

amount of morphine, which he claimed to have won as a gambling debt. He was ill with heart and nervous problems. So far as is known he wrote no new descriptions of the city.

In 1940 Marseille was filled with exiles and refugees of all nationalities, but particularly those on the run from countries now occupied by the Nazis. Many had left Germany and Eastern Europe for France in the 1930s, and with the collapse of France were now trapped in the unoccupied zone, unable to move further. The port of Marseille was virtually closed, visas and exit permits no longer obtainable except by bribery, the Vichy police had instructions to round up suspected refugees and hand them over to the Nazis. There were also in Marseille numbers of French intellectuals and artists, considered as undesirable by the Nazis, such as Andre Breton, Andre Gide, Marcel Duchamp, Victor Serge, Claude Levi-Strauss. For a very short period, and for the most desperate of reasons, Marseille, usually scorned for its lack of cultural life, became the intellectual centre of Europe.

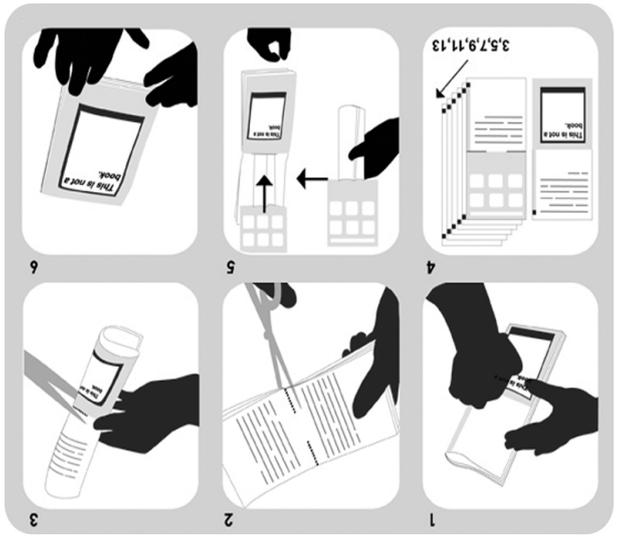
Many of these intellectuals were unable to adapt to a life on the run, and had no idea how to cope with the illegal tricks now needed. They often had

Marseille becomes the melancholic contemporary city, part urban part rural, which would later become a background for the typical Marseille thriller. Only the gangsters in their raincoats, engaged in some doomed struggle with corrupt policemen, are missing. Benjamin later wrote one further work on Marseille, a work of fiction called *Myslowitz-Braunschweig-Marseille*. His earlier writings are collaged together, sometimes re-using whole sentences and paragraphs, to produce a story of a man wandering in Marseille, taking hashish, losing his identity, and missing out on making a fortune. In a play on words brought on by the drug, the man imagines himself 'braun und schweigend', brown and silent, no longer a white talkative German but a taciturn foreigner. Benjamin appears to be testing out an idea which he might later carry into practice. In 1940 Benjamin fled from Paris to Marseille, hoping to be able to escape out of France to the USA, away from the German armies which threatened all Jews, and all those of the left. He had an entrance visa for the USA but no exit visa from France, and little hope of obtaining one. He spent a month in the city, carrying a large

Marseille Mix: withstanding the gaze

William Firebrace





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He was really nobody much, quite an undistinguished man. After a couple of smokes, he was fond of jokes, rather foolish jokes.

He must have had some sign of being so learned.

He couldn't even speak French properly, he had strong accent. I thought it was a middle eastern accent, because that was what he was, a Levantine, but maybe it was something else, maybe it was German. Everyone here has some kind of accent, everyone here comes from somewhere else, somewhere they have tried to forget but which remains with them in their pronunciation, this they can never lose.

And you?

Ah, and me. I am Marseillais.

Sparrow met the Anne Belant by chance outside her apartment in the Rue d'Aubagne. She was an old lady and having trouble carrying her shopping, and Sparrow had helped her carry it upstairs. She lived in a small dark apartment on the third floor, charming enough if rather dirty and uncared for. Anne Belant was lonely and liked to chat. She was a little difficult to understand, sometimes lapsing into long silences, sometimes inclined to a bitter humour. However Sparrow

This is a fragment from *Marseille Mix*, a forthcoming book exploring the city's literary, criminal, urban, gastronomic and cinematic aspects.

