

# Benjamin at the Border

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Quite fortuitously I had to change trains there, leaving two and half hours free on a fresh September morning. I was returning from Australia, in 1996, carrying the one small case that now serves for all seasons. I had read about Port Bou and Walter Benjamin's suicide in the 'Hotel Francia' in the night of 26-27 September 1940. Not that the suicide was of much interest; I wanted to see the border. Is that what Benjamin went there to see?

The story is roughly as follows: A small party of Jewish refugees was fleeing Vichy, entering Spain to make their way to the United States. They had visas for Spain and the United States; they did not have exit visas for France; so they made their way through the relatively unguarded Pyrenees border. Having reached Port Bou they were technically in Spain and on their way to freedom. But the mayor of the town asked for their papers, saying that refugees *sans nationalité* could not enter Spain and would be deported. At night, while they waited, Benjamin probably took the 14 morphine tablets he carried with him— 'enough to kill a horse', comments Koestler. In the morning he died, reportedly having refused a stomach pump. The rest of the group made their way to Spain.

The stigma of suicide is excused in various ways. His friend Scholem suggests Benjamin merely wanted to make himself ill so the group would necessarily be allowed through, at least so as to seek medical attention away from the border. Podszus, among others, makes much of the fact that Benjamin's death actually did allow the rest of the group to continue: 'he saved them through his sacrifice'. Everyone needs a hero. But I suspect Benjamin was simply not willing, intellectually or emotionally, to cross that border.

Benjamin was deeply troubled by the outbreak of war; this was a period of serious nervous disorders. Adorno and his wife urged him to seek refuge in the United States, or at least in England, where his family was then living. Yet Benjamin resisted the path of exile: 'In Europe there are positions to defend.' In 1940 Horkheimer secured him a visa for the United States. He left Paris in June and made his way to Lourdes, then to Marseilles for the visas, then the march through the Pyrenees to Port Bou, a 48-year-old man carrying a heavy black suitcase. Some say the case contained the manuscript of *Passagenwerk*; which would be appropriate; others, more probably correct, opt for a draft of 'Über den Begriff der Geschichte'. We will never know: the case, along with the man, was lost in the crossing. Why should he not have wanted to cross that border?

Port Bou is now one of those European border towns that has as good as lost its former function. It once lived on customs officers, police, and the international train station. It must now attempt to survive on its own intrinsic merits, on tourism, on any little thing that can attract a casual passer-by. The death of Benjamin, remarkably, is one such attraction. The town's frontier status of the past is now sublimated into glossy brochures, commemorative acts, and a superb monument of 'remembrance' dedicated to Benjamin and to the 'European exiles of 1933 to 1945'. If we remember Spain's Civil War, we see the exiles moving both ways.

The 'place of remembrance' is called *Passages*, by the Israeli artist Dani Karavan. It comprises several elements half concealed around the cemetery at Port Bou, a true *cimitero marino*, overlooking the sea. Not that they have much reason to use the cemetery: Benjamin's body was lost, presumably in a common grave, and the niche that now bears his name, next to the unwittingly self-referential plaque that reminds us that a 'document of culture is always also a document of barbarism', is little more than a cheap tourist trick. Yet we need not enter the cemetery. As I approached, there opened, as if unseen, to the left, a long rectangular shaft, in iron rusted to the modes of postmodernism, leading diagonally from the level of the path down to the level of the sea, cutting through the slope of the cliff. This is a large and long shaft. And when you look, it has steps. So you start walking down. And down. You are quickly enclosed in a dark rectangular space, a tomb, of course. Close, dark. And as you walk downward, step by hesitant step, the sound of the wind dies behind you and there, inside, the sound of your walking grows around you, and there in front, at the bottom, is the black-framed image of tumultuous waves crashing on rocks, in all the light and trouble of white on deep blue. So you approach that distant image, step by step, as you now hear yourself breathe and it seems surely not true that one could continue all the way, truly right down to the sea and a violent death. The anxiety of enclosure is real. Yet misfounded. About halfway down a glass barrier now shows itself as your reflection. The dark silhouette of a traveler, from Australia, with a small suitcase, framed against the blue and white of the sky, walking down to the white and blue of the sea. So you advance to the glass, to look for a sign, and sure enough there is one: in the bottom left corner: 'Generalitat de Catalunya', lest we forget who is paying for the experience. After which, there is nothing for it but to turn around and walk up, step by now quickening step, up to the light of day, and you hurry to escape oppressive tunnels and damn participative art, marching quickly uphill, to the Spanish side of the border and fresh rebirth in the wind and light of the clouds and sky.

