

Landscapes OF THE IMAGINATION

MICHAEL EAUDE

CATALONIA

A CULTURAL HISTORY



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A CULTURAL HISTORY

Michael Eaude

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

2008

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Published by Oxford University Press, Inc.

198 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016

www.oup.com

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Co-published in Great Britain by Signal Books

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Eaude, Michael.

Catalonia : a cultural history / Michael Eaude.

p. cm. —(Landscapes of the imagination)

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-19-532797-7

1. Catalonia (Spain)—Civilization I. Title.

DP302.C616E38 2007

946'.7—dc22 2007005776

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America
on acid-free paper

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Preface and Acknowledgements

I first became aware of Catalonia as a country that had a specific identity apart from Spain on 9 April 1973. The moment is fixed in my mind. I had gone to see Antoni Turull, Lecturer in the Spanish Department at Bristol University, with a view to attending his course on Cuban literature. This was our first meeting. Antoni, white hair straggling to his shoulders though he was only forty, greeted me with what I came to know as his characteristic warm extravagance: "Our great Picasso is dead." That day I was made aware of three things: that Catalonia was a nation; that Catalans could legitimately claim Picasso as a wonderful adopted son; and that Catalan was a rich language and taught in some British universities, such as Bristol. Antoni was one of those pioneer teachers. He continued trying to educate my ignorance on our occasional meetings until his early death in January 1990.

I am grateful, too, to my other early Catalan friends, Rosa Blanch and Toni Tulla, whose mother and then sister, Assumpció, ran the beautiful, old-fashioned chess bar, the Oro negro, in Barcelona's Carrer Aribau. Rosa and Toni kindly had me to stay in Barcelona on several occasions, including stressful weeks towards the very end of the dictatorship. Then activists in what was quite the best of the Catalan radical groups, the LCR, "la Lliga", they explained Catalan politics to me and introduced me to *embotits* and the beautiful music of Lluís Llach. The sound of 1975 and the death of Franco are captured for me in Llach's intimate and soaring voice singing that allusive political anthem, *Voyage to Ithaca: Més lluny, sempre molt més lluny. . . Further, always much further on. . .*

I would like to thank, too, the following who generously helped me on specific questions concerned with this book: Andy Durgan, Jude Egan, David C. Hall, Stephen Hayward, Vicky Hayward, Carol O'Brien, John Payne, Gabriel Sempill, Paddy Woodworth and Simon Wynne-Hughes. All errors are, of course, my fault and responsibility.

I am particularly grateful to Marisa Asensio, who encouraged me and is responsible for most of the photographs.

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Introduction

Thoroughfare and Nation

Many foreigners visit Catalonia today for art. Its capital, Barcelona, has risen in the last twenty years to stand alongside Venice or Paris as one of Europe's great destinations for cultural breaks. Catalonia's architecture, combining medieval Romanesque and twentieth-century Art Nouveau, is an experience difficult to find elsewhere. And Salvador Dalí, despite his complexity and sexual explicitness, is an extremely accessible and popular painter.

Architecture and painting give Catalonia its prestige. Most visitors, though, come for cheap alcohol and sun holidays. Millions are drawn to the coastal beaches and towns. More Britons know the Costa Brava than Paris or Rome. A linked attraction today is the reputation of Catalonia as a place to live well, with great bars in the beautiful surrounds of Barcelona's Born, *mestissa* music, famous and original food. It is the modern version of the Latin poet Martial's dream of Tarragona: here we know how to live, not too hot, not too cold, with sea and mountains, working hard yet knowing how to relax. . .

Catalans often refer to their own country as a *terra de pas*, a place people pass through, a thoroughfare. It is a comforting view of the homeland. It implies that they are open, a mix, with people passing through down the centuries, each leaving their traces behind. This feeling of being a *terra de pas* is represented most dramatically by Josep Maria Sert's startling paintings in the cathedral of Vic, Catalonia's religious capital, of pagan Hannibal's elephants, which passed through 2,200 years ago. It is also reflected in the melting-pot of Catalan food, fusing Italian, French and Spanish styles into an original cuisine.



