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Documents that Make Us Uneasy: Walter Benjamin's Path

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Introduction

The path of Walter Benjamin is not a metaphorical fiction, it is very real. It is a Pyrenean hiking trail that leads from Banyuls sur mer in France to Portbou in Spain. It is a border trail taken by people who fled European totalitarian regimes during World War II. The 15 km long trail, a smugglers' route, requires about 5 hours of walking for a physically fit person and 10 hours for Walter Benjamin, according to the writings of Lisa Fittko, a young anti-Nazi activist who helped create the "F" route taken by Walter Benjamin in September 1940. Lisa Fittko recounts her journey with the philosopher and the other refugees in a book entitled *Le Chemin des Pyrénées. Memoires 1940–1941*.

The point of arrival, which overlooks the Mediterranean Sea, is the cemetery of Portbou, which recalls the memory of Walter Benjamin who died there on September 26, 1940. Although his remains have never been found, a funerary monument is dedicated to him in the cemetery of Portbou.

Between irony and tragedy, the tombstone takes up the famous quote from the philosopher "There is no document of culture that is not at the same time a document of barbarism."

1. "There is no document of culture that is not at the same time a document of barbarism"

The quote is from an essay published in 1937 "Eduard Fuchs the Collector and Historian". In Benjamin's words, Fuchs is "a pioneer: the founder of a unique archive of the history of caricature, erotic art and paintings of manners" (Benjamin, Walter (1937/2017, p. 88). Walter Benjamin's analysis of Fuchs' writings in the midst of the colonial period may appear as a work of deconstruction that aims to demonstrate that culture is intrinsically linked to barbarism.

Whoever dominates is always heir to all the victors [...]. All those who have won so far participate in this triumphal procession where the masters of today walk on the bodies of the defeated of today. To this triumphal procession, as has always been the custom, also belongs the booty. What is defined as cultural goods [...]. There is no document of culture that is not also a document of barbarism. And the same barbarism that affects them, affects as well the process of their transmission from hand to hand. (Benjamin, 1972, p. 281)

For Benjamin, historical actualization is thus inseparable from the recollection of a painful past. This past concerns the oppressed generations whose memory, with its struggles and claims, is lost. Benjamin thus questions in these writings the political implications of transmission.

For Benjamin, Fuchs in his role as an art collector and a pioneer, through the accumulation of art objects, characterizes the materialistic study of art. The history of art is constantly changing. The past disappears as the present is realized in the artwork. Historicism inscribes the uniqueness of each past experience and each present moment. Fuchs sees in the constitution of private collections a means of counterbalancing the ideal of good taste put forward in public collections. The private collector is guided by the object itself, by its originality. Fuchs rids the art market of the market value of the object by bringing the work of art closer to the context in which it emerged. He thus questions the technical reproduction of the work of art and then defines the drawing of caricature as mass art. Through the example of Fuchs' work as a collector, Walter Benjamin criticizes the modalities of cultural transmission, fundamentally violent according to him, because it depends on norms elaborated by the power.

Isn't the use of such a quotation on cultural transmission in a monument that precisely aims at patrimonialization ironic? Indeed, the path named "Walter Benjamin" in 2007 paradoxically erases the traces of the other users of this ancient path of the Pyrenees used since antiquity by smugglers as well as by exiles seeking to flee wars, famines and epidemics.

Regarding the quote from this essay which serves as an epitaph for Walter Benjamin "There is no document of culture that is not at the same time a document of barbarism", it is interesting to note that two French translations I was able to consult do not use the word "document" to translate the German word "Dokument" but rather the words "illustration" and "testimony."

What do these translations of the word "document" tell us? Probably that the document is the keystone of the notion of evidence and of the different modes of construction of evidence as an echo to the philosophical theory and the tragic end of Benjamin. The concept of evidence has been discussed by the philosopher Fernando Gil, for him: "Obvious is what dispenses with a proof and true the description of what is, the evidence is a redoubled truth, an affirmation that does not require justification" (Gil, 1993, p. 5).

The document illustrates, as testimony and as emergence of evidence, what is past and at the same time of what is present. A document, a persistent rhizome, bears witness to both the past and the present.

