

Who killed Walter Benjamin?

From March 1933, when his exile in France had begun, till September 1940, when he killed himself on the border between France and Spain, Walter Benjamin had been living in the most precarious way, in all kinds of sublettings, garrets, cheap hotels and other makeshift lodgings. When his financial situation became intolerable, he sometimes moved to San Remo, on the Italian Riviera, where his former wife used to run a boarding house or to Bertolt Brecht's place, in Denmark. He was writing articles and commissioned reviews in order to earn some money. Still, he was almost constantly depending on assistance from the Jewish community or from the *Institute für Sozialforschung* lead by Max Horkheimer. He had taken all kinds of complicated and wearing steps in order to secure his status of refugee in France and, later, he tried to obtain French citizenship, but to no avail.

In short, these seven years stretching between two border crossings – the first as he fled from Germany, seeking asylum after the Nazis had come to power in January 1933, and the second, illegal and fatal, after the French authorities denied him the “exit permit” which was necessary for leaving the French territory – these seven years distinctly bear the features of a path of exile and of wandering, and this path itself bears the mark of the tragic death.

How were facts, events and situations linked together? How were different factors intertwined in such a way that the Catalan village of Port-Bou was to become Benjamin's tomb? What were these extraordinary powers of *the border* which one day associated it with death, and the other day with salvation? For it is well known that the (then) famous German (Jewish) antifascist writer Lion Feuchtwanger and his wife Martha entered Spain without any difficulty at the same point of entry, during the same crucial weeks, although Feuchtwanger was considered by the Nazi invader a much more dangerous enemy than Benjamin, and was denied exit permit as was Benjamin. As H. Arendt observed, what had

been possible one day became impossible the day after, and it had been Benjamin's lot to go across the Pyrenees the worst of all days...

So, let's now ask the question more abruptly: what is Benjamin's death *made of* – in historical, political, philosophical terms - the peculiarity of this premature and brutal death being its association with the *border*?

The common answer to this question (Benjamin as victim of Nazi/fascist barbarity) bears the mark of some kind of “political correctness” which is itself indissociable - at least in France - from the so-called “duty of remembering” (*devoir de mémoire*). This answer oversimplifies the problem and puts up with excess of generality and lack of preciseness for which moralizing will not make amends. It is worthy of note that during all these weeks of nerve-racking wandering in the South of France after the French capitulation in the summer of 1940, Benjamin had never encountered the agents of the German authorities. Of course, the ill-famed “Kundt Commission” was at work in the French non-occupied zone, busily engaged in picking out German, Austrian, East-European antifascists and communists - many of whom were Jews - in the concentration camps where the French authorities had locked them up. As I have already mentioned, the immediate cause of Benjamin's *death sentence* was the fact that he did not get the exit permit (*visa de sortie*) which the refugees who were trying to emigrate (mostly to America, to the United States) *had* to obtain but which, in most of the cases, they could not obtain, because of the French prefectures' unwillingness to grant it.

It is well-known that the discriminatory measures taken by the French administration against the German, Austrian and other antifascist refugees, after the German victory, were not due to any Nazi pressure. These devices meant for discriminating and harassing the aliens, notably the so-called “enemy citizens” (*ressortissants ennemis*), including those who had been deprived of their citizenship by the Nazi regime, all these steps were adopted as soon as the Vichy regime was set up. These devices derived from political and ideological choices

made by the new French authorities, that is to say, from a distinct and constant will to persecute the refugees.

As strange and shocking as it may seem, Benjamin (as any German, Austrian, or East-European refugee on the French soil during the summer of 1940) had not only been *caught up* by the Nazi war machine after the *Blitzkrieg* of June; he also *continued* to be, after the French defeat, the captive of a general device for discriminating and stigmatizing refugees; a device set up by the French political administration, long before the Republican regime collapsed; a device which had just been growing heavier after the defeat, but which had not changed its direction as the Vichy regime had been established.