Catalans counterpose the *terra de pas* to more fundamentalist views of identity, such as that in the Basque Country, often evoked as moulded by remote valleys uncontaminated by outsiders; or of the fierce Castilian tableland in the centre of Spain, freezing in winter and scorched in summer.

There is little genetic nationalist pride in Catalonia; all those who live and work in Catalonia, and ran the slogan of Jordi Pujol, Catalonia's first elected post-Franco president, are Catalans. The Catalan language is the distinguishing feature of Catalan nationalism, and anyone who comes and lives here can and should learn the language. Thus the definition of Catalonia as a *terra de pas* is transferred easily into a complacent modern view of an easy and hospitable people welcoming newcomers into a tolerant, liberal country. The *terra de pas* also implies that the country is a *terra d'acolliment*, a land of welcome.

The story, of course, is never as simple as people's views of their best selves. Africans and Asians today, picking fruit in Lleida for two scorched months a year, do not feel welcomed, but exploited. Many of the migrants to Catalonia, driven off the land by famine in other parts of Spain during the twentieth century, did not feel that working for rock-bottom wages in a Catalan factory was much of a welcome. Nevertheless, signalling the strength of Catalan identity, and to the credit of both the migrants and indigenous Catalans, in the 1960s and 1970s they united in a huge movement of unions and residents' associations against the dictator Franco. The immigrants recognized the justice of the demand for Catalonia's national rights.

There is another side to the *terra de pas*, chillingly posed by Claudio Magris, writing about Romania: "The evil is that of having too much history, being a crossroads, or at least an optional stop on the route of universal history, along which the slaughterhouses work overtime even in the minor centres." This certainly applies to Catalonia, the minor centre squeezed between two major states, France and Spain. The violence of its history can be envisaged dramatically on the great hill on which the cathedral of Catalonia's main inland city, Lleida, is built. Around the cathedral still lies the crushed

rubble where the old town was destroyed after Spanish conquest in 1714 and the citadel of the occupiers was raised. Then this latter was itself sacked by French invasion in 1810.

Present-day Catalonia's peaceful feel and the apparent calm and sense of its people belie this particularly violent and bloody history. Its repeated attempts and failure to become an independent nation state have led to wars and centuries of suppression, culminating in the ten-week siege of Barcelona in 1714 and subsequent suppression of all national rights, and in Franco's attempt to wipe out Catalan identity after 1939.

From the nineteenth century onwards Catalonia's industrial revolution made it the richest and most developed part of the Spanish state, leading also to the world's biggest anarchist movement and, in 1936, to what Andreu Nin called "a deeper revolution than Russia in 1917". Much of this book will examine the great artists whom modern Catalonia has produced, but none of them can be understood without reference to these linked struggles: the fight of an oppressed nation for its national rights and the fight of a militant working class for social justice.

The 1936 revolution attracted George Orwell to Barcelona. His classic, *Homage to Catalonia*, a hymn to socialist revolution, has done more than any other book to make English-speakers aware of Catalonia. No-one actually wants to experience a revolution on their holidays, but it is fascinating to reflect in Barcelona's comfort on the idealism and conflict of the 1930s.



The book is divided into three sections. It starts at the frontier town of Portbou, a *terra de pas* and a good place for a monument that reminds us of the slaughterhouses of history. The description of Portbou goes back (with Stephen Spender) to the Spanish Civil War, an event that still stirs many visitors to Catalonia, and (with Walter Benjamin) to the post-war period that still underlies Catalan politics today. The 1939 victor of that war, Francisco Franco, ruled Spain until 1975, long after his contemporaries and sponsors, Hitler and Mussolini, had died

violently. I return to the Civil War in later chapters, but the first section goes on to look at Catalonia's history: its Greek and Roman prehistory, seen as marks in the sand at lonely Empúries and in its glory in imperial Tarragona; then the birth of Catalan as a written language and of Catalonia as an independent state in the Pyrenees about 1,000 years ago, at much the same time as other European states were emerging. The Romanesque churches of the mountain valleys, Catalonia's first indigenous architectural style, flourished at this time. It dwells then on Catalonia's imperial conquests in the Mediterranean in the fourteenth century, when the Catalan flag flew on Athens' Parthenon for seventy years. Accompanying this imperial expansion, a literature flowered: chronicles, poetry, philosophy and one of the first modern novels, Joanot Martorell's *Tirant lo Blanch*.

