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Chapter Three

ARIADNE'S THREAD

Walter Benjamin's Hashish Passages

GARY SHAPIRO

In a letter of 1932 to Gershom Scholem, Benjamin outlines his literary ambitions; he plans four major books, one of which would have been on hashish. The others were to include the *Passagenwerk*, his essays on literature, and his letters. It could be said that we now have those three books, if only in the form of sprawling and gigantic ruins. The *Passagenwerk* has been the object of many inspired and yet hopeless projects of reconstruction; the literary essays are available in German and other languages; and letters from throughout his life have been collected and published. All can be supplemented by texts like the *Moscow Diary*, and the complexities of the European city are clearly implicated in Benjamin's work on both Paris and hashish. The city is the site of intoxication, whether provoked by commodities, a drug, or the erratic wanderings of the *flâneur*. It is in the city that we find the fix that we need.

In the case of the proposed hashish book, we ostensibly have only fragments: it is notable that the most substantial is the essay "Hashish in Marseilles," and there is also a short story set in the same city; then there is the four-page "Crocknotizen" and about 80 small pages called "Protocols" by Benjamin and his companions in drug experiences in the

Suhrkamp collection *Walter Benjamin: Über Haschisch*; these are to all appearances a series of dated, miscellaneous, rough, and unedited notes. Yet, when Benjamin writes to Scholem on July 26, 1932, about the four books that will be the fruit of his lifetime's work, he says that one will be "a truly exceptional book about hashish," and he distinguishes it from the other projects by requesting that his friend keep it confidential: "Nobody knows about this last topic," he writes, "and for the time being it should remain between us."¹ Why the warning, the secrecy? In the "Surrealism" essay he says that hash is a dangerous introduction to profane illumination. Dangerous in where it might lead us? Perhaps into a labyrinth from which there is no exit?

Given his statement to Scholem, written when he was immersing himself in the *Passagenwerk* or *Arcades Project*, we have some reason for thinking of Benjamin's hashish experiences as more than a casual, experimental, or episodic use of intoxicants. Some people do drugs and experiment with writing or philosophy. In these cases, psychotropic writing is a record or reflection of, or a meditation upon the experience; the writing is seen as a sign, an indication, of what transpires under the influence of the drug. Benjamin's hashish writing, the passages that he composed in relation to the experiences, ought to be seen as avoiding such an external relation of writing and *Rausch*. The *pharmakon* is both the substance ingested and the writing to which it gives rise. (Benjamin sometimes refers to it as a *Gift* in German, with the senses of both present and poison, and of potion, which offers one link between them.) Benjamin came to see hashish as an avenue of "profane illumination," one whose force coincided to some extent with surrealism and which became important to him at around the same time as the latter.

{One of the profane illuminations achieved in reflecting on "Hashish in Marseilles" was that the writer of prose and the hashish eater are engaged in deeply analogous forms of rapture. Writing about hashish, Benjamin discovers the joy and the difference of repetition that are writing and his writing; writing prose he threads his way through a labyrinth like the streets of Marseilles or Naples. The space of writing and the time of the hashish trance (these are Benjamin's words, even if I abbreviate "hashish") are uncanny variations of one another. If Walter Benjamin was addicted to anything, it was to writing. Benjamin's hashish writings are already inscribed in a literary tradition, in which Baudelaire's name is the most obvious.² His use of hashish was occasional, and much of it was undertaken in controlled conditions, where protocols of the experience were transcribed; other men of science and letters (Ernst Bloch, Ernst Joel, and Fritz Fränkel) participated in the same spirit.

Benjamin sees it as characteristic of the flux of the modern world that it encourages the "short habits" that Nietzsche endorsed. One of the dangers of this world is the commodification of experience, a threat that Benjamin finds in the thought of eternal recurrence which appears in the nineteenth century in such diverse figures as Baudelaire, Blanqui, and Nietzsche. As he understands this idea, it means that each moment of experience is indefinitely repeatable and replicable, like a mass-produced commodity, or like a photograph; and yet the thought of recurrence is designed to endow each of these moments with an aura, testifying by means of myth to the contradiction between repetition and aura that is analyzed in the essay on the reproduction of the work of art.³ In such a world, addiction could have the attraction of being a true constant. If there is a reason for rethinking and rereading Benjamin's writings on hashish in our context, it may have to do with what I propose was his deepest and most continuous addiction, the addiction to writing, an addiction that would link Benjamin's hashish use to culture, in the sense of a "high" or literary culture and would reinforce the suggestion in Plato's *Phaedrus* that writing is a drug. Such an exploration will have to touch on the question of how one writes about states of intoxication that many have said are pre- or extra-linguistic.