The discriminatory measures taken by the Vichy administration against Jews and German/Austrian refugees did not constitute a breach of hospitality - set on a political basis - supposedly granted by the previous governments. On the contrary, these measures only *strengthened* a whole set of restrictive and discriminatory measures which had been falling upon the refugees, notably since 1938. These measures and devices which reduced them to a genuine *state of exception* – a permanent, specific state meant for separating and isolating them from the rest of the population: restriction of movement, obligation to declare to the police any change of residence, restriction of the right to work, forbidding any participation in political activities, drastic limitation of the possibility to obtain French citizenship, etc.

From this angle, this state of moral and psychic exhaustion, of deep depression and despair which was the subjective soil of Benjamin's decision to "end it all" on the Spanish border, had its source long before his departure for Spain. *The utmost solitude* which led to his dreary death in Port Bou (a death which seems to imitate, even in details, that of the characters of Kafka - a writer Benjamin admired so much - in *The Metamorphosis* or *The Trial*); this absolute loneliness can be considered as deriving from a device intended for diminishing, damaging, annihilating special categories of human beings – by means of

separating them from the common body of the population and multiplying what we may call *interior, internal borders*. Their status was vague, but their efficiency was constant.

What is peculiar to Benjamin's exile (or, to be more precise, to his condition as a *refugee*) - as is the case with all those who left Germany during those years - is not only the diminution in terms of social status and recognition but, above all, the production of a state of constant wavering, tending towards what Hannah Arendt named *acosmism*. The refugee doesn't find a new "world" to which he has to adapt himself after having lost his original world; he finds himself in a process of experiencing a deficit, a *loss-in world* – any kind of world. The other name of this process is uprooting. Financial precariousness, chronic difficulties to find accommodation, constant problems with the administration, multiplication of cultural and linguistic obstacles – such are the most common symptoms of this phenomenon of downgrading and loss of social and symbolic position, which often tends towards a genuine form of downfall and is typical of the condition of the refugee.

But these factors do not rely entirely on the objective condition of an exile. The jeopardizing of the refugee's existence is indissociable from the *lack of hospitality* and from the proliferation of its opposite – the stubborn hostility, whether open or latent, that the fragile alien who has been driven out of his own country has to face. This hostility is first and foremost the state bureaucracy's doing; as for the population, its attitudes tend to vary.

The main factor is here the *categorization* of the alien as a refugee, the making of his separate and inferior status by decrees and devices set up by the authorities. The subjective reverse side of this making are isolation and loneliness – solitude as a process, rather than a state; the refugee is "becoming" (*devenir*).

Benjamin's case is a striking example of this process: as an *intellectual actor*, who was translating French contemporary authors into German as well as reviewing recent works published in French, and, last but not least, doing personal research on nineteenth century Paris (the grand *Passagenwerk*), he was what one might call the *ideal mediator* of his time between the most contemporary manifestations of French culture and their German counterpart. His intellectual acuteness enabled him to detect, especially in literature, the epoch-making works (Proust, Gide, Valéry, Aragon...). His relations in the publishing business, in the academic milieu and in the press were numerous and various, so that personalities as different as Jean Paulhan, Jean Cassou, Jules Romans, Adrienne Monnier, Louis Guilloux, Jean-Richard Bloch, Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (etc.) supported his application for French citizenship. Benjamin also knew Georges Bataille well enough to obtain the latter's agreement to hide his manuscripts at the Bibliothèque nationale where Bataille was working as a librarian, at the beginning of the war. His knowledge of the French language was good enough to enable him to write several texts directly in French and to translate several others from German into French – some of which are important texts, like "The Storyteller", "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", "On the Concept of History", etc.