The entire scene takes place within the border, perhaps within the imaginary border that was Benjamin's space that night in Port Bou.

As the day began I found information on the work, collected a handful of brochures, and chatted with the local tourism officer, born and condemned to the border town. He insisted that the anxiety of descent was a common experience, in fact the whole point of the remembrance. I

tried to argue that no, the point was the ascent, the rise into rebirth once the border had been crossed. But he couldn't see my point. He asked if I was a philosopher. I replied that I just taught English.

There is no reason to celebrate suicide, nor to dwell excessively on the blacker moments of our collective history. Nor do I really have much reason to venerate Benjamin's role in all of this, since it seems to me that his thinking was profoundly ill-equipped for any kind of border identity. Travel itself was not the problem: Benjamin had sojourned in Bern, San Remo, Capri, Moscow, Ibiza, Svendborg in Denmark, and had had a base in Paris since 1933. The problem, I suspect, was the passage to America, which implied a degree of extra-European exteriority for which there is little place in his writings. The text Benjamin worked on that year, 1940, before leaving Paris, was the series of imaginings and comments known as 'Über den Begriff der Geschichte'. It offers as much stimulating thought as you seek. Yet its history is exclusively of time, of a non-spatial axis where the past rushes forward and the subject passively awaits a Messiah. There is only one place here, one tradition, that is, no place and an unelaborated, hidden epistemology of tradition. Europe rushes through, as in the oft-cited fragment (to which we add the watercolour in question):



One of Klee's watercolours is called *Angelus Novus*. The angel appears to be trying to move away from something, something that he is staring at. His eyes stand out, his mouth agape, his wings outstretched. Thus must appear the angel of history. His gaze is turned to the past. Where a chain of occurrences appears to us, he sees just one catastrophe, which unrelentingly lays ruin upon ruin and flings them before his feet. He would like to stay there a while, to awaken the dead and piece together the broken parts. But a storm is sweeping in from paradise. It has caught his wings and is so strong that the angel can no longer close them. This storm carries him remorselessly into the future, to which he turns his back, while in front of him the ruins are piled to the heavens. That storm is what we call progress. ('Über den Begriff der Geschichte', IX)

It is an imaginative and much-fêted piece; Terry Eagleton even wrote a poem on it; it might be a useful figuration for all historical marxists. But it is foreshortened and shortsighted: if there is no space, and only time, then it is technically impossible to turn around. And in the diagonal timespace of the border, turning around is perhaps all that Benjamin and his angel really had to do.

[More recently, Eduardo Arroyo's painting *En el país de las moscas* depicts the moment of Benjamin's death in Port Bou not in terms of the Angel but in connection with an upturned perambulator, one of the philosopher's earliest memories, which supposedly rushed forward and inverted in the morpheme-blissed agony. Once again, time not space is the reductive dimension of reflection.]

In the seven or so years that I lived illegally between France and Spain, I was twice refused passage on the French-Spanish border near Port Bou, once for lack of an exit visa from France. So twice I crossed illegally, first by simply trying an alternative point, and second by walking along smugglers' tracks over the hills. If you look in the right direction, there is always a way. No spatial border is impervious. And always, crossing to Spain, there was an inevitable sense of freedom since, in this country more than to the north, you can generally talk your way around a rule. Benjamin's suicide, his backward vision and refusal of exteriority, looks for no such permeability and thus offers no positive model for contemporary European identity.