The connection between trance and writing is made explicit in this passage that reflects on the passages of both by means of the figure of the labyrinth:

To begin to solve the riddle of the ecstasy of trance, one ought to meditate on Ariadne's thread. What joy in the mere act of unrolling a ball of thread. And this joy is very deeply related to the joy of trance, as to that of creation. We go forward; but in doing so, we not only discover the twists and turns of the cave, but also enjoy this pleasure of discovery against the background of the other, rhythmical bliss of unrolling the thread. The certainty of unrolling an artfully wound skein—is that not the joy of all productivity, at least in prose? And under hashish we are enraptured prose-beings in the highest power (R, 142).⁵

Rather than seeing the experiences as escapes from language or culture, Benjamin thought of them as forms of "profane illumination," consistent with and amplifying a material critique of society by inducing the subject to attend to the neglected underside, the unthought in the surrounding world, and to articulate the illumination (in writing, in his case). There is nothing in Benjamin's writing to suggest the apocalyptic claims (which many of us recall from the 1960s) to the effect that the psychotropics lead us to a realm beyond language, beyond the conceptual, or beyond culture. As he explicitly notes, the illumination achieved

is not in the experience itself but in the relection upon it, a reflection that takes a specifically literary or prosaic form. The hashish *Rausch* will “not teach us half as much about thinking (which is eminently narcotic) as the profane illumination of thinking about the hashish trance” (R, 190). The passage through the hashish trance must be supplemented by the passages of prose, and we will find that their twists and turns evoke that complex of passages which Benjamin calls the labyrinth.

Sometimes what Benjamin discovers seems surprisingly familiar, and familiar even within the specifically German and European cultural world in which he lived. In “Crocknotizen,” for example, he finds that one of the chief effects of intoxication is to focus our attention on ornament and design, to allow us to linger with it rather than pass it by as we usually do when pressed by our usual concerns (H, 57).⁶ Lingering with it and meditating on it, we ponder the many different ways in which shapes, colors, and configurations can be read; we become aware of the fragility of the boundary between figure and ground. But this is just to reproduce Kant’s classical analysis of the aesthetic experience in the *Critique of Judgment*, and even to employ Kant’s examples drawn from the decorative arts. As the latter declares, “Flowers, free designs, lines aimlessly intertwined and called foliage; these have no significance, depend on no determinate concept, and yet we like them.”⁷ It might seem that Benjamin did not travel very far in the psychotropic world. Nevertheless, in some of the passages from the “Protocols” of the hash experiences, he develops this meditation on ornament into an analysis of the aura which plays such an important part in his canonical essay on “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproducibility.” Indeed, even in the passages on ornament Benjamin differs sharply with Kant, insofar as he takes the intensified effect of color to be a major aspect of the aesthetic experience; Kant had generally dismissed color as an adventitious charm in contrast to linear form.

The auratic two-dimensional complexity of design that holds Benjamin’s attention under hashish can be taken to be a relatively simple anticipation of the fuller experience of finding oneself in a labyrinthine space. Like the labyrinth as understood by Benjamin, such designs offer many ways into an interior from which it is not easy to escape. In the passage quoted earlier from the published essay “Hashish in Marseilles”—indeed this essay is nothing but a series of passages, in the several senses that word takes when we speak of literature, architecture, and travel—there is the suggestion of a deep affinity between the writing of prose and the hashish trance. The passage suggests that all prose is psychotropic writing, that it leads us through passages that are uncanny in being at once familiar and unfamiliar. Benjamin says some-

thing similar about his childhood reading, that it was an initiation into "the labyrinth of stories"; the serial form of publication in the periodical that he read, *New Companion of German Youth*, allowed "the longer stories, interrupted many times to appear as continuations, extended through the whole like subterranean passages" (R, 56). So reading is like finding one's way through the labyrinth, constantly being forced to double back, and so to become familiar with the involutions of a structure that are veiled by the linear form and the entryway by which it invites us in. In the passage on Ariadne's thread, Benjamin says that experience unrolls; the unrolling is repetitive yet it takes us through new places, surprising passages. To unroll Ariadne's thread is to find one's way to the heart of the labyrinth and also to prepare an exit for oneself. Writing is different from reading, insofar as the former is governed by an effect of unrolling, while the latter requires an inventive questioning of various possible routes and connections.