Others, but very few, the eternal journey... before, most seek for an eternal homeland. In love, Ben Waller had written many years away by the ever efficient Marseille dustmen. with items to be disposed of, and had been taken and the book had been placed on the wrong pile, returned to the shop I found that the briefcase by a chance meeting with an old friend. When I cafe for a coffee. On the way back I was delayed document to one side and went out to a street one night. I finished it as day broke. I put the intentionally left open. I read the text through in another. The story was incomplete, or perhaps some way not made entirely clear, linked to one any number of smaller stories which somehow, in narrative drive, but seemed to be composed of The story was not easy to follow, it had little African prostitute and a Marxist philosopher. described erotic relationship between a North about visits to another world and a graphically Jewish religious text, hallucinatory passages

found her a useful source of stories about Marseille, stories which no one else seemed to know. He visited her on several occasions. *A criterion for deciding whether or not a city is modern; the absence of monuments, wrote Walter Benjamin in his book Das Passagenwerk, the book of passages.* In 1940 Benjamin fled Paris. He left the manuscript of *Das Passagenwerk* hidden on the shelves of the Bibliothèque National in Paris. Where better to hide a book than in a massive library? He set off for Marseille. Where better to hide as an outsider than in a city filled with outsiders. Marseille has frequently been called a town without monuments - in spite of the fact that it has many. But most date from the time of the nineteenth century, the second empire, curious and pompous additions to a city which is both ancient in terms of time, but also modern in being a mass city - composed not so much of individual elements but of a continuous fabric. Monuments are static. They slow down movement, form fixed points in the dynamic system of the city. These fixed points then set up a formal relationship across the city, creating a grand vision,

apparently purposeless wanderings. He had also a taste for narcotics and an ability to source unusual hallucinogens. He visited without regret the whores of the area around the opera. The Armenian dealer in antiques never wrote another literary word and never took the slightest interest in the post-death literary career of Walter Benjamin, darling of the critical scene, famed for his intellectual sharpness and much lamented for his premature disappearance. He died in the mid nineteen-sixties of internal organ failure, probably advanced by smoking too many cigarettes. He is buried under a plain tombstone in the Armenian zone of the Saint-Pierre cemetery.

I knew the old man and occasionally did business with him. After Waller's death I took responsibility for clearing out the shop. At the back, under piles of stamp albums I discovered an old black briefcase. In this briefcase was a large sheaf of yellowed papers, carefully typed out on what was clearly an old-fashioned manual typewriter. The papers were some chapters, written in French, of a detective story set in Marseille, called Le Monument Infernal. The book featured elegantly dressed gangsters with a tendency to melancholia, a complicated plot about a missing

appropriate for a state which sees itself as controlling everything. The modern city could also be described as separate pieces without a grand system, moments revealed for a moment to the gaze, parts of a personal system of perception. The city would be like the book of passages, composed of a limitless number of individual elements, collected together but with no fixed relationship between the elements.

Benjamin first visited Marseille in 1926, on a journey from Berlin to the South of France. Ever restless, he was in Marseille again in 1928 and 1931, en route to Mallorca. However he was not drawn to the city by its monuments, or by its new architecture. Other Germans who visited the city at the time, such as Germaine Krull or Herbert Beyer, or the Hungarian member of the Bauhaus Lazlo Maholy-Nagy, were interested in Marseille as a modern city, a great port which functioned as a machine. Benjamin had other more personal interests: principally hashish and other intoxicants, which, then as now, were readily available in Marseille. He was drawn to hashish both on an intellectual level, because he thought it would allow him access into a surreal dream-world, into a some part of his perception

His false death in Port-Bou once assured, Benjamin had little to fear. He re-crossed the Spanish-French frontier the way he had crossed it a few days earlier, on foot across the mountain pass. He took the train and returned to Marseille, a city he knew well. He brought with him the large black briefcase. He grew a full beard, and allowed his hair to grow long. He used his contacts in Marseille, and money from the sale of the morphine, to set up as Ben Waller, a businessman of Armenian descent, a dealer in stamps, mechanical toys, second-hand religious books, and other small printed documents. This was a profitable business in the post-war years, when the personal possessions of those who had disappeared during the war became available in the flea markets and antiquarians. He opened a shop in a side street near the Cour-Julien, a diminutive space in which he stored goods in organised piles. With his stooped posture, his old suits, his thick-lensed spectacles, his slight foreign accent, he was well enough known in the neighbourhood, another slightly eccentric man from elsewhere surviving and growing old in Marseille. He had a reputation for having an detailed knowledge of the outer zones of Marseille, where he spent his free-time on long

