Memories That Don't Weaken: Seth and Walter Benjamin

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There is a sense of nostalgia in the graphic novel *It's a Good Life If You Don't Weaken*, a yearning for things past. It is evoked by the style of the drawings, the 1950s curve to the lines. It's in the color of the paper, which looks yellowed with age. It comes from the *New Yorkers* Seth collects, and most of all, from Seth himself: at any time he can break into what his friend Chet calls his "'everything was better in the past' speech" (Seth, 1996:16). Seth himself is aware of his obsession with the past. In part five of the graphic novel, he admits: "I'd hate to think that my belief in the superiority of the past was really just a misplaced, over-rationalized, aesthetic choice," only to continue, "No, forget I said that. Things are obviously getting worse every year" (1996:124). As Walter Benjamin might say, "This mode of observation is obviously not progressive" (1969:248).

Nevertheless, Benjamin himself also struggled with the realities of his day, the disappearance of traditions, the rise of new technologies. Often it is unclear whether Benjamin is enthusiastic or distrustful of new developments in the arts world, such as photography and film. By relating some of Benjamin's ideas and concepts to themes in *It's a Good Life If You Don't Weaken*, I explore the role the past plays in Seth's book, and try to discover whether Seth's predilection for the past really is just a "misplaced, over-rationalized, aesthetic choice" or something else. Tracing instances of Benjamin's concepts of *mémoire volontaire* and *mémoire involontaire* in this graphic novel brings into focus the different kinds of memories evoked by Seth. Some of these memories, with their overwhelming nostalgia, tie him only to the past, while others, mixed either with regret or a new understanding, open up the future.

Seth, as Benjamin's *flanuer*, traverses memories like the city, looking for a place he does not know yet. As a collector, he tries to create order and meaning from fragments, be they illustrations or memories. By relating Benjamin's ideas to *It's a Good Life If You Don't Weaken*, we can find new meaning in Seth's strolls in cities, his tortured soliloquies. They point out that rather than burrowing into the past with his collections of artifacts and recollections of earlier times, the character Seth in this book is also looking for a way to look beyond them, and be open to the future.

It's a Good Life If You Don't Weaken, by the Canadian cartoonist Seth, was first published in installments in Seth's series *Palookaville*. The complete story was collected into a graphic novel, or "picture novella" as Seth called it, in 1996. Although the book shows a certain amount of autobiographical detail

-- such as Seth's character, names and likenesses of friends, the settings in Toronto -- the story is fictional, and just for the record, Kalo, the object of Seth's quest, never existed. The image of Seth that stayed with me most after reading the graphic novel is that of him walking through the city. Seth does not cycle or use a car or even take the Toronto streetcars. Occasionally, for longer distances, he will travel by train, but in the first place, he is a pedestrian. He walks through the city, browsing in second-hand bookshops or talking with a friend (**Fig. 1**). He is also shown walking through smaller Ontario towns, but here he is followed by suspicious glances or made fun of by grungy teenagers: " -- It's Dick Tracy. -- No, it's Clark Kent" (1996:94). In these towns Seth stands out, but in the city, he moves through the crowds effortlessly, without being noticed, while being able to observe them at leisure (1996:44).

Fig. 1

In Walter Benjamin's terms, Seth is a flaneur, eternally sauntering through the city. The type figures prominently in Benjamin's essay on Baudelaire, where he describes him in 19th century Paris. He writes that the flaneur moved though the crowd with "skill and ease" (1969:167), "demanded elbow room and was unwilling to forgo the life of a gentleman of leisure" (1996:172), but at the same time was "already out of place." The flaneur's existence was being endangered by growing traffic in the cities, and by the rise of the automobile. The image of the flaneur comes across well in *It's a Good Life If You Don't Weaken*, partly because there are very few cars pictured in the comic, and there is always enough room for Seth to walk (we never see him waiting for the lights to change or trying to squeeze between parked cars).

The flaneur's precarious existence is central to the figure though. About to become a thing of the past himself, the flaneur has a special connection to other pasts. In *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin writes:

> The street conducts the flâneur into a vanished time. For him, every street is precipitous. It leads downward...into a past that can be all the more spellbinding because it is not his own, not private. Nevertheless, it always remains a time of a childhood. But why that of the life he has lived? In the asphalt over which he passes, his steps awaken a surprising resonance (1999:416).

The streets in *It's a Good Life If You Don't Weaken* lead Seth to two different pasts. One is his own childhood. He enters this partly, however, through a past that is not his own, through the career and the life and death of the cartoonist Kalo, which is the other past he uncovers in the book.