But, at the same time, the *existential* pivot on which Benjamin's life had been turning during the seven years of putting himself in the refugee's shoes - whether he liked it or not - was made of constant wavering, of separation, of increasing weakening and dereliction. Belonging to no party and making a point of being autonomous in his judgement in politics as well as in philosophy, Benjamin was living on the fringe of the German emigration which was politically split and overwhelmed by the difficulties of survival. But, at the same time, he observed that it was not possible for him to have a serious conversation with a Frenchman "for more than fifteen minutes"... not because most of his interlocutors would be openly hostile to him, but rather because of some kind of

lack of attention or some annoyance which constantly made the “natives” drift away from the newcomers and from their *Unheimlichkeit* which was so peculiar to them.

The numerous administrative obstacles that the state bureaucracy put in the way of the refugee’s integration (it was, for example, a real obstacle course for them to get the indispensable “identity card”) constantly contributed to pushing aside the refugees from common life spaces. Financial precariousness, linked, among other things, to the fact that it was almost impossible for them to work, also increased their isolation. They did not *live*; they *survived* in more or less secure interstices, in more or less narrow and skimpy isolated areas. The refugees did not *dwell*; they “camped out”, they “managed” – the ground was constantly giving way under their feet. The temporality ruling their lives was discontinuous, porous, pulverized. The soil on which they were greeted or, rather, grudgingly received, was for them anything but a *sheltering refuge*, for it was grooved by all kinds of invisible, symbolic, subjective, cultural borders - invisible because they were non-avowable and hence, unclaimed, more often than not. “Borders” one could only catch a glimpse of, as, for example, in the case of Benjamin who was constantly failing to have his articles published in the most famous Parisian journals at that time (*Nouvelle Revue Française...*).

The contrast between the great stature of Benjamin as an outstanding cultural and intellectual go-between in these inter-war years and his downgraded and forlorn personal condition, is striking. This refugee who was a bashful lover of Paris survived in the capital, in a state - at times - “close to destitution”, as one of his biographers says. This contrast is the crude expression of the conflict which opposed a “cosmopolitan” sphere where works, ideas, debates, cultural and intellectual fluxes did flow and circulate, *in spite* of linguistic, national and historical barriers, and another sphere where, by contrast, the bureaucratic and “police” rationale tended to multiply all kinds of separations and demarcation lines between categories of people who were living in a same space

(topography). The distinguishing feature of these bureaucratic and “police” logics was to put apart one from another those who were coexisting in a common space - on the same territory, to see to it that this very proximity would be anything but cohabitation; anything but living *together* based on sharing a common world. Facing constant difficulties in terms of housing, living, having his papers in order, Benjamin was basically *alone* in Paris or elsewhere in France; those who backed him up - the people to whom he confided his problems and his innermost thoughts - were far away (Scholem in Jerusalem, Adorno in New York, Brecht in Denmark...) as his correspondence and his rare travels show.

The game of the state facing the penniless alien, driven out of his country and later deprived of his citizenship (Benjamin had been stripped of his German citizenship in 1939) consisted in putting him in constant jeopardy, making his situation unstable and fragile, so that he would continually be *put in his place*. This place being not that of the *persecuted* who is greeted and welcomed according to the laws of political hospitality based on universal principles or values, but that of the *outsider*, of the different, who is necessarily a suspect and whose acceptance can only be - for this very reason - reluctant and conditional. The right of this *tolerated species* (the refugees) to public expression was constantly restricted, in spite of the fact that these people were the direct witnesses of the harming of human beings by violence and by deprivation of freedom, and, as such, should have been protected and praised by a democratic regime not only as victims, but as freedom fighters...

From this angle, the refugee is not, in terms of political and legal condition, a citizen (a “major subject”) whose position has been damaged and degraded because of specific political circumstances – he is rather the *other of the citizen*, if not his opposite.

