habermas, Benjamin’s “idea of happiness” remains in the realm of dreams. Agamben, by contrast, values precisely the radicality of Benjamin’s thought, both in its bleak diagnosis and in its demands that emerge only in the emptiness resulting from apocalyptic destruction.

The different reading to be attempted in what follows refutes the totalization reflected in these political approaches. The key passages in which Benjamin evokes happiness cannot be synthesized into a coherent system or theory, but they do reveal a figure in which happiness appears as an incomplete completeness, a fullness in flight, a dispossession that can only be experienced in the present as a remembrance of things past. Total remembrance would be analogous to messianic redemption. But, Benjamin writes, “[w]e can never

9 Ibid., 57.
11 Ibid., 158–9.
12 “Why does history take this course?” Marx answers: “So that humanity may happily separate itself from its past.” Agamben, Potentialities, 154.
14 Habermas, “Walter Benjamin,” 54.
15 Agamben, Potentialities, 152.
16 Ibid., 153.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid., 158.
19 Ibid., 159.
20 Ibid.
entirely recover what has been forgotten."\textsuperscript{21} Similarly, at the collective level, he writes that only the messianic world is the world of total and integral actuality. Only in the messianic realm does a universal history exist.\textsuperscript{22} Happiness, for Benjamin, is a worldly affair that is necessarily incomplete. It is not an arrival at a fullness of time, but a tryst, an instant of agreement with the world. It is a falling together of the disparate parts of the self that shines and flickers in a now-time (\textit{jetztzeit}) in which a specific past meets a specific future.

This configuration paradigmatically subsumes his early treatise \textit{The Happiness of Antique Man} (\textit{Das Glück des antiken Menschen})\textsuperscript{23} from 1916; his literary essay on Proust from 1925;\textsuperscript{24} passages from his collection of short autobiographical pieces \textit{Berliner Kindheit um 1900}\textsuperscript{25} written in the early 1930s; and, most famously, his theological political reflections, particularly the \textit{Theologico-Political Fragment}\textsuperscript{26} and the second of his \textit{Theses on the Concept of History}.\textsuperscript{27}

2 Redemption in the Image of Happiness

The latter two texts are arguably Benjamin's most quoted and interpreted reflections on happiness.\textsuperscript{28} They are also his most apodictic. Benjamin's central sentence in his \textit{Theologico-Political Fragment} has the ring of an imperative that clashes with the precarious consistency of its claims: "The order of the profane must be founded on the idea of happiness."\textsuperscript{29} The fragment says little about the nature of this happiness; instead, it configures the relation of happiness to redemption and addresses the temptation to identify happiness with a fulfilment that can be achieved by the end of history. In this fragment, Benjamin radically separates the profane and the messianic realm, the Kingdom of God. History, the sphere of human action, cannot achieve this totality and should not strive for it directly. The fragment's first sentence insists that the Messiah alone is an agent in the realm of the messianic, to which completion belongs. Therefore, "the quest of free humanity for happiness runs counter to the Messianic direction."\textsuperscript{30} "The incomplete (happiness)\textsuperscript{31} comes as close as possible to redemption, yet without attaining it. It is precisely in relinquishing its claim to achieve completion – in remaining entirely in the realm of the profane – that it can "assist" the coming of the Messianic era, but merely as a "category of its most unobtrusive approach."\textsuperscript{32} Similarly, the Messianic \textit{restitutio in integrum}, which is eternity, must remain distinguished from its profane, incomplete likeness in happiness, in the temporality of worldly existence, which is "transient in its totality."\textsuperscript{33} Worldly existence is, however, Benjamin writes, "eternally transient,"\textsuperscript{34} and thus ongoing, without reaching its goal, which would correspond to its disappearance. "Nature is messianic by reason of its eternal and total passing away."\textsuperscript{35} The rhythm of this eternal passing – which is nothing but what happens at every moment – is happiness, the paradoxical affirmation of worldly time, which stands against the wish for a completed, otherworldly eternity.