The border towns are dying. That is no great loss. Our frontiers are now in the interfaces of cities and computer networks; our border workers are mobile multilingual professionals, in virtual yet still doggedly urbanized societies. The formation of identity myths and consensual ethics for these new groups is no easy affair. Slick references to generalized intellectual exiles or joyous hybridity bring little consolation to those who, like most of us, have had to traverse the passages condensed in Port Bou. The formulation of ideas able to express and guide such identities requires as much feeling as abstraction; the passage is hard, sometimes painful, and there is not always another side, since our profit lies within the labyrinths of the crossing itself. A few of the circulated sayings come close to this. Here, for example, is Tvetzan Todorov taking a far more positive view of the border:

In our age it is the exile who best typifies, while changing its meaning, the ideal expressed by Hugh of Saint Victor in the twelfth century: 'Those who find their homeland sweet are no more than tender beginners; those who are at home everywhere are stronger; but the most perfect are those for whom the whole world is a foreign country' (I, a Bulgarian living in France, take the citation from Edward Saïd, a Palestinian living in the United States, who had found it in Erich Auerbach, a German exiled in Turkey). (*La Conquête de l'Amérique*, 1982: 253)

Yes, the list of intellectual exiles is impressive, all passing on the phrase as a ticket of mutual commiseration or even secret pride. (We who work the frontiers are stronger and more perfect; Benjamin failed the test.) Almost, but not quite. Hugh of St Victor, unfortunately, was referring most immediately for the need for students to spend time on foreign soil ('exilium'), according to the twelfth-century Erasmus programmes *avant la lettre*; and he was referring more ideologically to the ascetic retreat of monks, the most perfect of whom should have little contact with the world in order to focus on heaven. (*Didascalicon* 3.19). Such is perhaps not the experience of the modern exile. Yet it is still a risk, perhaps a turning of the back on this Europe of the holocaust and the first American century, a convenient forgetting of the power than now, in the age of information, lies precisely along intercultural interfaces. Indeed, if monastic retreat were the only

option in an age of ruins, Benjamin would perhaps have been right to stay in Europe to defend 'positions'.

But no, there is no real need for all three levels of the citation. The second level, that of the strong, or the strengthened, is perhaps enough. It is easily drawn back to that most classical of European exiles, Ovid: 'Omne solum forti patria est' (*Fasti* 1.493-4). For the strong, all soil is home. (I found it at the end of Lluís Marcó i Dachs, a Catalan Republican reflecting on the exile of Spanish Jews.) And the Loeb translation reads:

Every land is to the brave his country, as to the fish the sea, as to the bird whatever place stands open in the void world. Nor does the wild tempest rage the whole year long; for thee, too, trust me, there will be springtime yet.

This is Evander's mother telling him exile is no sin or crime; exile is merely fate ensuing from an unwittingly angered god. Valéry: 'Le vent se lève! Il faut tenter de vivre.' And Ovid: 'Cheered by his parent's words, Evander cleft in his ship the billows and made the Western land.'

January 1999

[Specific character is a necessary point of origin for universal relations: a pure nothing can have no radiation or scope.... A native country is a sort of second body, another enveloping organism to give the will definition. A specific inheritance strengthens the soul. Cosmopolitanism has doubtless its place, because a man may well cultivate in himself, and represent in his nation, affinities to other peoples, and such assimilation to them as is compatible with personal integrity and clearness of purpose. Plasticity to things foreign need not be inconsistent with happiness and utility at home. But happiness and utility are possible nowhere to a man who represents nothing and who looks out on the world without a plot of his own to stand on, either in earth or in heaven.

George Santayana, *The Life of Reason*. III Reason in Religion. ch. x. 'Piety' (1905).]