The game played by the state in the conduct and management of populations is to produce this kind of separation and sorting out, to continuously set up

hierarchies, to allow access (to jobs, positions, rights...) for some, and to create conditions of exclusion for others. The game of the state is to make visible the *contentious categories of people* whose names vary with the epoch, but whose structural specificity is to be eventually pointed out as the incarnation of some kind of danger (fifth column, rivals in unfair competitions for jobs, troublemakers in everyday life, etc.)...with the aim of *mobilizing*, on a negative basis, the so called or alleged *insiders* considered as entitled to benefit from their status of citizens in a given national space.

From this angle, the very notion of border, in relation to the rationale of the modern state, has to be reappraised: rather than primarily delimiting a national-state space and separating it from other ones, the border may be perceived, above all, as one of the means used by a state to govern populations by producing divisions and discriminations, by sorting out , parcelling out and categorizing – all these operations reposing not in alleged “natural” realities but, actually, in “*logics*”, that is to say, elements of governmental rationale. Thus, what is effective, in terms of its rationale, is not so much what we usually call “border” - a delineation meant for separating two states - but the interior or internal borders, having at stake the population rather than the territory. The internal or interior borders do not come at all under the same regime of visibility as ordinary borders whose layout or mark is so heavy, especially in Europe, at the time when Benjamin lived.

The specificity of the interior borders - those furtive, non-avowable and unclaimed borders separating categories of the living and not territorial or state entities - is their mobility, their faculty to expand and spread far and wide. This mode or regime of the border could be spotted everywhere: in the prefecture where the refugees and asylum-seekers were queuing for documents which were indispensable for their survival in exile; in the street, where the “illegal” alien was required to show his documents to the policeman who spotted his “peculiar” features or his “exotic” accent; in the department store where the sales clerk

patronized him; in employment agencies where he was discriminated against... And then, while the political situation was degrading and international tensions were rising, everything was accelerating, as if the line of this furtive and surreptitious border had become *thicker* and dramatically visible. Renamed “alien enemies”, the refugees had been rounded up at dawn and driven to different sites openly called *concentration camps* by the authorities. Some time later, as the lifelong anti-Semites came to power - as a consequence of the French defeat - the Jews spotted the newly erected borders separating them from their companions of exile – genuine and real *walls of administrative discriminations*.

In terms of moral, psychic and subjective economy, the system of internal borders that grooves and slashes the body of the population produces very distinct effects: it brings out an anxious, humiliated, distressed and depressed population. This additional *attrition* exercised on this very portion of the population which had already been weakened by its uprooting - the bravest and the most conscious part of the German nation who had refused to comply with the Nazi regime - was a decisive factor or perhaps even the most decisive factor in Benjamin's fate. All the people who met him during these exile years were struck by his depressive state, his radical pessimism and his psychic fragility – a melancholy which often gave way to real waves of despair. For it is well known that depression, melancholy and this form of despair are *illnesses of exile*, constantly stirred up, specially among intellectuals, by the loss of networks of acknowledgment and by the sinking of the possibility of belonging to human society; but also by the multiplication of the obstacles to integration and to restoring basic conditions for intellectual work . Such condition were particularly demanding, in the case of Benjamin who was very sensitive to noise, who could not move away from the Bibliothèque nationale (National

Library) and for whom the loss of his favourite fountain pen had been a major disaster...

This kind of more or less “soft” but stubborn persecution faced by refugees brings about the multiplication of financial and other material problems – every step in everyday life is becoming complicated, much more complicated than for other people. The specificity of this “complication” is twofold: first, it causes very special effects in terms of psychic attrition, and second, it cannot be shared with the *others*, the “natives” for whom this kind of complication does not exist. For an individual like Benjamin, who was completely impractical and unable to “manage” (the refugee being by definition somebody who has to learn how to “manage”, that is to say, to resist the whole administrative and police device meant for making the refugee’s life a misery and how not to succumb to the ordeal of precariousness), for Benjamin, the multiplication of specific complications did turn his everyday life into a perpetual hell and caused a form of permanent depression and exhaustion which increased his original *apraxy* (inability to action) et made him unable to come to a decision – at the very time when political circumstances made it imperative to make decisions. Being a refugee worn down by all the specific devices of the *police of aliens* - immigration police - meant thus being in a kind of open sky prison; the internal borders became to such an extent the fate of the refugee that he internalized them by isolating himself and by reducing to the minimum his communication with the outside – this, once more, according to the pattern of Kafka’s model employee transformed into an insect who locks himself in his bedroom.