While the \textit{Theologico-Political Fragment} articulates happiness by pointing to the future, the other key text relating happiness to messianic completion, the second thesis "On the Concept of History," turns toward

\begin{enumerate}
\item[21] Benjamin, \textit{Berlin Childhood}, 140.
\item[22] "Paralipomena to \textit{On the Concept of History}," in Benjamin, \textit{Selected Writings IV}, 404.
\item[24] Benjamin, \textit{Selected Writings II}, 237–47.
\item[26] Benjamin, \textit{Selected Writings III}, 305–6.
\item[27] Benjamin, \textit{Selected Writings IV}, 389–90.
\item[28] For an extensive bibliography of critical literature about these two texts, Linder, \textit{Benjamin-Handbuch}.
\item[29] Benjamin, \textit{Selected Writings III}, 305; translation modified.
\item[30] Ibid.
\item[31] Benjamin, \textit{Arcades Project}, 471.
\item[32] Benjamin, \textit{Selected Writings III}, 305.
\item[33] Ibid., 306.
\item[34] Ibid.
\item[35] Ibid.
\end{enumerate}
the past. Its central passage characterizes happiness as remembrance (Eingedenken) of moments when what was possible did not materialize:

> There is happiness – such as could arouse envy in us – only in the air we have breathed, among people we could have talked to, women who could have given themselves to us. In other words, the idea of happiness is indissolubly bound up with the idea of redemption. The same applies to the idea of the past, which is the concern of history. The past carries with it a secret index by which it is referred to redemption. ... There is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one. ... Our coming was expected on earth. ... Like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a *weak* messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim.36

As in the “Theologico-political Fragment,” Benjamin here relates happiness to the Messianic only in the most indirect ways. Happiness is, in these lines, “bound up with the *idea* of redemption,”37 like a debt that is to be redeemed, the debt one owes to the past. The conjunctive mode of the first sentence of this paragraph evokes a gift consisting of opportunities that were not seized or chances missed. Returning in memory to the moment when these were still felt as possible amounts to a demand imposed on us by the unfulfilled past. Messianic redemption addresses this debt owed to the past in the only possible way: a recovery through remembrance (Eingedenken) that includes “what has never happened” and thus all the possibilities that our choices discarded. But, as the fifth thesis suggests, this does not entail the reconstruction of things “as they have been.” “The true image of the past” can only be recognized and captured in the instant before it disappears forever.38 What remembrance can actualize in the present is the moment when alternatives to what did happen were still possible. Here, Benjamin configures “*weak* messianic redemption,” not as a fulfilment of what remained unfulfilled in the past, but – in the image of, thus analogous to happiness – as an experience that things can be different from what they are. In remembering, *weak* messianic power recovers the totality of possibilities that could have been experienced but that did not materialize. Remembrance can thus transform the past that historiography has established as fact.

> Remembering can make the incomplete (happiness) into something complete, and the completed (suffering) into something incomplete.39 This, Benjamin writes, “... experience ... forbids us to conceive of history as fundamentally atheological, little as it may be granted us to try to write it with immediately theological concepts.”40

This aspect of Benjamin’s “idea of happiness” brings us closer to its political relevance. The political meaning of Benjamin’s “idea of happiness” resides neither in a state attained through proper governance and progressive improvement nor in an apocalyptic destructiveness that creates a clean slate. The political relevance of happiness is indirect: it does not put things right but can awaken our alertness to detect and respond to the dangers and requirements of each moment.41 The secret index to redemption lies in this reminder to grasp opportunities with what Benjamin elsewhere calls “*leibhafte Geistesgegenwart,*” “bodily presence of mind.”42 All the major aspects of Benjamin’s configuration of happiness in these grand politico-theological schemes – its incompleteness, its fleetingness and unavailability for pursuit, and its appearance in now-time in involuntary remembrance of the past and as momentary flashes pointing to a redeemed future43 – are prefigured in earlier texts in different and minor forms.

---

36 Benjamin, *Selected Writings* IV, 389–90.
37 Ibid., 389.
38 Ibid., 390–1.
39 Benjamin, *Arcades Project,* 471; translation slightly modified.
40 Ibid.
41 In his book, *Das Glücksmotiv bei Walter Benjamin* (Essen: Die Blaue Eule, 1991), Rüsing explicitly associates Benjamin’s “idea of happiness” with awakening. See also Liska, “Dialectics of Attentiveness.”
42 Benjamin, *Selected Writings* I, 481.
3 The Happiness of Antique Man

Benjamin’s late theological-political writings sketch out happiness’ relation to redemption, but say little about the experience of happiness itself. Benjamin’s early writings feature passages that convey more concretely what he understood by this term. In “Dialog über die Religiosität der Gegenwart,” he mentions the joy of experiencing a wholeness of the self (Sammlung des ganzen Menschen) in terms of a correspondence with nature and a oneness with the cosmos.

