

I

The quiet Catalan settlement of Portbou has traditionally been best known as the first stop on Spanish territory on the Mediterranean side after France. Its vast railway station, seemingly quite out of proportion to a population of 1500 souls, stands as testimony to Portbou's border status, rivalling its opposite number in the French village of Cerbère across the frontier. Today, crossing the Franco-Spanish border is no longer quite the experience of transition-in-action that it once was. In the wake of the Schengen agreement and the euro, border checks and currency exchange have been consigned to history, although, thanks to the persisting difference between Iberian and standard European gauges, those nostalgic for the past of closed nation-states can still enjoy the complex operation by which the wheels of express trains are changed between Cerbère and Portbou stations. The small Catalan municipality generously offers the visitor the freedom of its tree-lined avenues and the repose of its stunningly beautiful beach. Today's painless border crossing would, however, have seemed an impossible dream in 1940, in a Europe ravaged by war and fascism, a Spain only beginning to recover from its own civil war, and a captive Catalonia licking its wounds, its language and culture pulverised under the iron heel of Francoism. In that year, in a time marked by irreconcilable conflict between nations and ideologies, Portbou, quite unintendedly and paradoxically, received, for little more than twenty-four hours of his life, a passing visitor whose memory would, at the end of the twentieth century, in a strange twist of history, transform the town's identity and promote it to a permanent place on the cultural map of Europe.

On the afternoon of 25 September 1940, a group of three clandestine travellers arrived in Portbou, exhausted after a harrowing trek across the Pyrenees from Banyuls-sur-Mer in France (15 km distant as the crow flies). One of them was a stateless German Jew, who carried on his person a provisional American passport issued by the US Foreign Service in Marseille, stamped with a Spanish transit visa, also issued in Marseille and good for the land journey to Portugal. A fugitive from the Vichy regime, he now aimed to reach the safety of the US via Lisbon. He had once visited Ibiza, but spoke no Spanish, although he had an excellent command of French. The Spanish frontier guards accosted the group and demanded their documents. They told the bearer of the US passport that he could go no further: his presence on Spanish territory was illegal because he had no French exit visa. However, in view of the traveller's evident ill-health, the police agreed to postpone expelling him back to Pétain's France until the next day. Impelled, perhaps, by inexplicable generosity or covert republican sympathies, they allowed him to spend the night, not in a police cell but in the less undignified surroundings of a cheap room in the Hotel de Francia - at No 5 in Avenida del General Mola, a street in the town centre near the police station, recently renamed after a Francoist commander. At 10 p.m. the next day, in Room No 4 on the hotel's second floor, the traveller was found dead.

The stateless refugee whose life ended in Portbou on 26 September 1940 was Walter Benjamin, now recognised as one of the greatest philosophers of the twentieth century. He had lived in exile in France since 1933. He had been deprived of his German nationality in July 1939, and later that year had suffered the indignity of an internment camp. After the Nazi occupation of Paris and the creation of the Vichy regime, to be returned to France would have meant certain deportation and death; the great critical thinker's US passport, obtained through the intercessions of his émigré friends, was his one and only lifeline, and the sole talisman

that might allow the continuation of his work. In these circumstances, and carrying on his person as he did a substantial quantity of morphine, to take his own life may have seemed the only dignified way out. It has been claimed that the Spanish border guards might have been willing to let him through after all the next day, subject to a 'small consideration', but the hotel owner, Juan Suñer Jonama, apparently had close connections with the Gestapo, and any notion of a police change of heart remains speculative. The death certificate, signed by the local judge Fernando Pastor Nieto, gives the cause of death as a brain haemorrhage. A heart attack cannot be ruled out, as Benjamin was known to suffer from cardiac problems. Nor is it impossible that he indeed swallowed morphine, but simply as a tranquilliser or a soporific, and that the efforts and stress of that terrible day may have turned an act of auto-sedation into an involuntary overdose. The experts now believe that the true cause of his death will never be established with certainty; meanwhile, for obvious symbolic reasons, the suicide story, true or not, remains the most potent. History was a little more merciful to Benjamin in the days following his death: the bundle of pesetas found on his person, together with the clement death certificate, sufficed to buy his remains a five-year rental in what is now Niche No 563 in Portbou's peaceful cemetery. Ironically, the authorities registered the deceased traveller not as Walter Benjamin but as 'Benjamin Walter', thus failing to identify his Jewish origins: thanks to this error, he was buried not in the 'outside' section reserved for non-Catholics and unbelievers, but in the cemetery proper, as the Christian and Catholic believer which, as a secular Jew and practitioner of materialist philosophy, he never was. In 1945, after the five years were up, his remains were moved to a common grave, and their exact location is now unknown.