2. The Walter Benjamin itinerary, a rhizome document

The Walter Benjamin path can be analyzed as a rhizome document, insofar as it is the patrimonialization of a road that constitutes a documentary ensemble around the philosopher. It actualizes the presence of the philosopher through quotations that mark out the route, and in echo it underlines the absence of the accounts of the

other users of the path. The path, in a documentary maze, thus establishes a tension between visible and invisible, presence and absence.

The document as a rhizome could help to understand the fundamental multiplicity of a document as Walter Benjamin path and all his components, a document linked to other documents as a tombstone, a quote, a work of art but also to a visible history and non-visible history. "A rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, intermezzo. The tree is filiation, but the rhizome is alliance" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 25). The metaphor of the rhizome seems to be an alternative to the continuum model of history. It is useful to understand the path, the artwork, the quotes, in short the essential documentarity of the path. "It allows nomadic associations which involve attribution, intention, meaning and social values (political, artistic, economic) without any notion of hierarchy" (Roux, 2016).

On June 10, 1940, four days before the German army entered into Paris, Benjamin left the capital and went to Lourdes. From there, he left for Marseille and finally arrived in Port-Vendres on September 25, 1940 with the intention of fleeing to America via Spain and Portugal. Arriving in Port-Vendres, he made himself known to Hans and Lisa Fittko, two Germans who had fought in the resistance to Nazism and who could help him to cross the border illegally. Walter Benjamin was forty-eight years old at the time and he suffered from chronic sciatica and myocarditis. He took morphine to relieve his pain.

With two other candidates for exile, Henny Gurland and his son José, the philosopher was taken by Lisa Fittko to Portbou in Spain, following the trail which today is called "Walter Benjamin's path." He wrote his very last letter in French on September 25, 1940: "In a hopeless situation, I have no choice but to end it. It is in a small village in the Pyrenees where no one knows me that my life will end." According to Lisa Fittko, the Spanish authorities had informed the three fugitives that a new directive from the Spanish government recommended the deportation of stateless persons to France, thus condemning Walter Benjamin to prison and deportation. As Hannah Arendt wrote, "it was only on that day that the catastrophe was possible" (Arendt, 1955/2019, p. 43).

On the evening of September 26, 1940, after crossing the border, Walter Benjamin committed suicide by taking a lethal dose of morphine. The documents contained in Benjamin's leather briefcase, which he said included a manuscript "more important than his life", were not found even though they were listed as a manuscript bundle by the Portbou police. Lisa Fittko remembers the bag Benjamin was carrying:

It looks heavy. I ask him if I can help him:

- It contains my latest manuscript, he explains.
- But why are you carrying it now? We're just out exploring.

- You know, this briefcase is my most precious possession. I'm not going to lose it. This manuscript must be saved. It is more important than my own person. (Fittko, 1985/2020, p. 201)

Forty years later, Lisa Fittko, who thought the manuscript was saved, would learn that the manuscript was never found "It was only recorded in the death register at the time that the deceased had in his possession a black leather satchel, 'unos papeles mas de contenido desconocido,' containing papers of unknown content" (Fittko, 1985/2020, p. 213).

Hannah Arendt mentions in her book dedicated to Walter Benjamin, manuscripts deposited in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France by Georges Bataille. "[...] and he [Walter Benjamin] also had reason to be concerned about the manuscripts that he had been able, before fleeing Paris for Lourdes, in the unoccupied zone, to store at the National Library, through Georges Bataille" (Arendt, 1955/2019, p. 41).

Before killing himself, the philosopher also wrote a farewell letter to Theodor W. Adorno, dictated to his companion in his escape Henny Gurland.

Today, since the summer of 2020, on this same border path between France and Portbou, refugees who have escaped the perils of the Mediterranean Sea are trying to illegally cross the French-Spanish border. The history of the path echoes Walter Benjamin's thought, the tragic irony of this documentary itinerary of exile.

3. Passages by Dani Karavan

In front of the Portbou cemetery, a memorial, created by the Israeli artist Dani Karavan, pays homage to the German philosopher. It is called "passages" and plunges into the sea in the very place of an infinite whirlpool.