Happiness understood in this way is neither a goal that can be achieved, chased, and owned, nor a possession that can be kept and preserved by an autonomous subject, but an experience of incomplete completeness. This finds formulation in Benjamin’s earliest elaboration on the topic, his short treatise on “The Happiness of Antique Man.” Here, Benjamin opposes the “distorted idea of happiness” of the modern bourgeois of his time to the ancients’ experience of happiness as a cosmic, social, and existential unity. This experience, Benjamin writes, is no longer available to the modern individual who is indelibly split and separated from nature, incapable of the oneness that the naïve man of Antiquity once experienced and driven by a hunt for possession to make up for his shrunken status in the cosmic order.

To describe how modern man has lost access to a cosmically embedded experience of happiness that the naïve, pre-reflexive ancients still had, Benjamin invokes Friedrich Schiller’s distinction between the naïve and the sentimental, which correspond respectively to the immediate and the reflexive modes of relation to phenomena. The dominance of rationality and individualism has robbed modern man of a sense of harmony with himself, his natural environment, and the ordered universe. His attempts to regain these states can only be done in the sentimental, thus indirect, mode (i.e., via art or knowledge). Since the bourgeois has nothing but contempt for naïve immediacy, considering it “uninteresting and without content,” he shamefully hides what he experiences as happiness in his innermost self, where it becomes “ein Kleinliches und Heimliches,” something “petty and secretive.” What once was “pure, strong and beautiful” (“Reinheit Kraft und Schönheit”) becomes a secret treasure harbored inside the individual. This shrinking provides the bourgeois with an illusion of happiness as a precious possession or as a prize deserved.

The ancients, Benjamin writes, would have considered this pride sheer hybris: even the ancient heroes, in their hour of glory, did not consider their triumph – their utmost moment of happiness – as a result of their merit. They thanked the gods for their victory and acknowledged that it could have just as easily been bestowed upon their rival in battle or could be taken away from them at the very next moment. With his insistence on his own merits, the bourgeois believes happiness to be his merit and his property. The antique man, who gave his utmost to win, reconciles at the moment of celebration with his city, his ancestors, and the very power of the gods. Benjamin insists that the heroes’ humility is not to be mistaken as mythical fate but in an encounter of his efforts with the benevolence of the gods. In this way, Benjamin writes, for the antique man happiness is both “Sieg und Feier, Verdienst und Unschuld” (“victory and celebration, merit and innocence”).

Unlike his modern counterpart, ancient man neither convinces himself of his innocence nor conceals his worth. Instead, he rejoices in the feast of victory “in the glory of his city, in the pride of his district and his family, in the joy of the gods, and in the sleep” (“im Ruhm seiner Stadt, im Stolze seines Gauses und seiner Familie, in der Freude der Götter und im Schlafen”) – presumably the final rest in eternal glory – that transports him to the gods.

Cut off from naïve immediacy, moderns have lost awareness of happiness’ contingency, heteronomy, and transience, as well as its public and collective character. They regard even the child experiencing happiness as nothing but an “egocentric creature” who possessively harbors his “small happiness” in

44 Benjamin, Gesammelte Schriften II:1, 16–35.
45 Ibid., 127.
47 Benjamin, Gesammelte Schriften II:1, 127.
48 Ibid.
49 Ibid., 128.
50 Ibid., 129.
his inner self. Yet, far from calling for a regression to the state of the ancient world that is neither possible nor desirable, Benjamin implicitly prepares his later exploration of remnants of a former intensity that can and should be recaptured from the ancients. However mediated and indirect, something of its former radiance, its momentary cosmic harmony, and unity with nature, as well as its acceptance of happiness as a transient gift, shines through. The mode of this recovery can no longer be naïve as for the Antique man; it can only be sentimental, reflexive – and irremediably indirect.

4 Elegiac Happiness: Berlin Childhood around 1900

The Schillerian distinction between the naïve and the sentimental echoes, too, in Benjamin’s essay on Proust, which contrasts the hymnic – the heroic, naïve and direct – with the elegiac: “There is,” Benjamin writes, “a dual will to happiness, a dialectics of happiness: a hymnic form as well as an elegiac form. The one is the unheard of, the unprecedented, the height of bliss; the other, the eternal repetition, the eternal restoration of the original, first happiness. It is the elegiac idea of happiness, ... which for Proust transforms existence into a preserve of memory.”

