

Benjamin's Grave

"He is more spirit than body and as such the site as much as the manner of his death connects us with the most profound form of spiritual warfare, that of state disappearance of people, their torture, and their mass, secret, execution—for which the Spanish border where he killed himself is such a potent reminder, not to mention the camps in Germany and Poland and what is happening with frightening velocity with the new state of emergency we are experiencing with the terror of the War against Terror... Michael Taussig, 'Benjamin's Grave', (2006), Page 26¹



Here now at the (loose) end:
one solitary poem...
(more brother and sister to *that* century's
revolutionary mirage)
the voice of an angel or a dead man
with a million pairs of shoes,
a word-murdered plea surely the size
of a mountain path,
(mouth wide-open maybe
like Munch's scream)

*"In our time, the words of politics
no longer know how to explain
what is happening,
they can not understand nor heal."
Sergio writes later...*

Likewise our own path:
endless as the crime of this single historical day
longer than the dust of the dead it left behind

this memory that drives us now like a whip
to find our past
or bury a future we can't forget

"...the hillside...ablaze with yellow wildflowers",
Taussig writes,

written, somehow, with words,
like nails on a cross,
all the way
to Benjamin's grave.

But there is no grave.

Just like there is neither history nor redemption
nor safety for those who wander
(even if all who wander are not all lost,

"...níl gach uile fhánaí cailte",
PK Murphy wrote,
and then disappeared:
nicht alle, die wandern, gehen verloren!)

And who else died then and disappeared,
keeping you company in this room of your exile,
this room you pace endlessly alone:

1. Ernst Weiss, novelist, poison in his room in Paris, June 15, 1940,
when the Nazis enter the gates.
2. Playwright and poet, Walter Hasenclever, 22 June, 1940, overdose of barbituate
in the concentration camp at Les Milles, not far from the Marseille you just fled.
3. Karl Einstein, writer and anarchist, 5 July, 1940, hanged himself on the Spanish-
French border when he, too, couldn't get across.
4. And, of course...the body of the deputy Muenzenberg, found hanging from a tree
somewhere in Grenoble.²

And what is left:
only our dust at the end of the day
and the dreams of these dead,
a murdered comrade in a *fosa común*³
(instead of a religion)
a mountain walk where our Spanish dead
laugh at us from the ditches,⁴

"All Spain is full of fosas,
'especially the ditches by the side of the roads.'
One fosa is reported to contain
up-wards of five hundred bodies
shot by the Guardia Civil."
Tasussig reads in El Pais

so much of use value with no profit, at this end of days
this law of memory⁵ too late for a renegade mind
another mirage at dusk
falling at our feet?

*"Political subversion
has become the space of the unspeakable..."*
Sergio adds.

*They waken us at dawn, they keep us awake
in the dead of night
they keep waking us with wishes
and books that have never been written
because nothing nowhere can serve as an excuse for dying.*

This is the way, Walter, the way we each
become a figment of the imagination.
In here, where the words are like Kalashnikovs!
or stun grenades, or tear gas
or just plain words, more words
now launched like a suicide bomber
at the door of our despair

*"Don't stay silent!" Orsola writes
"DO NOT STAY SILENT!"*

Here is a street, your one way street
the dead man walks
this dead man who never heard his name called.

*"And one thing, therefore, can never be made good:
having neglected to run away from home"*
Benjamin himself writes.⁶

This is a manifesto for the living,
whose debts can never be repaid,
this bill of sale without goods,
this is a gift to those that have escaped
the teeth and claws of work, of slavery,
of this disease the jailors call life
this life that hardly gave birth to a promise,
not an inch more beyond hope.
This birth pain in bone. Measured in years. Extracted
with cruelty. Its god is either violence or the dark.

*"... the voice of the peoples and movements
...weakened and stammering,
choked by technical and technological perfection ..."*
Sergio, again, with words on fire.

Here, they say, is the train that reaches the border,
for those who escape,
nationality called exit, still there remains in my nose
the smell of gas, this mattress of hair
and buckets of gold teeth to remind the professors:
all our angels have died so don't take yourself so seriously!