Catalonia's defeats at the hand of Spanish forces in the 1640s and especially in 1714 are still seared into the minds of modern Catalans. Their rights were suppressed, their language banned, their wealth reduced. The most interesting period follows: the Catalan renaissance in politics, art and language of the second part of the nineteenth century, coinciding with its industrial revolution. When Catalans talk of the *renaixença*, they are talking of this proud rebirth, not the post-medieval period we think of as the Italian Renaissance. The *renaixença* laid the basis for the painting and architecture that has made Catalonia's capital, Barcelona, one of the world's art-tourism capitals. This story is told by chapters on Catalonia's national poet, the priest Jacint Verdaguer, and on its most famous architect, Antoni Gaudí, both sponsored by wealthy industrialists.

The middle section of the book tackles directly the famous twentieth-century visual artists of Catalonia, all deeply attached to their local landscapes: Gaudí from the southern town of Reus, the painters Ramon Casas and Santiago Rusiñol at Sitges, Picasso (whose passage through Barcelona's slums was so fertile), Salvador Dalí from Figueres and Joan Miró, who settled near Reus at Montroig. The last chapter of the second section looks at music, an important component of Catalan culture, and focuses on Raimon, the most influential of the *cantautors* (singer-songwriters) who revolutionized Catalan culture and politics in the 1960s and 1970s.

The third and last part discusses Catalonia in the twentieth century: Barcelona's *barrio chino* (Chinatown), made famous by Jean Genet and other French lovers of low-life, the Ramblas and Gothic Quarter, one of Europe's finest ensembles of medieval buildings, along with the city's outlying suburbs where most people actually live. Chapters cover mass tourism, whose infrastructures have ravaged the beautiful Costa Brava; Catalonia's unique anarchist-led workers' movement and the Civil War that destroyed it; Catalan food, closely linked to its long coastline and mountains, and suddenly world-famous in the last decade; and FC Barcelona, 2006 European soccer champions and, historically, a repository of Catalan nationalist aspirations. The last section covers, too, the inland orchard on the plain around Lleida, and Catalonia's great river, the Ebro, site of the Civil War's longest and most terrible battle in 1938. The Ebro ends in the unique landscape of its large though shrinking delta, the flat antithesis to the Pyrenees.

It is a source of lament to Catalans that many foreign visitors who know that they are in Barcelona, Salou or Lloret think that they are just in Spain. They may not realize they are in Catalonia at all. This book aims to contribute in a small way to explaining an unusual, stateless country. A *terra de pas* for tourists does not have to be a place we know nothing about.



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Part One

Birth and Rebirth of a Nation

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Chapter One

Portbou and Montserrat: Sea and Mountain

Portbou is the first town in Spain, if you are approaching from the South of France. From Cerbère on the French side, the train rumbles through a long tunnel into an enormous station with a roof of pale cast-iron beams arching over the platforms. This Euston-like structure looks so metropolitan that, if you woke suddenly and glanced out of the window, you might think you had already reached Barcelona.

Ghost Town

It has always been a strange place, this gateway to Spain accustomed to its name on the destination boards of railway stations in Paris, Milan and Geneva. Because of the wider gauge with which the Spanish railway system was built—to prevent invasion by train from France—Portbou was not just a stop on the line, but a destination where the train halted. Everyone had to change.



It is not just an evocative name for travellers from abroad, but within Catalonia too. Josep Pla (1897-1981), the most officially “boosted” writer of twentieth-century Catalonia (and despite his being so “official” one of the best), expressed a general feeling: “Port-Bou has been, in the lives of many of us, a magic word with many different meanings: the illusion of leaving or the sadness of leaving, delight in return or regret at returning.”

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s the emigrants fleeing the hunger of Franco’s Spain with their knotted bundles and string-tied cardboard suitcases for jobs in German factories had to file through the enormous customs hall and have their hard-acquired passport scrutinized. Juan Goytisolo remembered it then:

The station was a shabby, inhospitable place, with a strictly military air: the traces of a recent past were still to be seen: barbed wire, sentry boxes, forts, protective sanitary cordon, fear of guerrillas filtering in, omnipresent police: grey caps, military stripes, three-cornered hats, sinister offices, corridors with benches for waiting on.