Benjamin's taste for the labyrinth is evident, and the ones that he discovers through hashish should be articulated in relation to those he finds in the city. The ancients, he tells us, dreamt of the labyrinth; but the form is actually realized in the European city (GS V.2, 1007). Benjamin's materialistic spin on Freud is to see the topography of the city as a realized, concrete dream. If the *flâneur* is the dreamer, then the student of the dialectical image of the lived, contemporary labyrinth is the analyst of the dream. Some of us (and we may speculate that Benjamin was among them) frequently dream of spaces that open up or double back in surprising and uncanny ways; so there are multiple ties between the dream-world and the labyrinthine experience. Hashish plays the role of inducing a waking dream in a setting that can be revisited awake and sober, thus lending itself to analysis.

Benjamin's essay on Naples, written with Asja Lacis (his Ariadne through the convoluted passages of the city that lies in the direction of the mythical Mediterranean?) celebrates an urban architecture that is "anarchical, embroiled, villagelike in the center" (R, 166). Hidden doors open onto mysterious courtyards; space is porous, with balconies and courtyards turning into theater, so that the relation of inside and outside is strangely reversible. It could be read as a loving account of postmodern architecture *avant le lettre* (think, for example, of Fredric Jameson's description of the Bonaventure Hotel). Behind, before, and beneath the boulevards of Haussmann's Paris lies a baroque labyrinth of narrow streets, tunnels, and catacombs that require the skills of Ariadne. The *flâneur* is the "flesh and blood" in which the image of the labyrinth has incarnated itself.⁸ The boulevards were not enough, however, to prevent the erection of barricades in the time of the Paris Commune, and these

cul de sacs reinstated the ancient labyrinth that the modernizers had attempted to suppress. When Benjamin writes at the beginning of "Hashish in Marseilles" that not even the space of Versailles is large enough for the trance, he could very well be thinking of its labyrinths. The labyrinth is one of Benjamin's primal experiences; a labyrinthine walkway near the Tiergarten is one of the very first things that he recalls from his travels beyond his home in the autobiographical "Berlin Chronicle" (R, 3). It is through the labyrinths that he finds himself in foreign cities (Moscow, for example), that Benjamin sees more clearly the labyrinths of Berlin. All of his cities—real, imagined, literary—form a labyrinth of labyrinths, one leading into and out of the others.

Perhaps we can begin to see why Benjamin might have felt that the planned book on hashish should be kept secret. There are so many dangers associated with the labyrinth. There may be a Minotaur or monster at its core. Sometimes the goal of the labyrinth is said to be the market, where the market can be read in either its literal, old world sense, or in a Marxist one, with a sense of the dangerously dehumanizing.⁹ At other points, both in the fragmentary essay "Central Park" and in the *Pas-sagenwerk*, the labyrinth is said to lead to prostitution; Benjamin speaks enigmatically of the "prostitution of space under hashish when it serves everything that has been (*Spleen*)."¹⁰ More generally, the Minotaur is the power of death that is secreted in the passages of the city.

