

ASJA LĀCIS AND WALTER BENJAMIN: TRANSLATING DIFFERENT CITIES

Jānis Taurens

Art Academy of Latvia

Where there is no love, not only the life of the people becomes sterile,
but the life of cities.

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Elena Ferrante, *L'amica geniale (My Brilliant Friend)* (160)

What can we do with this sentence written by Curzio Malaparte if we do not know the Italian language: “Quella folla di donne, sedute sulla scalinata simile alla scala degli Angeli nel sogno di Giacobbe, parevano adunate lì per qualche festa, o per un qualche spettacolo di cui fossero attrici e spettatrici insieme” (59)? Maybe we can recognize a proper name (“the ladder of the Angels in Jacob’s dream”)?¹ Of course, the level of our partial understanding or complete incomprehension depends on us, but similar use of a foreign and unknown language, or at least reference to an imaginary situation of its use, can be found in literature.

Let us next consider the following sentence from a novel: “She might have been speaking Russian for all he knew.” This sentence does not appear to be paradoxical if we know the source—the penultimate sentence of the seventh chapter of Vladimir Nabokov’s novel *Laughter in the Dark*—because the chief protagonists chosen by Nabokov are Germans, the conversation in the novel was held in Berlin, and the work itself is in English. But the first version of the novel was published under a different title—*Камера обскура (Camera Obscura)*—in Berlin and Paris, and it was written in Russian for Russian émigrés. In this version, the corresponding sentence at the end of the sixth chapter is: “Он, впрочем, не понимал ни слова, точно она говорила по-русски или по-испански” (Набоков, *Камера обскура* 336). It was translated into English in 1936, and Nabokov heavily reworked the original text and created a new translation under the title *Laughter in the Dark* in 1938. A translation-reconstruction appeared in Russian only in 1994 (using the first Russian version of the novel), which

was published as *Смех в темноте*. It has the same sentence as in the first Russian version, but a bit shorter (Spanish is not mentioned: “Он, впрочем, не понимал ни слова, точно она говорила по-русски” (Набоков, *Смех в темноте* 435), which literally means, “He, by the way, did not understand a word, as if she spoke Russian.” The locations of these various publications mark a transatlantic route from Western Europe to America to Russia, and a time span from the beginning of the 1930s to the 1990s, approximately sixty years.

To understand this sentence in Nabokov’s novel, paradoxical to Russian readers and with a metaphorical reference to an unacceptable and incomprehensible situation in Russia for Russian émigrés, we must involve geographical places, historical events and people, including Nabokov himself. The above quotation from Malaparte’s *La pelle* (*The Skin*) has been translated into English and many other languages, as was the above quotation from Nabokov’s novel. But there is some asymmetry between translation and understanding. We can understand a sentence in a particular situation —that is, we can correctly react in that situation—without being able to translate it; nevertheless, the translation can be made by somebody else. Yet, the correct translation can be insufficient to understand the sentence quoted from Nabokov’s *Laughter in the Dark*, as it demands some contextual knowledge. “Translation” here means not only translation proper, but also something like the writing of a commentary.

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“Translating cities” is a metaphor whose cognitive value consists of different aspects of translation and understanding included in that process. These aspects must reveal themselves when we are trying to describe the experience of the different languages and urban realities that Asja Lācis and Walter Benjamin had during their short period of acquaintance and love. To enumerate briefly: there are particular situations that can be characterized as incomprehension of particular sentences or language as such, descriptions of situations and places in different languages and understanding of particular realities—forms of life²—in particular texts. “Translation” is the proper term here if we compare it with conceptual art praxis as described by art theoretician Birgit Pelzer. Interpreting the work of conceptual artist Lawrence Weiner, she writes: “To elaborate reality is to translate. For Weiner, all communication takes the form of translation, of a transfer from one place to another, from one language to another” (87). If, for Weiner, communication is the translation of materials into statements and back into materials in the imagination of the audience, parallel to the transportation of thought from the artist’s studio to the exhibition place, then “translation of cities” means the spatial movement of Asja Lācis and Benjamin and the translation of their experiences into texts and back into experienced realities: the interpretation of texts in commentary.

In the case of the love story of Asja Lācis and Walter Benjamin, we can have a glimpse of the reality of the different cities they lived in and visited; that is, we can try to understand some very short but characteristic and live fragments of the languages of these cities. To get an understanding of their particular urban reality, we must take into account spoken language and particular utterances made by Lācis, Benjamin,

and other people, describing, referring to, or just being used in these cities. Here as well, understanding is inseparable from our translating capacity.