Portbou is the first, or last, town in Spain, but not in Catalonia, for French Catalonia—Roussillon—adjoins Spain to the north. The Pyrenees seem like the natural border between Spain and France, making Spain for most Europeans a homogeneous near-island south of the mountain range. History, though, has worked against geography, for both the Basque Country on the Atlantic coast and Catalonia on the Mediterranean are partly in Spain and partly in France. The French state has succeeded in imposing a uniform, centralized model, to the envy of Spanish nationalists. Spain, despite centuries of autocratic monarchy and even, on occasions, open warfare against Catalonia, is not at all homogeneous and has signally failed to suppress its several minority nationalities.

Portbou today is a ghost town. If you get off here, by the time the train has disappeared into another tunnel, you are likely to be the only person on the platform, alone beside the huge Customs offices, canteen and the 26-track-wide marshalling yards crammed onto a narrow plateau. A surrealist dream: just one passenger in an empty station. It is not surprising that French art critic and sex memoirist Catherine Millet

found the platform a good place to be photographed naked, though not easy to see how she could satisfy her exhibitionism where so few spectators are to be found.

Portbou seems especially ghostly on a day that the *tramuntana*, the cross-mountain north wind that blows for a sixth of the year, keeps everyone indoors. The steep streets leading from the station down toward the sea are pot-holed; the steps where the terrain is too steep for streets, crumbling. The church, built of the same off-white stone blocks as the railway offices, is locked. The Hotel i Restaurant Portbou in the main square is now given over to seagulls and feral cats. Window-panes are broken, doors on the balconies have fallen in, shutters bang as reminders of a busier past. There has been no vandalism. It is just that when the European Union opened its internal frontiers in 1992, most of the custom agencies closed and 500 people went with them. On the front, an old man told me: "We lost a frontier and gained a town. This place was a mad-house before. Now it's peaceful." "It's peaceful alright," his friend laughed, "because it's going nowhere."

It is not only the opening of the frontier and closure of the customs agencies that have depressed Portbou. The steady shift over the last decades from rail to road has also contributed to its decline. La Jonquera, the frontier-town on the inland motorway pass over the Pyrenees, is busier than ever, with its lorry-parks full of juggernauts that haul fruit from Murcia and Valencia to Northern Europe, while their drivers doze in the cabs or the decidedly non-tourist hotels. At weekends up to 3,500 trucks fill La Jonquera's parking-lots, as French law stops them driving. In addition, the town's half mile-long high street is packed with wholesalers from France filling their vans with cheap wine and spirits. Common prices have still not reached the Common Market. As if to symbolize the mercantile nature of this new frontierless Common Market, in which goods and white tourists pass freely while black people are still routinely stopped and searched, La Jonquera's main multi-storey customs agency has been converted into what is reputedly the biggest brothel in Spain. The women who work there are the new slaves, mostly paperless Romanians working off the "debts" they acquired for their trip to Western Europe.

Portbou inhabits another world: a side-entrance into Spain, a town of no more than 1,500 people huddled between the mountains and a

small bay. Inland, scruffy and low round-topped Mediterranean pines are the only trees that cling to the steep slopes of scrub and broken, black rock. Portbou is where the jagged end of the Pyrenees drops into the sea. Bare rock is part of the Spanish countryside, hardly seen in England, which is dressed demurely with trees and grass. It is part of the eternal attraction of Spain to foreign travellers. English novelist James G. Ballard, modern master of the power of landscape on the human mind, said: "Mountainous Catalonia is a dramatic landscape close to the central nervous system: what English meadows and rolling hills aren't." Around Portbou black cliffs rise straight up from tiny coves. Everywhere you look inland from the village, the splintered rock climbs into the low clouds. Here the Costa Brava really earns its name: the Rugged Coast.

It is well worth getting off the train, for Portbou boasts a formidable work of art that takes full advantage of this wild coast. Most of the town is shut up out of season, consisting of holiday flats for Barcelonans. The few shops round the waterfront are living off the last gasps of cross-border traffic, selling to the French cheap tobacco, perfumes and alcohol (mainly appallingly bad, cheap whisky in five-litre bottles).