*"But always from the word we must start, or re-start.
And today, as always,*

*the one that has greater inherent strength
is the poetic word."*
Sergio.

Now the armoured bulldozers approach and
maybe a few Apache helicopters, the ghetto will fall,
surely, it will fall, this ghetto of our illusions?

*They waken us at dawn, they keep us awake
in the dead of night
they keep waking us with wishes
and books that have never been written
because nothing nowhere can serve as an excuse for dying.*

This angel was sent to remind all who come later:
now we can no longer distinguish the dead
from the killers, the murderers from the dead
and who turned it all, upside down, on its head,
i ask my Israeli friend
("shut up, O, shut-the-fuck-up," they say)
who found your hidden meaning in more words
rented like whores by the hour?

*"Only by
recovering forgotten and subtracted vocabularies,
by rebuilding proper syntax and new
grammars, subversion becomes viable."*
Sergio.

So they sing and sing and sing this song:
*they waken us at dawn, they keep us awake
in the dead of night
they keep waking us with wishes
and books that have never been written
because nothing nowhere can serve as an excuse for dying.*

They sing this song...
for a different time, or comrade or friend,
sadly, somewhere west of our next mirage
called Palestine, or Kurdistan,
a people endlessly cursed with exile
cursed with these fools with their maps only of the grave,
their politics - of poison

*"...only patiently building the places where those vocabularies,
syntax and grammar can inter-change and recognize themselves,
the words will regain...strength,
and practice
ways and paths of transformation."*
Sergio.

Then they go build a monument to you,⁷

Walter.

As if you gave a shit or could, or did you,
meaning, in amid the ruins you described
did you ever learn to care,
or was it too late and is it too late now,
for me and you and this family in ruins
with your missing bones, your son on fire,
with each of us, our longing on loan, or rented
with a world choking with progress, this mountain of ruins
these angels in flight, behind us.

*"What is so hard to understand about Benjamin.
without being a poet
he thought poetically
and therefore was bound to regard the metaphor
as the greatest gift of language."
Hannah Arendt, years later, leaving Portbou behind.*

*They waken us at dawn, they keep us awake
in the dead of night
they keep waking us with wishes
and books that have never been written
because nothing nowhere can serve as an excuse for dying.*

Now the day curves over the hill as if it had the sun on a leash.
This dangerous day that falls *'steep into the sea'*.
The fucking tourists go home and even the dogs lay down
their burdens and yawn
but not us, not those with this job to do, alive or dead,
not those with the future, like a disease in my mind,
like a drug driving us from the herd
like this man without a suitcase burying books in among skulls.
The unwritten book is the one we must need!

That century has passed, or almost, and the world now
is new, is a fragile thing, an angel without its wings shorn,
a book with its pages white and emptied,
a grave with an empty mouth maybe

*"...this feeling...
that secrets like nameless graves lay everywhere ...
Taussig says.*

A briefcase tortured into silence, perhaps?

*So they wake us at dawn, they keep us awake
in the dead of night
they keep waking us with wishes
and books that have never been written
because nothing nowhere can serve as an excuse for dying.*

Even surrounded by these full stomachs, even now,
measured by words, so full, how we fall!
Just like you fell, stumbling at the last, carrying the
mountain on your shoulder, composing this music of despair,
carrying at the end only:

1. your pocket watch and chain,
2. a five-hundred-franc bill,
3. a fifty-dollar bill,
4. a twenty-dollar bill,
5. a passport (numbered 224) issued by the American Foreign Service,
6. a Spanish visa also issued in Marseille,
7. a certificate from the Institute of Social Research, previously of Frankfurt, now in exile in New York and affiliated in some way to Columbia.⁸

*"Benjamin's life after death was his final essay in this regard.
There are no bones we can point to, no honest gravestone,
no embalmed corpse, nor locks of hair."
the professor writes.⁹*

Oh, and somewhere in here:

1. six photographs,
2. a pipe (and its case)
3. and a pair of glasses,
4. an ID card issued in Paris;
5. an X-ray
6. a pair of glasses in nickel frames and its case
7. several letters and newspapers.
8. ...and no manuscript!¹⁰

O, what a drama where the audience failed to show!
Where the audience sat and clapped
a smiling heap of skull and bones.