Asja Lācis and Benjamin met in Capri in 1924. In 1925, Benjamin visited Lācis in Riga, and in 1926 they published an article, “Neapel” (“Naples”), in the *Frankfurter Zeitung*. In the winter of 1926-27, he visited her in Moscow, which is described in the posthumously published *Moskauer Tagebuch* (*Moscow Diary*). From the age of seven, Asja Lācis lived in Riga; before her marriage, her name was Anna Liepiņa; her nickname “Asja” comes from Turgenev’s novella *Asya*, which was finished in Italy, in Rome, in the winter of 1857-58. Benjamin’s native city was Berlin. Here we have four cities: Naples, Moscow, Riga, and Berlin. We can add a fifth: Paris, for Benjamin’s love of French culture, and also as a place of his exile.

Affection for Asja Lācis not only instigated Benjamin’s trips to Moscow and Riga, but was also one of the reasons for their writing their article on Naples. “Naples” is like a model for Benjamin’s method, which he used in his later texts. In this article, we see dialectical interplay between the present and the past, between high and low culture, and between the personal and the ideological.³ Naples (and Capri) is one of the places (texts) on the map of this fragmented case study, but at the same time it is a paradigmatic example, showing the translation from personal experience to text, which demands further contextual interpretation.⁴ “Personal” here, at the turn, cannot be understood without reference to particular places.

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NAPLES AND CAPRI

One can see Capri, the place where Asja Lācis and Benjamin met for the first time, from Naples. As Russian writer, art historian, and translator Pavel Muratov (Павел Муратов) wrote in his *Образы Италии* (*Italian Images*):

Линия берега, плавно убегающего к темным рощам Соренто, тонкие очертания Капри и Искьи пробудят в душе его древнее, как свет, воспоминани о земном рае. Каким верным спутником жизни в Неаполе становится этот далекий очерк Капри! Проснувшись и подойдя к окну, видишь его тающим голубым облаком на горизонте. Он пропадает в полдень в ослепительно сияющем воздухе и вечером появляется снова, чтобы пылать багряно на закате и, густо лиловея, соединяться с ночью. (Муратов 431-32)⁵

Italian Images was published in 1911-12, a little over a decade before the first meeting of Asja Lācis and Benjamin, and it is not surprising that they “returned” this loving sight that Muratov describes to Naples in their article on the city. Italy belonged to the discourse of “the south” that “had formed a key element of the German cultural heritage since at least the eighteenth century.” As Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings note in their biography of Benjamin: “Italy embodied what Germany seemed to lack: if Germany was gray, rainy, and repressed, Italy was sunny, hedonistic, and liberated” (198-99). The same had been true for Russian writers at least since

the beginning of the nineteenth century.⁶ In 1924, Bertolt Brecht—to whom Asja Lācis introduced Benjamin later the same year in Berlin—had stayed in Positano, near Capri. But in Capri, Benjamin’s acquaintance with Lācis marked this place as important, even as a turning point in the development of his thought.

Asja Lācis describes their acquaintance in three short, slightly different accounts of her life, written in Latvian, Russian, and German. Here is a reconstruction from the Latvian and Russian versions:

Kapri, kur es biju apmetusies 1924. gada pavasarī uz pusgadu, lai ārstētu meitu Dagu, es kādu dienu aizgāju ar viņu uz veikalu nopirkt mandeles. Mēs iegājām veikalā, bet es pēkšņi biju aizmirsusi, kā itāļiski sauc mandeles. Pārdevējs nesaprata ne manu mīmiku, ne žestus. Pēkšņi atskanēja balss: “Cienītā kundze, atļaujiet jums palīdzēt!” Es pagriezos, blakus stāvēja kungs ar lielām brillēm, kurām bija biezi stikli. Es atbildēju: “Lūdzu.” Kad es saņēmu paciņu ar mandelēm un citiem pirkumiem, viņš sacīja: “Atļaujiet stādīties priekšā—doktors Valters Benjamins. Atļaujiet jūs pavadīt!” (Lācis, “No piezīmju burtnīcas” 203)⁷

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Я назвала свое имя, и он предложил донести пакеты до дому, но они тут же выпали из его рук. Мы оба засмеялись. (Лацис 83)⁸

The last two sentences, which are missing in the Latvian text, are from Lācis’s memoirs in Russian. The facts and details are approximately the same as in the German version, except that the German text does not mention that they both began to laugh after “die Pakete fielen ihm aus der Hand” (the packages fell from his hands), but does include a description of the first impression Benjamin made on her:

Ich ging oft mit Daga einkaufen auf die Piazza. In einem Laden wollte ich Mandeln kaufen. Ich wußte nicht, wie Mandeln auf italienisch heißen, und der Verkäufer begriff nicht, was ich von ihm haben wollte. Neben mir stand ein Mann und sagte: “Gnädige Frau, darf ich Ihnen helfen?” “Bitte”, sagte ich. Ich bekam die Mandeln und ging mit meinen Paketen auf die Piazza—der Herr folgte mir und fragte: “Darf ich Sie begleiten und die Pakete tragen?” Ich schaute ihn an—er fuhr fort: “Gestatten Sie, daß ich mich vorstelle—Doktor Walter Benjamin”—ich nannte meinen Namen.