This brings to mind another analysis of urban geography, by Freud, who also fancied ruins and older cities, and whose analysis of dreams contributed to Benjamin's understanding of the metropolis. To evoke an experience of the uncanny, Freud recalls going astray in an Italian town:

Once, as I was walking through the deserted streets of a provincial town in Italy which was strange to me, on a hot summer afternoon, I found myself in a quarter the character of which could not longer remain in doubt. Nothing but painted women were to be seen at the windows of the small houses, and I hastened to leave the narrow street at the next turning. But after having wandered about for a while without being directed, I suddenly found myself back in the same street, where my presence was now beginning to excite attention. I hurried away once more, but only to arrive yet a third time by devious paths in the same place.¹¹

In the hashish writings, and elsewhere, there are the germs of an atypical transcendental aesthetic, one in which space resists the attempts of time to assert its hegemony, and in which space is no longer uniform, homogeneous, and Euclidean, but already structured, striated, marked, and twisted back upon itself. Benjamin supplies the hint of a transcen-

dental aesthetic in this contrast between addictive behavior in space and in time: "To the phantasmagorias of space to which the *flâneur* abandons himself, correspond the phantasmagorias of time indulged in by the gambler. Gambling converts time into a narcotic" (R, 159). And so it would also follow, in this proportional metaphor, that strolling through the city as a labyrinth converts space into a drug.

Benjamin recalls a diagram he drew of his life one afternoon at a Paris cafe. Although it was lost, he remembers its labyrinthine character; it was "not concerned with what is installed in the chamber at its enigmatic center, ego or fate, but all the more with the many entrances leading into the interior." At this point Benjamin recalls Nietzsche, that other thinker of the labyrinth and of a self without a center, or perhaps an empty center, and his saying "If a man has character he will have the same experiences over and over again." And it was this that Benjamin read in the labyrinthine diagram of his own life:

. . . there are perhaps paths that lead one again and again to people who have one and the same function for us; passageways that always, in the most diverse periods of life, guide us to the friend, the betrayer, the beloved, the pupil, or the master. (R, 31-32)

Benjamin is thinking of a certain form of the labyrinth here, that in which there are many paths and many entrances; it is to be contrasted with the maze that has only a single entrance (and exit). The description of the "paths" of life here may appear to be somewhat metaphorical, insofar as it is concerned with events and people rather than the space of bodily location and mobility; nevertheless, a more literal spatiality is implicated in this analysis because, for Benjamin, as the context makes clear, these paths and passages are always those of the city or of a network of cities. The approach recalls Heidegger's almost contemporary analysis of the spatiality of *Dasein* in *Being and Time*, which is said to be primordially oriented toward the meaningful paths that we actually live or inhabit, rather than a neutral space of Euclidean coordinates. In that phenomenology of space, human existence is characterized by *Ent-fernung* (dis-stance or de-severance) and *Ausrichtung* (directionality). Both Benjamin and Heidegger have a complex relation to Kant's transcendental aesthetic of space and time; both seem to change position with regard to how these are related and whether one is prior to the other.

Am I digressing in considering the labyrinthine, doubling and redoubling my steps, caught up, like Benjamin, in the memory of something archaic? (The word "labyrinth," like the myth, is from Crete, marking

it as one of the oldest European words). Let me retrace my steps to the question of prose and hashish, a relation that is mediated through this figure of Ariadne's thread. The identification may seem puzzling at first; rapture and trance might be associated more easily with the lyrical and poetic rather than with prose. But in the first draft of the Marseilles essay Benjamin says at this point that lyric poetry is not worth a sou (*H*, 101).¹² Yet his assertion that "under hashish we are enraptured prose-beings in the highest power" recalls a long line of German romantic and postromantic apotheoses of artforms as modes of self-transcendence. It could be compared with Nietzsche's declaration in *The Birth of Tragedy* that "Only insofar as the genius in the act of artistic creation coincides with this primordial artist of the world, does he know anything of the eternal essence of art."¹³ Nietzsche's own later criticism of his first book faults it for striving after an ecstatic union within the constraints of prose and quasi-Hegelian formulas. Benjamin, whose *Trauerspiel* book must be understood in many ways as an anti-*Birth of Tragedy*, adopted a baroque, labyrinthine style in writing about allegory. It is the writing of prose, the joy of creation (*Schaffenslust*), that Benjamin has in mind in the figure of Ariadne's thread. This prose writing feels as if one is unrolling something that is already there, one's own thoughts, one's language, one's style; this is the ball of thread with which we begin and in whose rhythmic turning we rejoice. As it is unrolled it takes us, however, into new places, passages that we could hardly have anticipated. Even when prose turns to the apparently banal or everyday, it leads us into strangely new pathways.