In his Berlin Childhood around 1900 Benjamin recollects his earliest experiences as a Proustian narrator. As past and present merge, as the narrator’s voice and the remembered perception of the child intermingle, elegiac moments of happiness occur. Moments experienced by the child in naïve immediacy are overlaid by the melancholic voice of the adult narrator who knows of their fleeting incompleteness. The very process of remembering contains happiness in the elegiac mode: it simultaneously conveys blissful intensity and poignant images of transient completion.

Benjamin insists that Proust “described not a life as it actually was but a life as it was remembered by the one who had lived it.” Similarly, in his childhood recollections Benjamin in no way aims at realistically reconstructing scenes “as they really were.” The adult narrator is present in those stories, and it is in the commingling of his and the child’s perspective that the past arises as present. In a short piece called “Der Lesekasten” (“The Reading Box”), Benjamin remembers his happiness when he learned to read and at the same time reflects on the impossibility of recovering that naive happiness:

We can never entirely recover what has been forgotten. And this is perhaps a good thing. The shock of repossession would be so devastating that we would immediately cease to understand our longing. But we do understand it; and the more deeply what has been forgotten lies buried within us, the better we understand this longing. ... None of the things that surrounded me in my early years arouses greater longing than the reading box ... whose job was to admit only the elect. Hence, its commerce with the letters was full of renunciation. ... My hand can still dream of this movement, but it can no longer awaken so as actually to perform it. By the same token, I can dream of the way I once learned to walk. But that doesn’t help. I now know how to walk; there is no more learning to walk.

The happiness of “the first time, the unheard of, the height of bliss” cannot be recovered in its totality. But traces remain: in dreams, in the unconscious memory of the body, and in the indirect, incomplete, elegiac remembrance of things past.

The literary theorist Peter Szondi sees Benjamin’s Berlin Childhood as “an exact counterpart of Proust’s Parisian childhood.” Proust, in his search for “time lost,” wants to escape time altogether and with it its transience. Benjamin, Szondi writes,

does not want to free himself from temporality; he does not wish to see things in their ahistorical essence. He strives instead for historical experience and knowledge. Nevertheless, he is sent back into the past, a past, however, which is open, not
completed, and which promises the future. Benjamin’s tense is not the perfect, but the future perfect in the fullness of its paradox: being future and past at the same time.55

In Proust’s déjà vu experience, like his madelaine-scene, the past breaks into the present. In contrast, Szondi continues, Benjamin “devote[s] himself to the invocation of those moments of childhood in which a token of the future lies hidden.”56 In this figure, Szondi recognizes a similarity between Berlin Childhood and Benjamin’s later philosophical—historical works. Happiness occurs, as in the second thesis “On the Concept of History,” the moment of the possible, the incomplete, and open toward the future, the instant before it ineluctably passes into eternal Vergängnis.57

Indeed, some of the most poignant texts in Berlin Childhood evoke the child’s moments of happiness in the elegiac mode that foreshadows Benjamin’s later texts. In the piece titled “Butterfly Hunt,” for instance, the child lives a brief moment in unison with nature before his will to master its elemental forces takes over:

Cabbage butterflies with ruffled edging, brimstone butterflies with superbright wings, vividly brought back the ardors of the hunt, which so often had lured me away from well-kept garden paths into a wilderness, where I stood powerless before the conspiring elements – wind and scents, foliage and sun – that were bound to govern the flight of the butterflies.58

This cosmic harmony, however, lasts only as an instant before it is overcome by the desire to capture and possess the thing of beauty. A passage in the middle of the text describes the child sitting in ambush, minutely observing his prey before he catches the insect and prepares the booty for his collection kept in the cabinet on the wall of his boyhood room: Lying in wait for the butterfly that continuously escapes him, he “would gladly have been dissolved into light and air, merely in order to approach my prey unnoticed and be able to subdue it. And so close to fulfillment was this desire of mine, that every quiver or palpitation of the wings I burned for, grazed me with its puff or ripple.”59 The little hunter becomes insect-like and the insect takes on human features until the capture of the butterfly ends their unity. By catching the butterfly, the boy regains his humanity – as mastery. Once he nets the butterfly and brings it to the worktable where it will be prepared to adorn the collection, the child’s happiness gives way to the reflexive awareness of the destruction he caused:

And what a state the hunting ground was in when I left! Grass was flattened, flowers trampled underfoot; the hunter himself, holding his own body cheap, had flung it heedlessly after his butterfly net. And borne aloft—over so much destruction, clumsiness, and violence—in a fold of this net, trembling and yet full of charm, was the terrified butterfly.60

The last lines of the text suggest an unexpected reference to redemption, more particularly to Jewish messianism. The collection of dead butterflies on the boy’s wall is, in the child’s perception, transfigured into an image he finds in the parental bourgeois interieur: They are now “scattered over one of those glistening Limoges enamels, on which the ramparts and battlements of Jerusalem stand out against a dark blue ground.”61 The naive experience of the child’s moment of happiness in the wilderness in unison with nature ends in the lifeless design of precious china of a Jerusalem that promises both violence and redemption.