system normally cut off from the waking state, and also as an escape from his inability to make any decision, a method of allowing some outside force determine his way. In his article, "Hashish in Marseille", Benjamin describes the effects of the drug. He took hashish in his hotel room and at first noticed little change. In a cafe on the corner of the Canabiere and Cours Belsunce, he began to feel a certain spreading happiness. He wandered in the city centre, thought the faces of strangers were those of people familiar to him, marvelled at the names of the boats beside the Vieux Port, visited dubious bars and clubs, became lost in the jazz music. He was aware of being in a trance cut off from everyday reality with fine prismatic edges; it forms a kind of figure and is more easily memorable. I would like to say, it shrinks and takes the form of a flower. A feeling of happiness, unusual for a man so beset with melancholia, spread through him. The town became a kind of toy: people and things behave at such hours like those little stage sets and people made of elder pith in the glazed tinfoil box, which, when the glass is rubbed, are electrified and fall at any moment into the most unusual of arrangements.

Return to the apartment on the second floor.
Sparrow and Anne Belant.

Its all just another story. Another druggy escape tale, like many others. A story of another man exchanging one name for another, one life for another.

Annie Belant coughed and cleared her throat. Sparrow listened vaguely. The apartment seemed to have become darker. The bright street scene outside, with the people pressing past, to be a distant and artificial, not very believable.

Of course Benjamin did not die in Port-Bou. The death from overdose, the inversion of the name, the false burial were just a convenient cover-up for a man who needed to escape. Benjamin had spent all his life escaping one fate or another, always with a certain ingenious incompetence and indecisiveness. He had flirted with and then evaded in turn Berlin middle-class life, Marxism, German philosophy, Surrealism, the Paris literary scene, Jewish theology. He had always played with writing a book, but in the end his works were assemblages of quotations and thoughts, apparently unstructured. Now he had a chance to change, to become someone else.

Being Benjamin he could not help but intellectualise the hallucinogenic experience, writing: *I find in my notes the surprised comment 'how objects withstand the gaze'.* Why did these objects withstand the gaze? Marseille, ever solid and unassuming, in spite of its unusual arrangements, was not so easily opened up to an imagined dream world, the drugged viewer remained outside the glazed box.

In the daytime Benjamin explored Marseille on foot. He seems to have been still partly in his drugged trance. In the short text *Marseille*, with *Naples* and *Moscow* part of a trilogy of articles on mass cities, he described the city as a surreal vision, switching from one state to another, dirty, collapsed, erotic. The cathedral beside the sea is some kind of railway station, with the confession boxes for the passengers to wash themselves. The Madonna of Notre-Dame-de-la-Garde is a decorated pagan woman, with the fortress as her footstool. The seafood stalls display a sexual feast. In these short texts nothing holds Marseille together, there is no possibility of an overview, the city is reduced to the elements immediately before the gaze of the viewer.

to rely on the gangsters and lowlife of Marseille for assistance. At one point Benjamin disguised himself as a Marseille sailor, in a striped marine jersey in the hope of getting a passage out by sea, but his plan fell through. Finally he left on the train west for the illegal passage over the Spanish border. Aided by a small group set up to help refugees trapped in Vichy France, he crossed the Spanish border by walking up into the mountains, thus evading the border officials. He carried with him a black briefcase. In Port-Bou, in Spain, he was informed by the authorities that he did not possess the right visa and must return to France. If he had waited probably the situation would have changed and he could have moved into Spain and found his way to America. But Benjamin lacked any desire to carry on. The next morning he was found dead, having taken a massive overdose of morphine. The death certificate was made out in the name of Benjamin Walter. He was buried in the cemetery above the town, but his grave has never been found.

Now the hashish eater's demand on time and space comes into force. As is known these are absolutely regal. Versailles for one who takes hashish, is not too large, or eternally too long.

He was attracted to and also disturbed by the open sexuality of the prostitutes beside the harbour, and, perhaps influenced by the large numbers of Africans, related this zone to a colonial system. Invisibile lines divide up the area up into sharp angular territories like African colonies. The whores are strategically placed, ready at a sign to encircle hesitant visitors, and to bounce the reluctant guest like a great ball from one side of the street to the other. He imagined this zone of the city as threateningly female, ready to capture the unwary man. He was as ever uncertain, to indulge in the sexuality of the Marseille whores, or to remain apart.

Finally he found his way up into the industrial suburbs. He observed the same mixture as exists today, of industry and countryside: the outskirts are the state of emergency of the city, the terrain on which incessantly rages the great decisive battle between town and country. It is nowhere more bitter than between Marseille and the Provençal landscape. It is the hand to hand fight of telegraph poles against Agaves, barbed wire against thorny palms, the miasmas of stinking corridors against the damp gloom under plane trees in brooding squares.