



One Way Street

'Franklin Cleaners' - Arnaud Montagad (2018)

Redemption preserves itself in the small crack in the continuum of catastrophe.

Walter Benjamin

A SHORT DISTANCE BEYOND A nondescript cemetery in the Spanish coastal town of Portbou, at the end of a winding path, a stroller will find himself suddenly confronting a most remarkable memorial.

Here, on a cliff high above the blue of the Mediterranean, one can follow a narrow, enclosed passageway pointing down toward the waves below—until suddenly, he finds the way blocked by a thick pane of glass.

Engraved here in German is an epigram: *“It is more arduous to honor the memory of anonymous beings than that of the renowned. The construction of history is consecrated to the memory of the nameless”*—the words of German philosopher Walter Benjamin, who spent his final hours at a local hotel in 1940.

The memorial is named ‘Passages’ in honor of Benjamin’s lost, unfinished masterwork, *Passagenwerk (The Arcades Project)*—as well as in remembrance of his passage from France to Spain on his doomed escape from the Nazis. (Benjamin’s unmarked grave is in the nearby cemetery.)

Walter Benjamin was born on July 15th, 1892 to a wealthy family of Ashkenazi Jews in the Berlin of the German Empire.

Plagued with fragile health as a child, at the age of 13 Benjamin was sent to a boarding school in the German countryside. He resumed his education in 1907 in Berlin, and later studied philosophy at the Universities of Freiburg and Berlin.

Benjamin volunteered for service at the outbreak of World War I but was rejected—later, ironically, having a change of heart and feigning illness to avoid conscription.

In 1915, he continued his studies at the University of Munich, where he met the poet Rainer Maria Rilke. In 1917, he moved to Switzerland and attended the University of Bern, where he met and married Dora Pollak, with whom he fathered a son.

Benjamin earned his Ph.D in 1919, writing his dissertation on art criticism, but unable to find work, returned with his family to Berlin. In 1926, he secured a job writing articles for literary newspapers.

An eclectic thinker, Benjamin made influential contributions to aesthetic theory, philosophy, and literary and social criticism. But, like the nondescript 1920s subject of the Woody Allen film, *Zelig*, he played an even more important role as an observer, chronicling the transition from modernism to post-modernism in Europe through his close association with many luminaries of the period—including Kurt Gödel, Bertolt Brecht, Martin Buber, Ernst Bloch, Charles Baudelaire, Theodore Adorno, Marcel Proust, and various other members of the interwar intelligentsia of Berlin and Paris.

In 1927, Benjamin began work on *Das Passagenwerk (The Arcades Project)*, a study of 19th century life in Paris, as viewed through the iron-and-glass covered walkways famous for *flânerie* (or casual strolling and people-watching). Intended as a small article that he would finish in a few weeks, the project became an obsession, one he ultimately perceived to represent his most important creative accomplishment.

That same year, he considered taking up a friend's offer to help him emigrate to Palestine, but fatefully, he declined.

The following year Benjamin published *Einbahnstraße (One-Way Street)*, a rambling, ground-breaking collage of brief 'meditations' from his newspaper articles.

In 1932, during the political turmoil that accompanied Hitler's rise to power, Benjamin—now divorced—left Germany, living for a brief period in Ibiza and Nice.

Hitler was elected Chancellor of Germany the following year, intensifying the Nazi Party's violent persecution of German Jews. Stripped of his citizenship, Benjamin was exiled to Paris, where he befriended Hannah Arendt, Hermann Hesse, and other German refugee artists, writers, and intellectuals.

Arrested by the Vichy government, he spent three months in a prison camp in Burgundy. After his release, Benjamin returned to Paris, fleeing with his sister to Lourdes on June 13, 1940, only a day before the Nazis stormed his flat to arrest him.

After an unsuccessful attempt to escape via a freighter from Marseille, Benjamin obtained a visa to enter the U.S. through a friend, and he and a small group of refugees travelled by foot over the Pyrenees to the Spanish coast, hoping to board a ship bound for London, to ultimately reach America.

But unexpectedly, the Franco government abruptly cancelled all travel visas shortly before their arrival at the Hotel de Farnancia in Portbou on September 25th. Betrayed by the owner of the hotel and informed that he would be deported back to France and turned over to the Nazis the following day, the 48-year old Benjamin apparently committed suicide late that night in his hotel room, deliberately overdosing on painkillers.

Tragically, the other members of his party were granted passage the following morning, probably due in part to the shocking effect of Benjamin's suicide in the small Spanish town, and all safely escaped to London.

Benjamin left a brief, hastily written note, concluding, "In a situation with no escape, I have no other choice but to finish it all." ■