Seth's childhood is important to him. As he says: "I am immersed in my past -- wallowing in it. I look at my childhood like it's some sort of golden key. If I just ponder it, sift through it, pick at it enough, I feel like I'll find the answer to every goddamn thing that's wrong with me now" (1996:41). Seth relates three of his childhood memories in particular; one of a dreary Christmas parade, one of an undisturbed moment of watching TV, his mother's presence felt in sounds from the kitchen, and an even vaguer memory of hiding in boxes, enjoying the "safe, contained space" of them (1996:12). Seth speaks of "retreat[ing] to these memories often when [he is] depressed." In Benjamin's terms, this kind of memory is the *mémoire volontaire*, which can be called up, recalled, consciously. More fitting to the part of the flaneur as I quoted him earlier, however, is *mémoire involontaire*. This is made up of memories that one doesn't even know one has, that one is unconscious of until they are triggered by something, a scent for example as in Benjamin's example of Proust in the Baudelaire essay where he discusses this notion of memory. *Mémoire involontaire* suits the flaneur, who wanders and doesn't want to plan his every next step.

Fig. 2

Formalized into artistic expression, memories can become *correspondance*. The *correspondance* is an experience "which seeks to establish itself in crisis-proof form," as Benjamin writes (1969:182). Expressions of such moments, according to him, are "the data of remembrance -- not historical data, but data of prehistory." The childhood memories that Seth describes early on in the graphic novel fall into this category. They "are days of recollection, not marked by any experience. They are not connected with

the other days, but stand out from time" (1969:181) -- the sensations recalled by Seth of lying on his parents' couch without any cares, the shelter of the boxes he played in.

On one of his wanderings through town, as he sifts through the tangible past as it is presented by second-hand bookshops, Seth by chance comes across a collection of illustrations from the *New Yorker*, that eventually leads him to Kalo's work. Collecting, or rather, excavating drawings by Kalo becomes a passion for Seth. He rummages through countless stacks of old magazines to find his pictures, and in the meantime tries to piece together the man's life story. What fascinates Seth about Kalo is his style, which is similar to his own style of drawing, but even more the fact that such an obviously talented artist can be so obscure.

Benjamin discusses collecting in a light-toned essay called "Unpacking My Library." He writes that "to the true collector the acquisition of an old book is its rebirth" (1969:61). Similarly, Seth wants to find out everything he can about the man who created these images, to flesh him out. As Seth discovers how little work by Kalo he can find, and how unknown the man really was, he often wonders why he even bothers. But his obscurity is precisely part of the attraction of Kalo as an artist. His work has not been collected, anthologized, reprinted before. He is all Seth's, and like with the *mémoire involontaire*, Seth never knows when and where he'll find another of his illustrations. Benjamin makes the connection between collecting and memory explicit. He talks of the "spring tide of memories which surges toward any collector as he contemplates his possessions. Every passion borders on the chaotic, but the collector's passion borders on the chaos of memories" (1969:60). Seth's own memory is a jumble of gags, quotes, and anecdotes from decades of comics, not to mention the memories of his personal life, but with his collection of Kalo's work, he adds to this the jumble of disparate illustrations, biographical facts, and new associations connecting these to his own life. In this chaos of historical data, he is looking for messages with a deeper significance to his own existence. Several times Seth almost leaves his Kalo collection for what it is, but for some reason, he is drawn back to it every time. In his research into Kalo's life, he also revisits his own past, as he visits Strathroy, the town he grew up in, on a trip to find Kalo's relatives. When he finds nothing there but his own memories and the house he was born in, he decides to drop the effort. Eventually, however, it is also his memories that lead him to give the search one last try.

In *It's a Good Life If You Don't Weaken*, the importance of this search for Seth personally is underlined by the repetition of the image of a particular apartment building. As he first looks at it, Seth comments, "It's funny. There's something in the decay of old things that provokes an evocative sadness for the vanished past. If those buildings were perfectly preserved it wouldn't be the same" (1996:124). He continues, "It occurred to me the other day that

maybe I'm wasting my time looking for Kalo. He's kind of a nobody -- a one-hit wonder [...] I s'pose I should be researching just about anybody else -- anybody with a significant body of work. That would be the smart thing to do." Then the building is shown again (**Fig. 3**:125). On the next pages, Seth is thinking back to a particular woman he was going out with when he first got involved in the search for Kalo, and to how he broke up with her. As the rendition of this memory ends, we see Seth fixed in contemplation, and then phoning information for Strathroy. He is back on the Kalo case. The scene ends with another image of that same old building (1996:128). The repetition of the building draws attention to the parallel between Kalo's work and the old building, unpreserved, unnoticed, left to decay. The repetition, interspersed with the memory of the break-up with Ruth also shows how the search for Kalo has personal implications for Seth. We have established that Seth criticizes himself for being so immersed in his past. It now seems as if, perhaps unconsciously, he feels that by seeking closure to his search for Kalo, he also attempts to find a way to let go of his own past and the regrets that go with it. If he has discovered that he cannot return to his childhood, and that there is no golden key to the truth there, he must try and find it in some other place.