Stephen Spender's Divided Heart

Portbou does not have the space of Lloret, Platja d'Aro, Blanes, Calella and other notorious names of the Costa Brava package holiday boom, and is undeveloped. Fishing-boats are still pulled up on the beach. It is not even especially picturesque. The narrowness of the bay, the grey shale and pebbles of its beach, and its remoteness have ensured its peace. If it wasn't for the wind and the lowering hills that mean the sun sets too early, it could have become a very pleasant secluded resort for the rich: not unlike Cadaqués just down the coast (see Chapter Nine).

The village covers the slope from the railway down to a little bay. An ox horn-shaped bay, thus the name perhaps, *bou* in Catalan meaning ox, though it is as likely to refer to the technique of fishing off a small boat with a long line, also called *bou*. If the name is known other than by train-passengers creeping under the edge of the Pyrenees, it is for Stephen Spender's poem "Port Bou". Spender spent his first day in Spain here, in February 1937. He had come to serve as an ambulance-man on the Republican side in the Civil War, but despite his new and public commitment to the Communist Party he was in private profoundly

uncertain of what he was up to.

In his autobiographical *World within World* (1951) Spender recalls how he sat on the parapet above the pebble beach and answered—or failed to answer adequately, which is the theme of his poem—a lorry-load of militiamen, “smiling flag-like faces like one face” eager for war news. “Port Bou” describes how:

...the earth-and-rock arms of this small harbour
Embrace but do not encircle the sea
Which, through a gap, vibrates into the ocean,
Where dolphins swim and liners throb.

That is just how Portbou’s small, natural bay is. In the carefully structured poem Spender makes the circling bay that does not quite close correspond to his “circling arms” around a newspaper and to his failure to connect with the militiamen who ask him for news, but are unable to read the French paper held out to them or to understand Spender’s words.

The image of Spender and the smiling militiamen, still waving as the lorry jerks away, is reminiscent of another famous Civil War encounter. On the very first page of *Homage to Catalonia* (1938), George Orwell is deeply moved by an Italian militiaman he meets by chance in the POUM’s Lenin Barracks in Barcelona. The Italian gripped Orwell warmly by the hand, though neither spoke each other’s language. Orwell wrote later, in 1943, of this as one of his two basic memories of the Civil War: “This man’s face, which I saw only for a minute or two, remains with me as a sort of visual reminder of what the war was really about. He symbolizes for me the flower of the European working-class, harried by the police of all countries...”

These two Englishmen meeting militia on their first day in Catalonia are both honest in their different ways. Whereas Orwell’s powerful, romantic and revolutionary vision is expressed with a decisive hand-shake, Spender’s doubt is reflected by his inability to connect with the militia. Orwell’s book has done more than anything or anyone else to make the name of Catalonia known to English speakers. Its description of the anarchist revolution that erupted in 1936 has associated Catalonia with red politics to this day, even though the sympathies of

most visitors are more likely to lie with Spender's ambivalent liberalism. Indeed, Spender's Civil War poems are outstanding precisely because, avoiding Stalinist panegyrics about the working class, he expressed this ambivalence.

Spender's intensely personal poem continues with the militiamen driving out to the Portbou headlands, where the circling arms of the bay nearly meet. They start target practice.

I assure myself the shooting is only for practice
But I am the coward of cowards. The machine-gun stitches
My intestines with a needle, back and forth;
The solitary, spasmodic, white puffs from the carbines
Draw fear in white threads back and forth through my body.

The machine-gun bullets close the circle. The connection made is not a frank hand-shake, but rather the fear of the lanky Englishman watching from the parapet above the beach. This poem about doubt and cowardice seems brave today; in the middle of a war where a pose of public heroism was demanded, Spender remains in his poetry true to his "divided heart", giving an anti-heroic response to the Civil War.

Trapped: Walter Benjamin's Last Night

The parapet and "the childish headlands of Port Bou" are still there. Indeed, Portbou must be the least changed of any town on the Costa Brava in the last sixty years. By sitting on the wall above the beach, visitors can have the rare pleasure of reading a fine poem in the precise geographical position described. But there is no mention of Spender today in Portbou. All the leaflets in the hotels, shops and Town Hall concern another literary figure, the German philosopher Walter Benjamin. Benjamin, along with the cheap whisky, has become the town's minor industry. Just as down the coast, at L'Escala, they sell Spain's best anchovies, here they sell Benjamin and Spain's best anti-fascist monument.