In “A Christmas Angel,” Benjamin recalls one of his earliest memories, a moment of intense expectation tinged with a sense of incompleteness and Vergängnis. As the sun sets on a Christmas evening, the little boy impatiently looks out the window, enchanted by the emerging lights of Christmas trees in facing windows. He notices that some of the windows are not lit, or “even sadder,” only poorly lit. This awakens his sense of social injustice: “It seemed to me that these Christmas windows were harboring loneliness, old age, privation – all that the poor people kept silent about.”62 Though the child is quickly distracted from this melancholy thought,
his expected happiness now has a shadow: “Then, once again, I remembered the presents that my parents were busy getting ready. But hardly had I turned away from the window, my heart now heavy as only the imminence of a certain happiness can make it, than I sensed a strange presence in the room.” The child expects the Christmas angel, but no longer trusts its actual appearance:

It was nothing but a wind, so that the words which were forming on my lips were like ripples forming on a sluggish sail that suddenly bellies in a freshening breeze: “On the day of his birth/Comes the Christ Child again/Down below to this earth/In the midst of us men.” The angel that had begun to assume a form in these words had also vanished with them. I stayed no longer in the empty room.

The words of the song simultaneously capture and dissolve the moment of happiness. The child sees that the Christmas tree in the parental living room “had entered into its full glory.” But this fullness “estranged me from it.” He regains his familiarity with the tree only when it is discarded after the holiday, when it lies “half buried in the snow or glistening in the rain.” The magic of the moment – the enchanting lights and the chant of the angel – lasts but an instant. It almost immediately vanishes in the awareness of its imperfect completion.

That is the image of happiness. The ritualized verses of the song promising an eternal return of the savior and the fullness of the tree’s glory are belied by the experience that the feast is not shared by all and by the transience – the eternally recurring Vergängnis – of the spark of Glück.

5 Of Sparks and Splitters

“Before Benjamin’s Manichaean gaze,” Habermas writes, “history spreads out like the rotation of a dead star upon which every once in a while, lightning flashes down.” In a single sentence, Habermas’ critique of Benjamin’s lack of political acumen names what turns out to be the very figure of Benjamin’s “idea of happiness” – the momentary flashes of lightning – and, arguably, its relation to the political. But these flashes are not to be dismissed as lightly as Habermas does: they resemble the messianic sparks that, in Benjamin’s sixth thesis “On the Concept of History,” are to be “fanned” in the past as it “flashes up in a moment of danger.” Such momentary flashes flicker through so many figures in Benjamin’s work: from Proust’s mémoire involontaire to a leibhafte Geistesgegenwart (“bodily presence of mind”), from the quoting writer to the collector, from the materialist historian, from the chronicler to the storyteller, from the ragpicker to the righteous man, and last but not least from the dying man’s remembrance in his last hour to the child at play. To this heterogeneous cast can be added Benjamin’s own list of figures: the reader, the thinker, the waiting one (der Wartende), and the flâneur. In experiencing their various instants of intense experience, each of these illuminated figures shares with recollected happiness the weak messianic power that saves. Although they offer neither recipes for the right life nor political strategies, these instants save the past and open the future in the present. Remembered moments of happiness have the shape of messianic sparks. They may not illuminate a path that can be diligently pursued, but they do ward off the completeness of gloom to which only destruction would answer. They may resemble fireflies in the dark more than the beautiful butterflies of a child’s memory. They may not be figures of the Messiah, but, faintly radiating with “profane illumination,” they have their share in announcing his quietest – and most indirect – approach.

63 Ibid., 104–5.
64 Ibid., 105.
65 Ibid.
66 Ibid.
68 Benjamin, Selected Writings IV, 391.
69 Benjamin, Selected Writings III, 305.
Author contribution: The author confirms the sole responsibility for the conception of the study, presented results and manuscript preparation.

Conflict of interest: Author states no conflict of interest.

References