Benjamin was already familiar with the neighborhood of Marseilles where he ventured out under the influence. His passage through the neighborhood and his intercourse with its well-known landmarks is transformed by prose and hashish as he threads his way through a labyrinth of his own making. The essayist, unlike the systematic writer, might enter into the subject almost anywhere, for there are many entrances; what becomes important are the passages that he marks out, the structure that emerges. There is something very secure in holding the pen, or sitting at the computer; it is our words that will fill up the page. Yet we could not have said what they would be. We find ourselves amazed as the sentences and paragraphs unroll and as we find ourselves repetitively pushing pen across paper or fingers playing over the same keyboard; we become involved in the essay (*Versuch, essai*), a true work of prose, perhaps, like Benjamin's *Trauerspiel* book, too labyrinthine to serve as a philosophical calling card at the university, but a provocation to a certain ecstasy.

This seems close to what Roland Barthes describes as the middle voice of writing, where the agent is interior to the action.¹⁴ In Herman

Schweppenhäuser's essay on Benjamin's hashish writing, "Dialectics of Profane Illumination," he explains these reflections as meditations upon the collapse or identification of subject and object. While he is certainly on the right track in emphasizing that Benjamin does not simply accept such an apparent dissolution of boundaries at face value, as so much ecstatic writing about drug experiences does, Schweppenhäuser does not see the possibility that the middle voice of writing may call the subject/object schema itself into question rather than simply questioning the possibility of its resolution in a speculative synthesis.¹⁵ [Neither active nor passive, both active and passive, it unrolls: prose happens.]

While the philosophical construction projects like the Cartesian demolition and rebuilding or the Kantian architectonic have their own special pleasures and are by no means easy to achieve, the essay that meanders, twists, and occasionally loops around to take us through where we have been in a way that strangely transforms the passage that we thought we already knew is the focus of readerly and writerly ecstasy—think of the writings of Montaigne, Emerson, and Nietzsche. After all, even the reading and writing of philosophy depends on the activity, *is* the activity, of finding our way through the text, to that monstrous thing buried in its heart, and then finding our way out again.

Monsters? In "Hashish in Marseilles" they are the faces of the men in the bar, faces whose ugliness turns into a beauty that Rembrandt would have understood. "Hashish in Marseilles" is the narrative of a labyrinthine passage, in which space and Benjamin's movements are subject to a complex set of constraints. One of the first sensations he records about leaving his hotel is that his walking stick began to give him a "special pleasure." It is not exactly the thread of Ariadne, but it is an accompaniment, a supplement to ordinary walking, one that might promote the impression that one's way is not merely arbitrarily chosen but results from the confluence of a number of cooperative forces. Space becomes tactile, something whose passages we must feel our way through. After announcing that "the hashish eater's demands on time and space . . . are absolutely regal" he records his bemused reaction at the restaurant when he is told that the hot kitchen is closed after he had been anticipating an eternal feast. But before Benjamin gets to the meal he must tell us about finding his seat. This matter of locating himself in a restaurant is no longer a simple thing. Wanting a place by the window, he takes a large table that has just been vacated but, feeling shame at having seized so much space for himself he retreats to a smaller one. This pattern of advance and retreat, of circling round, is repeated on a larger scale in the unfolding or unrolling of the essay itself.

Benjamin gives us a glimpse of his game of musical chairs at the restaurant only to tell us that the full story of his meal there must come later; reversing himself, he says "First, the little bar on the harbor" (R, 139). This is the first, but not the only place in the essay, where we begin to explore a passage of some sort only to be brought up short by the stage direction "first," pointing us to another scene, another passage. Always a doubling back, a repetition with a difference: the square changes constantly with each new arrival. The very material of the passages, the stones and sidewalk seem to be "bred of my imagination," Benjamin says, adding that they could have been in Paris; which is to say, the labyrinthine Paris of his architectural and historical imagination. Hashish intensifies the experience of the *Traumstadt*, as it is called in the *Passagemwerk*. Armed with Ariadne's thread, in his literary or hash-inspired imagination, the structure becomes his own and yet other, like the words he unfolds in his writing. The labyrinth function reinstates itself wherever he is or whenever he writes.

