T

here was no exit either for Val-

ter Benjamin, the German Jew-

ish philosopher of cities, on the

run from the Gestapo in 1940 with a

U.S. entry visa of no use unless he
could escape France. He got as far as

Portbou, on the Spanish side of the

Pyrenees. When the local authorities
refused his papers, he chose that night
to overdose on morphine. And so al-
though we have more than a thousand
pages of his Arcades Proj-

ect—a history of Paris as if it were Pompeii, a brilliant
montage of fashions, shopping, photography, adver-
sising, and prostitution—we know it to be frag-
mentary and unfinished, murdered like its author by
a homicidal century. How very strange then to come
upon Benjamin’s BERLIN

CHILDHOOD AROUND 1900 (Har-

vard, $14.95), as if upon a book of fa-
bles from a golden age of bourgeois
sumptuousness—of courtyards with
caryatids, gaslight and hackney car-
rriages, butterfly nets, specimen boxes,
tweezers, and a sphinx moth; goldfish
ponds, labyrinths, clocks, and books; nursemams, grandmothers, and gov-
ernesses; silk dresses, Chinese lanterns,
peacock feathers, and marzipan; toys,
fevers, masks, ghosts, bicycles; skat-
ing rinks, carousels, brass bands, and
fire brigades.

Benjamin says that he wrote these
sketches, in exile in Italy and Spain in
1932, to inoculate himself against “homesickness”: “I sought to limit its
effect through insight into the irre-
trievability—not the contingent bio-

graphic but the necessary social ir-

trieveability—of the past.” Maybe so,
but the book feels more like some-
thing rescued from catastrophe—a
ring whose stone was once thought
precious, or a scroll that can no longer
be deciphered. See the magic be-

precious, or a scroll that can no longer
ring whose stone was once thought
different, at age twenty-three, in 1656 by a Sephardic community in

Amsterdam still spellbound by its Iberian narrative of

Inquisition and expulsion, of suffering and redemp-
tion, and fearful of calling too much attention to it-
self. Secular before we had a word for it, a premature
modern, what he saw through the lens-

ground and polished for a living

effects arrived at a priori, by deduc-
tion—his very own science of ethical

optics. As Rebecca Goldstein wonder-

fully paraphrases him in BETRAYING

SPINOZA (Schocken, $19.95):

It is logic itself, not its rules—but its applications—the

vast and infinite system of

logical entailments that are not merely abstract, as we

usually conceive of them, but rather coated with the

substance of being. Reality is ontologically enriched

logic. It is a logic that is animated, alive with

thought, infinitely aware of its own infinite space. And

it is, simultaneously, a logic that is em-

bodied, a logic which generates itself in

space, resulting in a material world.

Goldstein is both a professor of phi-

losophy and a novelist. (Her PROPERTIES

of Light: A Novel of Love, Betrayal, and

Quantum Physics is a mordant marvel.)

By “betraying” Spinoza, she means that she has dared to imagine him in a so-

cial context, reading his mind as well as

his books, even though she knows how much he would have hated being thought of as historical or contingent.

But while Goldstein the philosopher
can be counted on to fill us in on

Torquemada and Marranos, on Descartes and Leibniz, on Calvinism

and kabbala, on idol worship and “rad-

ical objectivity,” Goldstein the novel-

ist wonders what it felt like to be shunted by your own brother, and

whether a woman did him wrong. So

we do. He was a hero of consciousness, who cared about rainbows. It matters

that when his friend Jan de Witt, Grand Pensioner of the States of Hol-

land, was dismembered by a mob and

ted to dogs in 1672, Spinoza sought to

place a placard at the assassination site:

YOU ARE THE GREATEST OF BARBAR-

IANS. He too would have been torn

apart if his landlord hadn’t locked him

up inside the house. He died instead of

tuberculosis, at age forty-four. At least

John Locke would get to read him in

time for the American Revolution and

the Bill of Rights.

Death is almost all that Philip

Roth can see through the lens of his EVERMANS (Houghton

Mifflin, $24), a short, scary novel that

spends more time in surgery than it
does in the conjugal or adulterous bed.

Roth, of course, can never turn off the

camera or the mide; he tells us things

we didn’t know about watches and dia-

monds and retirement communities, about the

advertising business and com-

mercial art, about models and stents. But the wives,

the daughter, the brother, the collea-
gues, the jewelry shop, and the New Jersey

graveyard are all stage props in an operatic descant of
despair as the flesh fails, the

mind blinks out, and there’s nothing left ever to wake up to.

The decay we have tracked in the

Zuckerman novels, the impotence, in-

continence, morphine drip, and IV

pole, triumphs here at last. Instead of

the tumor that ate Roth’s father’s brain in

Patrimony, it’s a cardiac arrest for

Everyman. After all those years of prid-
ing himself on refusing to be social-
ized, on being the last bad boy of Amer-
ican letters, Roth attacks his character in

the heart. Not since the last mad
days of Tolstoy has a writer been so fu-
cious knowing we must die, and so vis-
ceral about it, with bloody hands and a banshee howl.