Like Spender, Benjamin spent just one day at Portbou; but unlike Spender, who lived a long and prosperous life, Benjamin had the ill fortune to die there, and his name was thus linked forever to an obscure border town. Fleeing the Gestapo in 1940, Benjamin crossed the

Pyrenees on foot from Vichy France. Three years later than Spender, he was greeted by no smiling militiamen full of the optimism of the still unlost war, but by those fearsome victors of the war and patrollers of rural Spain, the Civil Guard with their polished three-cornered hats. With his two chance travelling companions, Henny Gurland (later wife of Benjamin's colleague, Erich Fromm) and her teenage son, Benjamin took a room at the Fonda de Francia for the night of 25 September 1940.

The three applied for permission to cross Spain to Lisbon, from where Benjamin intended to embark for the United States to meet up with his colleagues of the Frankfurt Institute of Sociology, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, already safe in New York exile. Though Benjamin and his fellow refugees had a transit visa for Spain, they were trapped by having no exit visa from France. Unknown to them, just the day before—one more link in this unfolding chain of ill luck—Spain had agreed with Germany not to allow people into the country who had their papers not fully in order. The three were told they would be returned to France the following day. Three policemen guarded the group in the hotel that night. It was Benjamin's bad luck that the hotelier Juan Suñer was a fascist. The police and Gestapo—who at this time, after the fall of France, openly wandered through this border town in uniform, even though Spain was neutral—habitually drank there, a presence that could hardly have eased Benjamin's terror on the last night of his life.

On reaching the Fonda de Francia (now the Fonda Internacional) Benjamin, who suffered from a number of ailments, including angina, and had just made a strenuous seven- or nine-hour (accounts vary) journey on foot cross-country through the Pyrenean foothills, felt ill and had a doctor called. According to Henny Gurland, Benjamin told her he took morphine after this medical visit. There is no reason to doubt her, though otherwise the evidence of suicide is circumstantial. No autopsy was conducted and the death certificate recorded "cerebral haemorrhage". Bertolt Brecht summed up the desolation of his friend Benjamin's death in a concise couplet:

Then at last, brought up against an impassable frontier
You passed, they say, a passable one.

In a savage twist of fate, Henny Gurland and her son were granted permission to travel on to Lisbon the day after Benjamin died. Perhaps he would have had a visa, too, or perhaps it was the shock of Benjamin's death that moved the authorities to waive the new ruling. Certainly they had nothing against Benjamin: they had registered him by a bureaucratic error as Señor Benjamin Walter. Benjamin is a common Spanish first name; he had not been identified as a Jew or a famous German Marxist.

Walter Benjamin, Jewish atheist, was interred in a niche of the Catholic cemetery at Portbou. Because of the Second World War no family or friends came to collect his remains or renew the rental on the niche. As is customary in such cases, after five years the niche was cleaned and re-let, and his bones thrown into the ossuary. With its white-washed walls and cypresses, Portbou's classic Mediterranean hill-top cemetery, overlooking the sea and black cliffs and surrounded by twisted prickly pears, is the most beautiful part of this ugly town. In autumn soft red fruits can be pulled gently from among the piercing prickles of the cactus, sweet trophies to reward patient picking. The beauty of the cemetery hillside is not smooth or delicate. This is, remember, the Costa Brava, with days on end of fierce seas and winds that drive the inhabitants, as the saying goes, "either mad or taciturn".

With the approach of the 1992 centenary of Benjamin's birth—coinciding with the opening of Europe's internal borders under the Schengen agreement—a memorial was commissioned from the Israeli artist Dani Karavan "in memory of Walter Benjamin and the European exiles of 1933 to 1945". The scheme was co-funded by the German government and the government of Catalonia.