What more to say - and who cares - and
who will turn up for the breaking of this new day
and what for, if not one more theory
like the 'hot cup in hand'
(Lisa Fittko, 1909-2005,
both survivor and angel of the path,
will say much later)

*"...the woman who took him secretly over the mountain
("...Benjamin and his puzzling ways," Fittko recalled)
across the border so many years ago",
Taussig, (from a glass and metal phone booth in Chicago),
"...the sort of guy who,
as she put it,
even needed instruction
on how to hold a hot cup of tea."*

or this craving
like a question, its philosophy now purchased by fools,
by shopkeepers or traitors, by murderers and fascists,
or else, dear comrades, too much forgotten
meaning the endlessness of the unbearable
the helplessness of each one
the world spinning on its way

"Don't stay silent!"
"DO NOT STAY SILENT!"
Orsola writes, over and over...

as if, finally, our own mothers
had forgotten our name, at birth,
in a carelessness
that no words on a cross can redeem,
no messiah ever return to salvage
this simple act - now, *tovarisch*, with nothing left,
not justice, not memory, instead,
say, this history, lying here with an ice pick
in its skull, instead...
(as if we could begin again

"Homeland is humanity"
Sergio & Orsola and José Martí
together
we now write)

so i ask: kindly, *kindness* make real.

séamas carraher
26 april 2016 - 30 september 2016.

References & Sources (*Thanks to...*)

Pictures

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Sources:

1. *Editorial*, Global Rights Magazine, Number 0, April 2015.
2. *'The Form and Places of Unsuspected Subversion'*, Sergio Segio, Global Rights Magazine, Issue 2
<http://www.globalrights.info/2016/07/the-forms-and-places-of-unsuspected-subversion/>
3. Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968.

References:

¹ Michael Taussig, '**Benjamin's Grave**', The University of Chicago Press, Chicago © 2006 by The University of Chicago.

² Thanks to: Michael Taussig, '*Benjamin's Grave*'

³ "The common grave where even if you were buried at first with a name you end up nameless." (Taussig)

⁴ "'All Spain is full of fosas,'" I later read in Spain's leading newspaper, *El País*, "especially the ditches by the side of the roads." One fosa is reported to contain up-wards of five hundred bodies shot by the Guardia Civil. There is a growing movement connected to the Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory to dis-inter the remains that, as the news item puts it, "have been sixty years awaiting this moment." Michael Taussig, '*Benjamin's Grave*', Page 19.

⁵ The Historical Memory Law (*Ley de Memoria Histórica* or *La Ley por la que se reconocen y amplían derechos y se establecen medidas en favor de quienes padecieron persecución o violencia durante la Guerra Civil y la Dictadura*), is a Spanish law passed by the Congress of Deputies on 31 October 2007... The Historical Memory Law principally recognizes the victims on both sides of the Spanish Civil War, gives rights to the victims and the descendants of victims of the Civil War and the subsequent dictatorship of General Francisco Franco, and formally condemns the Franco Regime.

⁶ Benjamin, Walter, *One Way Street*, Page 49 (NLB, 1979)

⁷ "This was the monument to Benjamin that Tel Aviv artist Dani Karavan had built just outside the cemetery, completed in 1994." Taussig

⁸ Taussig

⁹ <http://anthropology.columbia.edu/people/profile/376>

¹⁰ "In the judge's documentation the dead man's possessions are listed as a suitcase leather, a gold watch, a pipe, a passport issued in Marseilles by the American Foreign Service, six passport photos, an X-ray, a pair of spectacles, various magazines, a number of letters, and a few papers, contents unknown, and some money."

<http://walterbenjaminportbou.cat/en/content/el-darrer-passatge>