This retreat from the common world has its exact equivalent in the intellectual life. Contrary to what one would imagine, the fact that so many of the foremost German intellectuals and artists settled in France, in the thirties, did not bring about *ipso facto* the intensification of debates and exchanges with their French colleagues. Quite the opposite. Benjamin had translated into German the best contemporary French authors; he presented them to the German public (with

greater difficulties after 1933); he met Paul Valéry, Georges Bataille, Roger Caillois, Pierre Klossowski, Jean Paulhan and many other key figures of the intellectual life and the artistic avant-garde of that time; he read and wrote in French as some of his interlocutors read Hegel in the original text. But this does not mean that in his intellectual or editorial collaboration with his partners, Benjamin was on an equal footing with them. Quite the reverse: it seems as if the French intellectuals and the German exiles lived on two different planets, even though they were actually frequenting the same coffee shops, theatres, artistic exhibitions, seminars, anti-fascist committees, etc. Their respective subjectivities, feelings, problematics and interests remained absolutely heterogeneous. Such is the inflexible effect, once more, of the invisible borders: an irremediable distance *within* topographic proximity and in spite of it. Evidence of this phenomenon can be found in Benjamin's correspondence with his *true* and genuine interlocutors, who came from the same intellectual and cultural matrix as himself but who were far away – Adorno, Scholem, Brecht. Thus, it is not through discussion and direct exchange that the intellectual refugee communicated with his partners but through *the letter* – a last-ditch attempt - which often reached its destination after making long and complicated detours, because the refugees were always on the move, and because of political or war circumstances...

Benjamin's correspondence harbours all kinds of remarks and anecdotes which – beyond the usual mockery - show that the French and German intellectuals in exile were not on the same wavelength; this can be seen, for example, in the many allusions to the “Collège international de philosophie” and its leading personalities – Bataille, Caillois, Klossowski...

Thus, the refugee intellectual's problem was not only the deterioration of his social status and the growing precariousness of his everyday life; it was also and maybe above all the fact that he brought along with him his own “world” of thoughts, references, “problems”, linguistic constraints, cultural implicit marks,

etc. – a microcosm whose very peculiarity is that it is *not* “transportable” or transferable as such from one topography to another. In that sense, we can say that the refugee intellectual brought along his borders with himself and thus prepared the conditions for his failure to find his place within the intellectual field into which he was thrown. This constraint - coming from the subject himself - combined with the constraints depending on the bureaucratic state rationale, tended to *manufacture* a character: the refugee as an outsider, who was more or less tolerated. Conversely, we would say that the refugee who succeeded in tearing himself away from his subjective constraints (his original “formatting”) as well as in finding access to the prescribed code of the culture and the institution of intellectual (academic, journalistic...) life of the refugee-society, could succeed in making a very creative symbiosis - as shows the example of Hannah Arendt or even Siegfried Kracauer in the United States, in contrast to Benjamin in France or Adorno in California.

So, having gone over the elements forming the concise picture of “Benjamin in exile”, we begin to see how an answer to our question – Who killed Benjamin? – is taking shape. Obviously, long before the summer of 1940, when the German troops invaded France, the death knell had tolled for this man who was both one of the most clear-sighted observers of the epoch in general and of his time in particular, and completely incapable of drawing the obvious conclusions from his observations and analysis (until the last minute, Benjamin refused to accept the idea that he had to give up working at the Bibliothèque nationale, which was for him some kind of a protective matrix where he felt sheltered from danger). This death “sentence” was rooted in the constant attrition exercised on the refugee by the state’s legal and administrative devices. This means that the question itself has to be rendered “complicated”: instead of the univocal and simplifying “who?” (the answer being Hitler and his henchmen) we should rather use a neuter (“what?”) designing a combination of factors involving a

living machine, a human machine – the state, its bureaucratic routines and “police” logics, and historical circumstances bearing the mark of disaster – the defeat of France and the occupation of its territory by the Nazis.