The author of 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' might seem an unlikely candidate for the most-famous resident of a small coastal resort, far removed from the great intellectual centres, where he spent only the very last day of his life on earth. Certainly, at no point did Benjamin's work have anything to do with Catalonia or Spain. And yet it does seem appropriate that this most cosmopolitan of thinkers should have found his resting-place here in this border town, just after forging a passage across the mountains. His intellectual endeavours had always been marked by the crossing of disciplinary borders, and today it is difficult, indeed impossible to pigeon-hole him, whether as a philosopher proper, sociologist, literary critic, historian of aesthetics, or precursor of media studies: Walter Benjamin was all of those things and more. His analytic method was to seek out the hidden connections of things, to create links and passages between apparently unrelated phenomena. The vast, unfinished book which is his magnum opus (a tissue of French quotations and German commentary, drafted over the 1930s in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, and finally published in 1982), is called Das Passagen-Werk [Le Livre des Passages; The Arcades Project], and is dedicated to the interpretation of the urban symbolism of nineteenth-century Paris, taking as its central symbol the glass-and-iron arcades which are, quite literally, *passages* between one street and another. Today, the author of that seminal work lies buried at the intersection point between two European nations, a place of passage par excellence.

## II

On a sunny day in July 2002, we arrived at Portbou station on a day trip from Cerbère. We emerged into Carrer del Mercat with its souvenir shops selling leather goods, and made our way down to the café-lined esplanade that faces the beach. The blue Mediterranean gleamed, superb under a cloudless sky. Our first stop was the Tourist Office, where the on-duty woman told us how to reach the places associated with Benjamin, in a tone suggesting that philosophically-inclined visitors are no rarity in today's Portbou. We directed our steps

towards the Rambla de Catalunya, in search of the former Hotel de Francia (warned that, since 1940, it had changed its name and then fallen into disuse). Knowing that the hotel was to be found on one of the streets off the Rambla to the left, we walked halfway down the dusty avenue, past the still-extant police station, and asked for the side-street in a perfumer's. The ageing, bespectacled owner gave us precise directions; to talk of Benjamin was obviously a pleasure for him. Avenida del General Mola has been rebaptised Carrer del Mar. No 5 had, indeed, been renamed the Restaurant Internacional, before the business closed altogether and the blinds came down. The entire four-storey building (in Benjamin's day it had only three floors) is now uninhabited. There is no plaque, but a painted sign reads 'Bar Restaurante Casa Alejandro Especialidad de Paella', flanked by a smaller, foursquare plastic-and-metal sign that projects on to the street with the words 'Restaurant Internacional' and proclaims the virtues of a beverage called Fanta. We entered a small general store two doors down; the shopkeeper confirmed that this was indeed the former Hotel de Francia. Carefully and respectfully, we photographed No 5 - the peeling ochre paint of its façade, the rusting balcony on the fateful second floor.

Retracing our steps in the direction of the station, we reached Carrer Méndez Núñez and the headquarters of the Walter Benjamin Foundation, in a small, run-down building next to the tiny fire station. The Foundation houses a small museum devoted to Portbou's most famous guest, with maps, photographs and other memorabilia. These premises are temporary: there is an ambitious plan to convert the former town-hall building into the Foundation's permanent home, with the aid of no less an architect than Norman Foster. The curator filled us in on a few details and pointed us in the direction of the cemetery.