In the essay on "Surrealism" we come across an extended meditation that again links hashish with reading and writing; these passages on hashish themselves form a labyrinthine structure that runs through the assemblage of Benjamin's writing. Perhaps the hashish book does exist in the form of such a labyrinth; perhaps it is the only way that it could or should appear.

[W]e penetrate the mystery only to the extent that we recognize it in the everyday world, by virtue of a dialectical optic that perceives the everyday as impenetrable, the impenetrable as everyday. The most passionate investigation of telepathic phenomena, for example, will not teach us half as much about reading (which is an eminently telepathic process), as the profane illumination of reading about telepathic phenomena. And the most passionate investigation of the hashish trance will not teach us half as much about thinking (which is eminently narcotic), as the profane illumination of thinking about the hashish trance. The reader, the thinker, the loiterer, the *flâneur*, are types of illuminati just as much as the opium eater, the dreamer, the ecstatic. And more profane. Not to mention that terrible drug—ourselves—which we take in solitude. (R, 190)

Reading may be about as telepathic as we get. Certainly the "messages" reported by researchers into extrasensory perception seem more like the signals of the so-called language of bees, whose deficiencies are remarked by Lacan, than like the most rudimentary examples of human conversation or communication. As Benjamin points out, Baudelaire's exemplary writing on hashish was not composed while under the influ-

ence of the drug, but as a later reflection; it is this delayed effect that offers something like a dialectical optic, that is, one that allows for a simultaneous multiplicity of perspectives. In this respect it is instructive to see how Benjamin incorporates some of the notes taken during and just after the hash trances into the prose of the Marseilles essay. In the numbered notes entitled "*Hauptzüge der ersten Haschisch-Impression*," Benjamin remarks on the transformations of spatiality:

4. Both of the coordinates through the dwelling: cellar-floor/horizontal. Great horizontal extension of the dwelling. A suite of rooms, from which music comes. But perhaps also fear of the corridor. (H, 65)

Even speaking becomes a spatialized experience, as he feels his words spreading out, and he compares this, even in the protocol, to the *Pas-sagenphänomen*:

9. It occurs to one that one is speaking in very long sentences. This is connected with horizontal extension and (even) laughter. The *Pas-sagenphänomen* is also a long horizontal stretching out, perhaps combined with a dissolution into vanishing, narrow perspectives. In such minuteness there is a tie between the idea of the *Passage* and laughter. (H, 66)

One's place in the room becomes less determinate (H, 67). And yet the literary, the prosaic already enters into the formation of Benjamin's hashish experience, so that the later reflection will be a double one. He observes the "*Kolportage und Unterschrift*" in the trance; that is, that there is a kind of hawking of books, a proliferation of signatures in space, so that far from escaping from the textual, the world presents itself as already and everywhere inscribed.

The incomplete and incompletable *Passagenwerk* is often described as a ruin, the ruin of a life's work by a man who was fascinated by and theorized ruins. We should add that it is the ruin of a labyrinth by a writer who was, by his own testimony, obsessed with that figure from his youth. The Paris of Baudelaire is a labyrinth into which the walker or the writer can stray and wander without end. As Benjamin writes in "Berlin Chronicle":

Not to find one's way in a city may well be uninteresting and banal. . . . But to lose oneself in a city—as one *loses oneself in a forest*—that calls for quite a different schooling. . . . Paris taught me this art of straying; it fulfilled a dream that had shown its first traces in the labyrinths on the blotting pages of my school exercise books.¹⁶

The *Passagenwerk* was to be a vast labyrinth of baroque reason, an intoxicated materialist analysis of a cityscape that was the condition of wandering and writing; it is the nature of such places and of the writing they provoke that there will always be more passages, more corridors and connections. While the main theme of the project has been said to be a “dialectics of seeing,” it should be emphasized that the vision Benjamin analyzes is not one detached from space and mobility; it is always, as Heidegger says of vision, an *Umsicht*, a looking around in a space where we are to some degree oriented, even in those relatively disorienting experiences of the labyrinthine.¹⁷ How is such a proliferating structure to be presented? In part through summoning up archaic images of spatiality, as in this account of the uncanniness of the city by night and of the infernal depths of the Paris metro:

In ancient Greece places were pointed out from which one could descend into the underworld. Our waking existence is also a land in which one can descend from hidden, completely invisible places into the underworld, where dreams lead. Every day we pass them by unsuspectingly; but as soon as sleep comes on we find our way back there with rapid movements and lose ourselves in dark passageways (*Gänge*). By bright daylight the city’s labyrinth of houses is like consciousness; the arcades [*Passagen*] (which are the galleries that lead to a past existence) flow daily and unnoticed into the streets. At night, however, among the dark masses of the houses a more compact darkness rises up in a frightening way and the walker who is out late hurries past them, encouraged perhaps to go through the narrow lanes (*Gasse*).

The metro, where evenings the lights glow red . . . shows the way down into the Hades of names: Combat, Elysee, Georges V, Etienne Marcel, Solferino, Invalides, Vaugirard have thrown off the tasteful chain of streets and squares, and, here in the whistle-pierced darkness, have become misshapened sewer gods, catacomb fairies. This labyrinth conceals in its innards not just one, but dozens of blind, rushing bulls, into whose jaws not once a year one Theban virgin, but every morning thousands of anemic young cleaning women and still sleepy salesmen are forced to hurl themselves.¹⁸

This working section of the *Arcades Project* is entitled “Ancient Paris, Catacombs, Demolitions, Ruins of Paris.” The excerpted passage aims at demonstrating that the labyrinthine underworld which we enter in our dreams also appears with the coming of night and is always accessible through the stations of the Metro.

Benjamin began his hashish experiments at just about the same time as the *Arcades Project*, perhaps superficially inspired by Baudelaire, but

more profoundly by the elective affinity between his writing project and its pretext, or pretextual space. Included in *Über Haschisch* are a number of inscriptions Benjamin made under the influence of mescaline, in which the writing circles around the page, and into the midst of the circle it forms; these are labyrinths of writing and Benjamin seems to have reveled in getting lost in them, as he did in those texts that might be the products of a medical sobriety, even if written under the influence of the narcosis of prose composition.

It is this not finding oneself, this talent for getting lost, for which the architectural theorist and historian Manfredo Tafuri seems to criticize Benjamin and his hashish taking toward the end of *The Sphere and the Labyrinth*, a book that interrogates the discourse of architecture from Piranesi to the 1970s. Tafuri finds a contrast between Benjamin's use of hashish and his asking how the intellectual positions himself with respect to the means, specifically the intellectual means, of production; he finds the contrast to be an emblem (perhaps an allegory?) of the dilemma of the avant-garde:

"The disenchanted avant-garde," completely absorbed in exploring from the comfort of its charming *boudoirs* the profundities of the philosophy of the unexpected writes down, over and over again, its own reactions under the influence of drugs prudently administered. Its use of hashish is certainly a conscious one: but it makes of this "consciousness" a barrier, a defense.¹⁹

[The question is not simply whether there was a kind of escapism in Benjamin's use of hashish, but whether such an escapism was characteristic of his thought. Benjamin was clearly aware of this as a general possibility, if we can take a comment about those with a taste for the labyrinthine to apply to that species of the labyrinth lover, the hashish eater. In "Central Park" he wrote that the labyrinth "is the home of the hesitant. The path of someone shy of arrival at a goal easily takes the form of a labyrinth." The labyrinth is the place of the sexual drive "in those episodes which precede its satisfaction" and it is the home of "humanity (the social class) which does not wish to know what will become of it."²⁰ One might find or create labyrinths for oneself by various means: producing a life plan that could only, like Benjamin's, be represented by a labyrinthine diagram; writing, especially the writing of an ambitious, multifaceted work that itself revolves around the question of passageways, a historical book that aims at countering a more linear conception of history by a certain spatialization of time; cultivating a taste for wandering and getting lost in European cities; consuming hashish or mescaline to provoke an experience of the labyrinth

in otherwise ordinary surroundings. These are all modes of profane illumination, ways of revealing the impenetrability of the everyday and the everyday character of the impenetrable.] Many strategies are available to the hesitant; we might think of them as alternative entryways into the labyrinth, as we might think of Benjamin's four projected books as such openings to the thought that possessed him like a narcotic. And the labyrinths are not only of our own devising; we might remember, in connection with Benjamin's comments on the labyrinthine delay of sexual satisfaction, his impression (and Freud's experience) of the site of the red light district in the convoluted streets of an old city.

