

Prologue

Anthony Pym, on borders

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About 15 years ago, I had the opportunity to visit Walter Benjamin's stunning memorial at Port Bou, just across the border in northern Spain, where Benjamin had ended his life in 1940, fleeing from the Nazis. I later emailed Anthony, to say how impressed I had been, and back came a message from Tarragona. Of course, he had been there, and not only been there, but checked out the details of the historical background and written an informative and personal essay about the memorial, linking his own experience of it with wider socio-political issues of exile. It was called "Benjamin at the border" and is now available via the following link: Pym, A. (2025). "Benjamin at the Border." Knowledge Commons. <https://doi.org/10.17613/nc4ge-m7k06>

Benjamin is of course well known in Translation Studies for his classic essay "Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers" ("The task of the translator"), but for Pym, embedded personally and professionally in intercultural space, Benjamin symbolized the whole concept of crossing borders – or not crossing them. Re-reading Anthony's essay now, I notice how much it reveals of his whole way of thinking and writing.

Benjamin was "at" a border when he died. Anthony writes "on" borders of all kinds, including the one at Port Bou, and has long inhabited multicultural borderlands (in Australia, Germany, France and Spain, to mention a few). The essay starts with a personal experience, changing trains at the border between France and Spain. Anthony often brings personal experiences into his academic writing: it is as if he does not quite recognize a border between the two, not an impervious one, at least. He is happy to share his experiences, for instance by sending me his essay. He contemplates the Benjamin memorial as a visitor from Australia, with a small suitcase, and compares Benjamin's experience with his own.

Other examples of this subjective involvement can be found in paratexts in his publications. His first monograph was called *Translation and Text Transfer* (1992), a work that introduces many themes that will be developed in later works, particularly in *The Moving Text* (2004). The frontispiece of the earlier work is a photo of a hand, alongside a rock painting of a second hand. The title is: "Aboriginal handprint and the author's hand; cave near 'The

Mission', Kellerberrin, Western Australia, August 1991." A similar photo appears in the 2004 volume. It makes a statement: here I stand, Anthony Pym, making personal contact with a distant time, standing in the same place as someone stood thousands of years ago, someone very different yet also similar in many ways... His hand, my hand. Connected. His second monograph, *Epistemological Problems in Translation and its Teaching* (1993) is also given a subjective frame, this time by the photo on the cover, showing two children playing on a beach. Turn the page, and you notice that they are the author's children, "busy." Read further, in the preface, and you will meet Anthony's (then) wife, whose surname takes you back to the book's publisher. And the place of publication, Calaceite, is the small village which is one of the places where Anthony has made a home. He has put down special roots in Catalonia, but not uncritical ones. Note the throw-away comment about who sponsored the memorial.

This personal way of writing shows up in other ways too: in a style that is sometimes surprisingly informal (especially in article titles: peruse his list of published articles, available on his generously informative website, and note where your eyebrows rise), and sometimes unacademically lyrical (like the very end of our essay). The informality comes partly from an underlying oral basis: some of his publications start from lectures or seminars (for instance, his book on ethics, and the one just mentioned on epistemology). Yet it is a style that can suddenly shift into abstractions: one needs to pause to think when he notes, in passing, Benjamin's "refusal of exteriority." Further down the same page, we meet the comment that the formulation of certain complex ideas "requires as much feeling as abstraction." Feeling, empathy, on one hand, and abstract conceptualization on the other: but maybe here too there is no impervious border between the two. The style is instantly recognizable. I once acted as a peer reviewer for an anonymized article, submitted to a highly reputable journal. I read the first paragraph and thought: this must be Anthony. And of course I turned out to be right.

Right from the start of our essay, there is a strong sense of history. Well, there would be, wouldn't there, from a scholar who has written several books about translation history and how to study it. We are reminded of Benjamin's personal tragedy, as a Jew, and the political background of the Nazi terror. Fittingly, the memorial at Port Bou is the work of a Jewish sculptor, Dani Karavan. (See many photos online.) But we also have more glimpses of Anthony's personal history, living "illegally" in the borderland between France and Spain, moving back and forth, with more of a sense of optimism than Benjamin had. "If you look in the right direction, there is always a way."