Benjamin’s death is ascribable not only to the collaboration with the enemy set up by the new French authorities, after the defeat - the adoption of anti-Semitic laws and the internment of anti-Nazis refugees, mostly German and Austrian; it is also ascribable to the very device meant for ascribing special features to the anti-Nazi refugee after Hitler’s seizure of power, in January 1933. The main trait of this device is distinct: it erased any notion of a genuine *political* asylum, as the refugees’ *due*; it denied any kind of *unconditional hospitality* as a *right* owing to the circumstances of their exile.

This description is in accordance with the definition of the catastrophe elaborated by Benjamin during these very years: not so much the disastrous event which unexpectedly disrupts the normal order of things and the course of time in an apocalyptic way; but rather the fact that “things continue as before” piling ruins over ruins - the present as the site of the continuous catastrophe. It is striking how the biographic - subjective (psychological and moral) dimension of Benjamin’s existence in exile can be perfectly superimposed on his diagnosis of his epoch and the contemporary course of History (always moving forward “by the wrong end”). Thus, it is in a *continuous rather than discontinuous* way that this process occurs: deteriorating, downgrading, shrivelling up, weakening the moral and psychological resources of the individual - a process leading to some kind of a *surrender* to the combined forces of Leviathan and Behemoth. Some kind of a stoical death - acceptance of fate’s sentence.

Benjamin’s exile was paved with bureaucratic hindrances and impediments – his failure to obtain the French citizenship being the crucial obstacle. It is quite obvious that had Benjamin become French in 1938, he would have been less desperately viewing the possibility of a new exile in September 1940.

Benjamin's perilous (notably in view of his poor health - for financial reasons, Benjamin could not afford to have his heart condition diagnosed and treated) clandestine border crossing between Cerbère and Port-Bou was the final outcome of the slow manufacturing of a personal existence progressively deprived of its qualifications. A body at bay, left stranded on the French-Spanish border, as Lisa Fittko, his amateur smuggler, very well shows in her memories. In this lonely and despaired end, one can identify the constant biopolitical fracture in contemporary societies and systems of power, separating those who are allegedly included *de jure* from the others –the alien plebs, the suspect outsiders whose condition is necessarily fragile and contentious.

Walter Benjamin' slow killing incites us to question the thanatocratic and thanatopolitical functions of the modern state or, as Foucault says, of the modern powers. We should remember that, for Foucault, this dark side of biopower has basically two faces: atomic genocide and destructive racism. But the issue at stake here does not correspond exactly to a clear-cut category. It was not open racism – an explicit project of eradicating a whole human group designated as harmful and superfluous - which was exerting its wearying power on Benjamin during most of his exile years. It was rather a device intended for selecting some fractions of the population - a “police” meant for sorting out and separating those who, as suspect aliens, were “included” in a discriminatory way, that is to say, “included as excluded”. Benjamin was experiencing low intensity thanatopolitics which would kill people in large numbers only when it would combine with other factors – notably the triumphant invasion of Europe by the Nazi troops. As a rule, this soft thanatopolitics manufactures stunted, shrivelled, prematurely worn out life – the life of these refugees who have the feeling (and rightly so!) of being considered as outcasts rather than guests of a democratic nation. This soft thanatopolitics bred a form of non (qualified) life which was not death but some kind of anxious survival and which, above all, was going to

unveil its mortal potentialities as soon as it would be “connected up” with the extraordinary circumstances of the French defeat and the Occupation. But still, these destructive potentialities are - properly speaking - *infinite*, boundless. It had come to light, then, that, from the refugees’ point of view, the state devices (whether legal, administrative or police devices) that were governing their fate - the republican or democratic form of the political institution (the state designated as republican or democratic) – would not offer them as such any kind of safeguard, so far as their integrity was concerned. The devices set up by the democratic institution could be directly connected with the Nazi exterminating machine. After the defeat of France, the emissaries of the Reich police apparatus came to collect the blacklisted German antifascists - including many Jews - *in the very concentration camps set up by the French authorities during the “Phoney War”*.