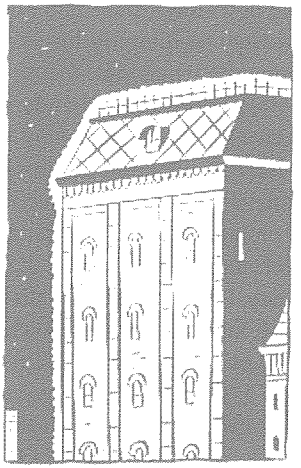

Fig. 3

When Seth returns to Strathroy, he visits several people who were close to Kalo, most importantly Mrs. Kalloway, Kalo's mother. What he finds is different from what he expected. He does not find any new Kalo illustrations; none was saved. In fact, he learns that his collection will probably never be complete: Kalo's mother tells him she once had a scrapbook filled with his cartoons (1996:161), but it has been lost. Seth has so far found eleven illustrations; he must realize, though it is never put into words or pictures, that it is unlikely he will ever unearth a whole scrapbook full of them. This, however, is inherent to collecting, according to Benjamin:

> Right from the start, the great collector is struck by the confusion, the scatter, in which the things of the world are found...The collector...brings together what belongs together; by keeping in mind their affinities and their succession in time, he can eventually furnish information about his objects [...] As far as the collector is concerned, his collection is never complete; for let him discover just a single piece missing, and everything he's collected remains a patchwork (1969:211).

Seth has to face now that his Kalo collection will remain a patchwork that will provide no answers. He has been searching for places where the past becomes

tangible, where life was simpler. This is evident in his love for old objects, from gramophone records to buildings, from his pilgrimage to the house where he lived as a boy, and ultimately in his search for Kalo, the man and his work: these are all ways of revisiting the past, trying to hold on to it.

Fig. 4

In the end, when he finds that there is little left to discover about the man's art, Seth also learns that Kalo eventually left his art behind completely, turning to a completely new career (real estate), and was satisfied with that. Kalo's mother takes Seth back to Kalo, Jack Kalloway, as a child. He has been grown and dead for years, but her repeated use of the words child and boy for her son makes explicit her access to his childhood, underlining Seth's attachment to his own childhood. Seth finds out Kalo gave up cartooning completely when he got married and had a child of his own. He became Jack Kalloway once more. When asking Kalo's mother how she thought her son felt about giving up cartooning, she responds with the answer Kalo gave her when she asked him that same question: "A little misery is good for the soul" (1996:163). Maybe Seth's own depressions are good for something after all.

In the final pages of the book, Seth asks Mrs. Kalloway if she would like to see her son's drawings again. As she looks through them, she comments: "In some ways I'd forgotten how nicely he drew" (1996:163). Looking at these cartoons again after so many years, years even after her son's death, is like an instance of *mémoire involontaire*. She rediscovers something she had forgotten she knew.

In the conversation that follows, she mentions that, even though he could draw well, her son wasn't much of a painter. Seth is faced with unsentimental memory here. Though she is his mother, Mrs. Kalloway does not romanticize the memory of her son. There is no nostalgia there. For Seth this may be an example of the proper place for memories and nostalgia in life. Mrs. Kalloway illustrates that even a son's death is no reason to live in the past too much, while on the other hand, it is never too late to learn new things from this past. Reading her son's cartoons, she comments: "Oh my! This is a funny one -- quite naughty really.... I didn't know he had it in him" (1996:164). During these words, Seth is looking down at her, smiling. This final strip of the book, with the panel showing Seth balanced between two images of the old woman, becomes frozen in time. The moment of experiencing Mrs. Kalloway's rediscovery of her son's work becomes an instance of *correspondance* here, going beyond mere recollection. This impression is achieved partly because of the place this moment takes in the book. It is the final image, left to resonate in the reader's mind.

His encounter with Kalo's mother, who in his conception had almost been a living artifact, gives Seth access to recollections other than his own. It forces him to realize that there is a place for memories and nostalgia, but it should not run one's life. Similar to the way Kalo gave up cartooning, maybe Seth has to give up the wallowing in his past. The search for the golden key is over. Now he can face an uncertain future and the fact that maybe it's a good life after all.

References

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