Anthony often seems to think in all directions at once, reaching after allusions and citations that bear witness to his wide reading. The essay includes Benjamin's description of a monoprnt by Klee, *Angelus Novus*, depicting what Benjamin sees as the angel of history. (Wikipedia says that Benjamin purchased this print in 1921.) Not content with merely citing, Pym

gives us his critical reaction to Benjamin's interpretation, itself inviting a response: time is surely the primary dimension of history (one damn thing after another, as the saying goes); but the events of history do of course take place as well, in spatial dimensions.

A critical attitude is a hallmark of Anthony's work: he likes engaging in dialogue, arguing, counter-arguing, pointing out alternatives or counter-evidence, or indeed a lack of empirical evidence. The local tourist officer asks Pym if he is a philosopher, and he says no. But to what extent is this true? He is not a professional philosopher, but he has a deep interest in ideas, epistemology, and indeed moral philosophy or ethics, with two books on this topic: first in French (1997), and a revised version later in English. In terms of the philosophy of science, he is an outspoken defender of a general empirical position, grounded in evidence, logical argument, the centrality of claims and hypotheses that can be tested, and an initial attitude of fallibility – a willingness to admit that “I don't know” I may be wrong, let's look for more evidence and test further. See in particular Pym 2016. The list of publications on his homepage, by the way, notes that this article was actually published with the wrong title, which should have been “A spirited critique of a certain anti-empiricism in Translation Studies [...]”)

Being critical is easier if you have read widely and can read closely. After Klee's picture, we touch on a poem by Terry Eagleton; a painting by Eduardo Arroyo depicting the moment of Benjamin's suicide; Tzvetan Todorov, who cites 12th century Hugh of Saint Victor on borders and exiles, in a quote that Todorov (a Bulgarian in France) took from Edward Saïd (a Palestinian in the US), who had found it in Auerbach (a German in Turkey); and finally Valéry and Ovid, with a quotation found, we are told, “at the end of Lluís Marcó i Dachs, a Catalan Republican reflecting on the exile of Spanish Jews.” The range covered by this short essay is amazing, as is the wide reading and scholarship behind it, all connected, made sense of, and entertaining sense at that. And with a spot of close reading as well: it is critically suggested that Hugh of Saint Victor probably meant something a bit different from Todorov by ‘exile’: a point that is immediately linked to the EU Erasmus exchange program and the current shape of the power lines of the information age that lie along intercultural interfaces. The essay is the fruit of a mind that is curious, sensitive, reflective, seeking to understand, to make something coherent from many fragments. We cross borders fluently between aesthetics, culture, history, politics and sociology, spiraling between the personal and the more general.

Anthony came into Translation Studies with a background of work as an English teacher and a professional translator, and with a PhD in sociology. This may explain something of his interest in practical translation problems of all kinds, and above all in people, who they are and what they do, where they live, where they move, where they get their ideas, how they are treated. In some places, the sociologist notices, “you can generally talk your way around

a rule.” In other words, you can negotiate how a rule is to be interpreted. You can act as an agent, using whatever power and imagination you have. The sociologist also observes that Port Bou has largely lost its former function as a border town and must now survive as best it can, on e.g. tourism, such as people coming to see Benjamin’s memorial...

Yet an interest in people implies more than this: in Anthony’s case, it has led to many social networks-which-become-friendships, from local (in France and Spain) to European (e.g. via EST) to international (e.g. CETRA, and Anthony’s later links with Monterey and Stellenbosch, not to mention his most recent post in Melbourne).

Some of my warmest personal memories go back to the two months I spent with my wife-to-be in Tarragona, as a visiting professor at Anthony’s Intercultural Studies Group. On a free day, he and his wife took us to his book-crammed hideaway in the village of Calaceite, where he expressed horror at my query as to whether he ever felt the need to, um, throw out a book or two in order to make room for new ones... During his PhD summer school, we broke off one day to play a global game of football (Northern against Southern hemisphere), which ended in hysterical laughter. I forgot who won, but I do recall that young Marc Pym, then aged maybe 7 or 8, persuaded us all that he was to be both captain of the Southern team and also referee. (I did wonder where he got the idea from...) This was followed, or perhaps preceded, by an amazing Catalan onion party, the *calçot* feast: delicious!

As the end of the essay shows, borders can be crossed, with a good spirit.

Other references

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