Tafuri discusses Benjamin's hashish use but not his fascination with the labyrinth; this seems odd, considering that the title of his book suggests that it will be thematized. If we can only continue to wander, to unroll Ariadne's thread, to write in circuitous and meandering fashion, we might avoid the confrontation with the monster at the center of the structure until the very last moment, perhaps escape it altogether. Is this to be seen as nothing but an evasion of moral and political responsibility? Or should it be understood as one of the ways in which time and history are intensified and realized by becoming space?²¹ The ecstasy of the labyrinth and of prose, both of which can become thematic in the hashish *Rausch* are consistent responses to the Benjaminian conception of history as catastrophe, in which the production and enjoyment of strategies of ecstatic postponement and deferral may be among the very best things that we can do.] This line of thought coexists in Benjamin with his view of surrealism as having "the particular task . . . to win the energies of intoxication for revolution." Benjamin's essay on Marseilles and his labyrinthine cityscapes can be read as transformations of the city into surrealist sites. What seem to be contradictory attitudes toward time—revolutionary metamorphosis or the luxury of deferral, embodied in the figures of the activist and the *flâneur*—are in fact different modalities of the profane illumination achieved in the space of writing and the writing of space.

NOTES

1. *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin*, Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno, eds.; translated by Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson (Chicago, 1994), letter of July 26, 1932, pp. 395–396.

2. As early as 1919 Benjamin records that he has read Baudelaire's "Artificial Paradise" and says that it will be necessary to repeat his attempt independently (*Correspondence*, p. 148); the drug is introduced by a book. But what are we to make of the notion of an independent repetition?

3. For Benjamin's thoughts on eternal recurrence see correspondence of Walter Benjamin, op. cit., pp. 156–178.
4. Walter Benjamin, "Central Park," p. 36.
5. Walter Benjamin, *Reflections*, translated by Edmond Jephcott, edited by Peter Demetz, 1978.
6. *Über Haschisch*, p. 57.
7. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, translated by Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis, 1987), p. 49.
8. "Central Park," p. 53.
9. "Central Park," p. 40.
10. "Central Park," pp. 53, 35.
11. Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," translated by Alix Strachey in Benjamin Nelson, ed. *On Creativity and the Unconscious* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1958), pp. 143–144.
12. *Über Haschisch*, p. 101.
13. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, section 5, translated by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), p. 52.
14. See Roland Barthes, "To Write: An Intransitive Verb?" in *The Rustle of Language* (New York, 1986); Hayden White, "Writing in the Middle Voice," *Stanford Literature Review* (9:2), fall 1992, pp. 179–187; Martin Jay, "Experience Without a Subject: Walter Benjamin and the Novel," *New Formations* (20), summer 1993, pp. 145–155.
15. Herman Schweppenhäuser, "Dialectics of Profane Illumination," in Gary Smith, ed. *On Walter Benjamin: Critical Essays and Recollections* (Cambridge, MA, 1988), pp. 35–37.
16. Walter Benjamin, "A Berlin Chronicle," in *One Way Street and Other Writings*, translated by Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (London, 1979), p. 298.
17. See Susan Buck-Morss, *Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA, 1989); Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, translated by John MacQuarrie and Edward Robinson (New York, 1962), pp. 134–148.
18. Benjamin, V.1, pp. 135–136; partially quoted and translated in Susan Buck-Morss, *Dialectics of Seeing* (Ithaca, 1989), p. 102.
19. Manfredo Tafuri, *The Sphere and the Labyrinth: Avant-Gardes and Architecture from Piranesi to the 1970's*, trans. Pellegrino d'Acerno and Robert Connolly (Cambridge, MA, 1990), pp. 289–290.

20. "Central Park," translated by Lloyd Spencer, *New German Critique* (34), 1985, p. 40, translation modified.

21. I am alluding to Jacques Derrida's characterization of *différance* as the becoming-space of time and the becoming-time of space in "Difference," in *Margins of Philosophy*, translated by Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), pp. 1-27.