

Walter Benjamin:

Excavation and Memory

Language has unmistakably made plain that memory is not an instrument for exploring the past, but rather a medium. It is the medium of that which is experienced, just as the earth is the medium in which ancient cities lie buried. He who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging. Above all, he must not be afraid to return again and again to the same matter; to scatter it as one scatters earth, to turn it over as one turns over soil. For the "matter itself" is no more than the strata which yield their long-sought secrets only to the most meticulous investigation. That is to say, they yield those images that, severed from all earlier associations, reside as treasures in the sober rooms of our later insights—like torsos in a collector's gallery. It is undoubtedly useful to plan excavations methodically. Yet no less indispensable is the cautious probing of the spade in the dark loam. And the man who merely makes an inventory of his findings, while failing to establish the exact location of where in today's ground the ancient treasures have been stored up, cheats himself of his richest prize. In this sense, for authentic memories, it is far less important that the investigator report on them than that he mark, quite precisely, the site where he gained possession of them. Epic and rhapsodic in the strictest sense, genuine memory must therefore yield an image of the person who remembers, in the same way a good archaeological report not only informs us about the strata from which its findings originate, but also gives an account of the strata which first had to be broken through.

Written ca. 1932; unpublished in Benjamin's lifetime. *Gesammelte Schriften*, IV, 400–401. Translated by Rodney Livingstone, on the basis of a prior version by Edmund Jephcott.

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Selected Writings, Vol. 2, part 2 (1931–1934), "Ibizan Sequence", 1932, ed. by Marcus Paul Bullock, Michael William Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith, Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005 (paper), p. 576