A steel tunnel of eighty-five steps descends towards the waves, preserving the silhouette of the hill and its cemetery. At its summit, a solitary olive tree is planted, facing the wind, challenging time and the dramas of history. This sculpted work testifies to a reflection on memory, the partition of space and a journey through time, in resonance with Benjamin's thought. The title chosen by Dani Karavan, "Passages," refers to Walter Benjamin's unfinished work, "Paris, capital of the 19th century: the book of passages." Started in 1927, this book brings together numerous writings on life in Paris in the 19th century as well as contemporary urban reflections by the writer.

The work of Karavan Passages is thus an echo of Walter Benjamin's unfinished work *The Book of Passages*, which alternates notes, lectures and materials. "The passages are the nuclei for the trade of luxury goods. In order to design them, art is used by the merchant. Contemporaries never get tired of admiring them. For a long time they will remain an attraction for tourists" (Benjamin, 1935/2021, p. 11). The unfinished book can be read as an allegory of

the modern world symbolized by the passages in the big cities. According to the artist Dani Karavan:

This whirlwind was the first point of my project. Then I wondered how. Get people there. A corridor, a staircase in the cliff, is not in itself an art object. It's just there to take people out to sea, to see the whirlpool. So, I had one point and was looking for another. I said to myself: if this phenomenon exists, nature can offer me other elements. Then came the olive tree, which represents the struggle for life against rocks, stones, the salty and violent wind: this is the second point. Then I found the third with the hedge, an obstacle between the view and the sea, the horizon, freedom, and on the other side, simply the noise of the trains leaving. This was the third point. [...] I wanted people to physically feel the difficulty of this journey. You climb to the olive tree then you arrive at the platform, at the fence, finally at the place where he was buried. They say it's there but we don't know where. It is therefore a very narrative story but it is not an illustration of the story. The story adapts itself to an existing situation. History is discovered by the situation I create. (Karavan, 2000).

Karavan's work uses a quote from Walter Benjamin, engraved on the glass above the infinite whirlwind: "It is more difficult to honor the memory of the anonymous than that of the renowned. Historical construction is dedicated to the memory of the anonymous."

Irony or tragedy of this fragmentary thought suspended above the marine whirlpool. For Walter Benjamin, quotation was a mode of thought, as Hannah Arendt notes, "For Benjamin, to quote is to name, and it is this 'naming' rather than 'speaking,' the name and not the phrase, that brings truth to light" (Arendt 1955/2017, p.102). She reminds us that quotations constituted Benjamin's very being, "In any case, nothing characterized him better in the thirties than the little black-bound notebook he always carried with him, in which he wrote down in the form of quotations what his life and his daily readings brought him in fact of 'pearls' and 'corals,' to exhibit them and read them occasionally afterwards like pieces of a precious collection" (Arendt, 1955/2017, pp. 95–96).

The quotations that mark out the path as well as the work of Karavan put in tension the absence and presence of Walter Benjamin, an omnipresent absence. Thus, the immersion in the work of art and the omnipresence of natural elements give rise to a unique documentary experience of the violence of the world.

"I will try to show that without being a poet or a philosopher, he thought poetically" (Arendt, 1955/2017, p. 12). This sentence by Hannah Arendt, which qualifies Walter Benjamin, perfectly illustrates the work of Karavan, which makes poetic thought emerge.

The violence of the elements, the wind, the escarpment of the rocks and the sea whirlpools are metaphors for the destiny of Walter Benjamin and, beyond this, the tragedy of the living.

Conclusion

The path marked by monuments and works of art resonates deeply and intensely with the writings and personality of Walter Benjamin. According to Hannah Arendt:

with Benjamin, we are dealing with something that is in fact, if not unique, at least extremely rare—the gift of thinking poetically. This thinking, nourished by the present, works with the “fragments of thought” that it can tear from the past and gather around itself. What guides this thinking is the conviction that if it is true that the living succumbs to the ravages of time, the process of decomposition is simultaneously a process of crystallization; that in the shelter of the sea—the element itself non-historical to which must fall all that in history has come and become—are born new forms and crystallized configurations that, made invulnerable to the elements, survive and wait only for the pearl fisherman who will bring them to the day: as “fragments of thought” or also as immortal Urphänomene. (Arendt, 1955/2017, pp.105–106).

In permanent tension between absence and presence, visible and invisible, the path along the Walter Benjamin trail, dotted with quotations and ending at the Portbou cemetery, is an invitation to think poetically about the world, an experience of documentarity (Day, 2019) where word and thing, idea and experience coincide.

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