Indeed, thanatopolitics, defined as the intentional killing of targeted fractions of the population, appears to be a *permanent potentiality* of modern powers, whatever the label they go under. Once the gesture of sorting out and selecting is rooted at the heart of the modern government, this potentiality exists; and it is a primordial gesture of the exercise of power in modern societies in general, but also of biopolitics, specifically, since it is the most brutal and elementary gesture of the medicine of war and of catastrophes. In our societies, the refugee - the alien in a litigious situation - is constantly and structurally the *object* on which this kind of operation or gesture is operated or tested. It’s a peculiarity of the act of “sorting out” or, in its “terminal” version – of “selecting” (in the Nazi sense of the term) that it instantaneously creates a border that is non material, but still absolutely fateful. Benjamin’s death *on* the French-Spanish border only objectifies the potentially thanatocratic dimension of this gesture in a way that is conventionally designated as *tragic*.

We do not live anymore in the era of the rise of totalitarian powers and of the Nazi barbarity but in the era of democratic globalization and of constructing the European Union, that is to say, in a quite different sequence; and we are in a position to know how stubbornly and constantly the state persists in carrying out these kinds of gesture, in sophisticating them - and this in spite of all that differentiates between our age and the thirties and the forties of the last century. The evidence of this continuity is the transformation of the European community into a “Fortress Europe”, the multiplication of sorting out devices in our societies, intended for categorizing immigrant workers, for stopping and turning them back - whatever the causes and the courses of their migrations. The fact that only a part of these migrants are “asylum-seekers” and, in that sense, comparable to the refugee victims of the Nazi terror, doesn’t make here any difference. What matters is the continuity that manifests itself in the violence of the sorting out devices and in their mortal potentialities: police raids, jailing, detention, deportation of the so-called illegal migrants; the disappearance of hundreds or even thousands of people in the Mediterranean sea among those who try to reach the Italian, the Spanish or the Greek coasts on perilous small craft for the good reason that they cannot expect to get immigration visas (more than 15 000 people have died this way since 1988, according to the website “Fortress Europe”, as quoted by a French specialist, Claire Rodier).

These *missing people* (as is, after all, Benjamin, since his mortal remains have never been located and whose last moments are surrounded by a persistent mystery giving way to the most various interpretations) are the often anonymous and forever silent witnesses of this non-avowable and unpronounceable dimension of contemporary biopolitics; they are the witnesses of the persistent actuality of this historical regime of the catastrophe interwoven into our most ordinary present – they “disappear” day after day, as if they have been vanishing into thin air; they are the witnesses of the most silent of disasters – a catastrophe

which we, the European public, have the greatest difficulty to perceive in its very reality, as purely and simply reality.

More and more admirers of Benjamin converge towards the cenotaph erected in Port-Bou. Facing it is the sea which has become the liquid barrier where the reality of disaster is engulfed together with the bodies of the unlucky migrants. Boats loaded with hundreds of people disappear not far from Sicily, but this disaster does not attain enough “solidity” or “substantiality” to become a *fact* which would raise indignation or shame among the European public. So, we have here a “mental border”, a splitting point that is even more drastic than all these new *walls* erected here and there, in Palestine, between Greece and Turkey; between the United States and Mexico, India and Bangladesh, etc. – at least, these wall have a very obvious materiality; they leave indelible marks and traces, and they can be seen and judged...