Though statues of General Franco still abound in Spain, there are few official anti-fascist monuments. Two of the very best are in Catalonia: one in Barcelona at the quarry site of executions behind the Montjuïc mountain and Karavan's at Portbou, finished in 1994. Karavan's piece of landscape art, called *Passages*, took full advantage of the cemetery's setting. Outside its main gate he had a rusted iron corridor drilled down at a 45-degree angle through the cliff. Stepping down the corridor through the rock, the only thing visible below at the end of the dark tunnel is the turbulent sea. In this low corridor you feel as trapped as Benjamin. Then the corridor's roof ends and a sudden marvellous view opens of the sea (that ocean outside the harbour encircled

by the bull's horns) and the hills across the bay. Thick glass, invisible from higher up, stops you stepping off the cliff into the waves. On this glass is cut, in German, Catalan and Castilian, famous words of Benjamin's:

It is a more arduous task to honour the memory of the anonymous than that of the famous. Historical construction is consecrated to the memory of those who have no name.

The monument is a direct and militant use of art that is uncommon today. Not ironic and not self-observing, it harks back to the internationalist spirit of the 1930s. It can be weighed against Spender's more ambivalent view of the world, and indeed against the complex philosophy of Benjamin himself.

Apart from the corridor, there are three other component parts of Karavan's memorial, which surrounds, without entering, the cemetery. The water swirling hypnotically in and out of the rocks, seen by the visitor stepping down the rusty corridor, forms a second part. By the front gate of the cemetery an olive tree has been planted. And on the hill overlooking the cemetery a large platform with an empty plinth has been placed. The platform, made of the same simple hard rusted metal as the corridor through the cliff, is brilliantly simple, its sharp rectangular lines set boldly in the dramatic setting. The plinth faces the mountain, just as the corridor faces the sea.

On the memorial slab to Walter Benjamin inside the cemetery is carved his most famous aphorism: "There is no document of civilization that is not at the same time a document of barbarism." The aphorism is famous partly because it is not immediately clear what it means, though it certainly sounds good. Nevertheless, the context of the quote does clarify its meaning. Benjamin is explaining that all those who paid money for what we think of as the great achievements of our civilizations were barbarians. For barbarians, read generals, statesmen and ruthless businessmen, who did not care a fig for culture, except for how it could immortalize their names. We will meet some of these in the form of the industrialists who had made their money out of slavery and financed the *modernista* architecture that is one of Catalonia's claims to fame (see Chapter Six).

Benjamin was a man obsessed by history. Indeed, it is often asserted that the lost contents of the suitcase he carried with him over the Pyrenees were his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*. For him, as for Adorno and other members of the Frankfurt School, history was dark. He probably needed no profound analysis to reach this conclusion; the circumstances of his life as a wanderer and then as an exile from Nazism were sufficient. Yet (unlike Adorno) he was not a pessimist. He encouraged his readers to fight constantly over the interpretation of history because if the ruling class's version prevailed, it would consolidate in the present, in each new generation, the unjust power of that class. Thus he coined a beautiful phrase, in the same paragraph as the quote above, that historians should seek to “brush history *against the grain*.”

Historians should tell the story of those who have no name or an unofficial story, which is usually the history of how history is falsified. Despite Benjamin's growing fame, which has turned Portbou into a site of pilgrimage, the poignant destiny of his salt-bleached bones in the ossuary makes him an apt representative of nameless victims.

Official Catalonia is fond of over-promoting its great figures, its “universal Catalans”, rather than let them stand by themselves. And they certainly could stand by themselves: Gaudí, Casals, Picasso, Miró, Dalí are towering figures of modern art. Over-promotion is a tic characteristic of a small nation having to fight for its identity. To some extent Benjamin has become a posthumous victim of this mythologizing, despite his tenuous relationship with the country. Few people could tell you anything he had to say, but he adds to the general aura of leftist victims of oppression that is part of modern Catalonia's view of itself.

The emotion associated with Benjamin for Catalans is that his death at Portbou took place when Catalonia was buried under the barbed wire that the earlier quote from Goytisolo refers to. Its freedoms had been crushed by the victory of fascism in the Civil War of 1939, the same wave of fascist victories in Europe that led to Benjamin's death. Catalan President Lluís Companys, the only democratically elected president of a European country to be executed in these dark years, was shot at Montjuïc only a few days after Benjamin's death.

Dark Lady of the Mountains: Montserrat

If Catalonia is coast, it is also mountain. If it is famous for its revolu-