Portbou's municipal cemetery enjoys a clifftop location above the town, with remarkable views over the beach. We emerged from the twisting lane that leads up to the burial ground, to encounter a man walking a large white dog. On the cemetery wall, a simple plaque reads, in Catalan: 'A Walter Benjamin - Filòsof alemany - Berlin 1892 Portbou 1940 - Portbou 1979'; thirty-nine years after the fugitive's death and four years after General Franco's, it was put there as the town's first sign of tribute to the 'German philosopher'. The dog ran up barking towards us; the inevitable 'Don't worry, he doesn't bite' served to break the ice, and his owner, knowledgeable about Benjamin as was everyone we had met here, gave us a detailed preview of what to expect in the cemetery. We went inside, and located Niche No 563, where Benjamin's remains had rested for the duration of the second world war.

Further up, perfectly positioned just under a low, sloping whitewashed wall with a breathtaking view over the sea, we found the memorial stone itself - a rectangular slab of black marble between two bushes, surrounded by a riot of multicoloured flowers. Under the words 'Walter Benjamin - Berlin, 1892 Portbou, 1940' (the slab was placed there in 1990), the visitor may read a quotation from Benjamin himself - first in the original German: 'Es ist niemals ein Dokument der Kultur, ohne zugleich ein solches der Barbarei zu sein', then in Catalan: 'No hi ha cap document de la cultura que non ho sigui també de la barbàrie' (in English, it would read: 'There is no document of civilisation which is not at the same time a document of barbarism'). At the bottom, the source is indicated: these words are from Thesis VII of the 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', one of Walter Benjamin's most famous writings and, as it happens, the very last work he ever penned - a brief, apocalyptic vision of human history and its crises, drafted in 1940 as catastrophe loomed dark over Europe. Just to the left of the inscription, a single pink hollyhock undulated slowly to the sea breeze.

We left the cemetery to absorb Portbou's final Benjamin object, the monument called 'Passages' which overlooks the sea, just outside his resting-place on the way back down. It is

the work of the Israeli sculptor Dani Karavan, and was unveiled in 1994, in a ceremony attended by the assembled presidents of Germany, Catalonia and twelve of the German Länder. I did not realise at the time, but we had already walked through another work by Karavan - the similarly symbolic Street of Human Rights in Nuremberg. Karavan's monument in Portbou is intended as a tribute to Walter Benjamin and to all the victims of fascism; it is called 'Passages', in homage to the border-crossing and passage themes in the philosopher's life and work. From a low brick wall, two metal rails - a symbolic 'railway to freedom' - lead to a gaunt iron rectangle, erected above the sea. The visitor then descends a flight of steps, enclosed between dark walls, towards the Mediterranean, glimpsed through an aperture below - before reaching a dead end halfway down, formed by a glass barrier on which, once again, there appears a quotation from Walter Benjamin. The words traced on the glass are in German: 'Schwerer ist es, das Gedächtnis der Namenlosen zu ehren als das Berühmten. Dem Gedächtnis der Namenlosen ist die historische Konstruktion geweiht' ('It is more arduous to honour the memory of the nameless than that of the renowned. Historical construction is devoted to the memory of the nameless').

### III

As we left the monument and walked slowly back down into town, the steps inside were occupied by a French photographer and his female 'artist's model' companion. He seemed to be photographing an 'artistic' pose for a chic magazine, a gesture which somehow did not seem entirely appropriate to the place. We were rather more impressed by the unfeigned interest which the ordinary people of Portbou - the perfumer, the grocer, the man with the white dog - had shown in the life and death of their distinguished guest from 1940 - an interest which remains genuine and touching even if none of them had actually read any of his books. Meanwhile, Benjamin's warning from a dark time, etched on his memorial stone, of how culture can at any moment mutate into barbarism has lost none of its validity. At the same time, however, if we read his aphorism in reverse, we may also conclude more hopefully that out of barbarism can come culture, sometimes in the most historically surprising ways. In the place where Walter Benjamin's intellectual career ran up against the forces of barbarism and came to an abrupt end, his memory is cherished, signs of his writings are multiplied, and a nascent foundation promises to keep alive the flame of culture. Bright flowers bloom in the cemetery where the philosopher lies; the azure Mediterranean smiles.

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