Mein erster Eindruck: Brillengläser, die wie kleine Scheinwerfer Lichter werfen, dichtes, dunkles Haar, schmale Nase, ungeschickte Hände—die Pakete fielen ihm aus der Hand. Im ganzen—ein solider Intellektueller, einer von den Wohlhabenden. (Lācis, *Revolutionär im Beruf* 41-42)⁹

From the Latvian and German texts, we can see that Lācis’s account is not a translation, not even the kind of translation Nabokov created for some of his English works, but is more like the remembering of an event, each time with different details. Of course, over the process of writing, some phrases were in all probability translated, such as the address “gnädige Frau” (Asja Lācis and Benjamin communicated in German), for which “cienītā kundze” were the most fitting words in Latvian.¹⁰ The differences are more telling. In German, we have a detailed description of the impression Benjamin made on Lācis; this would be interesting for German readers, but not for Latvians, who knew nothing about Benjamin at the time of the memoirs’ publica-

tion. The Russian and German—but not the Latvian—reproduce Benjamin’s comical clumsiness, but only in Russian do we find the detail of their laughing. The most intriguing detail (the beginning of their intimate relations?) was told in a language that was not native for either Asja Lācis or Benjamin.

The Italian language is missing in all three versions of this account. We can only try to imagine how the situation in the shop would have sounded in reality, and also how strange these three descriptions of that conversation would have seemed to the Italian shopkeeper. Benjamin experienced a similar, but more uncomfortable feeling in Moscow, which he visited in the winter of 1926-27 without any knowledge of Russian. For many situations he encountered in Moscow, the phrase discussed above from Nabokov’s novel would be appropriate for him. Nevertheless, his lack of knowledge of Russian did not lead to a misunderstanding of the urban experience or city life, but to the opposite: Benjamin translated his linguistically estranged experience into prophetic descriptions.

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MOSCOW

Two fragments of Benjamin’s *Moscow Diary* can provide an impression of his unconventional look at this city. They are quoted here in the Russian translation because in this language, the reality is described in, at least several occasions, more appropriate terms. The context of these remarks is Benjamin’s and Asja Lācis’s complicated relationship. Both fragments are about the “architecture” of Moscow, and architecture seems the first candidate if we use the term “language of the city”:

Здесь, на рынке, выявляется архитектурная функция товаров: рулоны ткани образуют пилястры и колонны, ботинки и валенки, подвешенные на шнурках рядом над прилавком, образуют крышу киоска, большие гармошки образуют стены, так сказать, мемноновы стены. (Беньямин 101)¹¹

As we can see, Benjamin describes architecture, but not the solid stone architecture of buildings. Rather, he describes the architectonic function of commodities. In the structure of a city, there are always unchangeable structures and, in contrast to them, “flows” of people, transport, and information.

In 1996, seventy years after Benjamin’s visit, Catalan architect, historian, and philosopher Ignasi de Solà-Morales created a quasi-category for cities called “flows” (14-16) at the International Congress of Architecture in Barcelona, in order to emphasize this aspect of city life. But for Benjamin, as the *Moscow Diary* demonstrates, these more or less constant relations of unchangeable structures and flows are converted:

Вобщем же, похоже что из-за неизменной убогости просящих милостиню, но может и из-за их хитрой организации, но они—единственная надежная структура московской жизни, всегда сохраняющая свое место. (Беньямин 52)¹²

In the Russian translation, the term “structure” (“структура”) is used; in the English, only “they alone are reliable”; in German, “sie allein verlässlich sind” (Benjamin, *Moskauer Tagebuch*, 20 Dezember). As a rule, the Russian translations are more interpretive; here, the predicate “structure” is added to the marginal form of life (“these beggars”) to stress the insecurity and uncertainty of life in Moscow. Benjamin continued the entry in his diary for December 20 with an argument for this observation:

Потому что все прочее здесь пребывает под знаком ремонта. В холодных комнатах еженедельно переставляют мебель—это единственная роскошь, которую можно себе с ними позволить, и в то же время радикальное средство избавления от “уюта” и меланхолии, которой приходится его оплачивать. Учреждения, музеи и институты постоянно меняют свое местопребывание, и даже уличные торговцы, которые в других краях держатся за определенное место, каждый день оказываются на новом месте. (Беньямин 52)¹³

20 Before this description, Benjamin speaks about the cold weather in Moscow, which is new for him, and he introduces the theme of coldness with reflections on his uneasy relation with Asja Lācis:

Но я не знаю, способен ли я даже сегодня на жизнь с ней, жизнь суровую, при ее—несмотря на все очарование—бессердечии. (Беньямин 51)

Ob ich aber, selbst heute, dem Leben mit ihr mit seiner erstaunlichen Härte und, bei all ihrer Süßigkeit, ihrer Lieblosigkeit gewachsen wäre, weiß ich nicht. (Benjamin, *Moskauer Tagebuch*, 20 Dezember)¹⁴

The Russian and English translations are different, and they also differ from the German original. The most telling in this aspect is the attribution of “astonishing hardness” to Asja Lācis (“her astonishing...”), while in German the predicate refers to life in Moscow (“seiner erstaunlichen Härte” means “its astounding harshness”).¹⁵ Thus, a little mistranslation leads to the demonization of Asja Lācis. (In the patriarchal typology of women, there are only two roles: a virgin, a wife, and a mother; or a witch, a slut, and a mistress.) In Russian, the expression “seiner erstaunlichen Härte” is translated as “жизнь суровую”; that is, *seiner* correctly refers to “life” (“жизнь”), but the predicate *суровый* (“severe”) is most naturally connected with *зима* (“winter”). Therefore, the “harshness of life” could be understood in a narrow sense as “its coldness”; yet, we must take into account that in Russian, this predicate can also be used as an attribute of a monarch or ruler; from the latter point of view, it could be interpreted as an indirect reference to Stalin.

There are also several differences in the descriptions of Asja Lācis: “her sweetness” as compared to “her lovelessness.” The German “ihrer Lieblosigkeit” literally means “her lovelessness,” but likewise can be understood as “her hardheartedness” or even “her cruelty.” That stronger interpretation occurs in the Russian translation, in which “при ее... бессердечии” means “her heartlessness” or “her cruelty,” but not “lovelessness” as “simply without love.” This close reading of just one sentence shows that the interplay of personal and political aspects in Benjamin’s life can create far-reaching

misreadings as well as open a space for the debatable possibilities of translation.

With the fading of Asja Lācis's love, moving from Capri and Naples to the “суровая зима” of Moscow—of course, personal relations involve much more than merely changes of climate—Benjamin, in his various descriptions of this city of fading love, where love is perhaps impossible due to the increasing deprivatization of personal life, has grasped¹⁶ the coming “sterility” (to use Elena Ferrante's term) of Moscow in the 1930s, during Stalin's terror. As Mikhail Ryklin (Михаил Рыклин) wrote in his essay on the Russian translation of Benjamin's *Moscow Diary*: “Дневник фиксирует только первые симптомы, водяные знаки этой катастрофы, проступающие в пока еще относительно неоднородной среде” (Рыклин 207).¹⁷

It is significant that without knowledge of the Russian language, in a position of linguistic estrangement, but a personal and theoretical interest, Benjamin grasped with such a prophetic precision the coming future of the Great Terror that occurred ten years later. It can be said that on this occasion, Benjamin's dialectics of history are at work, only “the concrete historical situation of the *interest* taken in the object” is directed not towards some past event, but towards some culturally and politically distant city life.

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NAPLES AND RIGA

Benjamin's remarks on Moscow would have been different without Asja Lācis, if, indeed, there had been any. To understand how Moscow speaks to Benjamin, we must return to the language of Naples. One characteristic of this language can be called “theatricality”; after a description of urban life on the stairs of Naples's streets, Benjamin's and Lācis's article concludes: “Eine hohe Schule der Regie ist was auf den Treppen sich abspielt” (“Neapel” 310).¹⁸ This sentence, without doubt, belongs to Asja Lācis, who “founded a proletarian children's theater at Orjol in central Russia and later directed plays at a workers' theater in Riga” (Eiland and Jennings 203). The term “theatricality” also connects low and high culture, the historical past and the present. Eating macaroni on the streets is like a performance in the theatre, and “Wie auf Eremitenbildern des Trecento zeigt sich hier und da in den Felsen eine Türe. Steht sie offen, so blickt man in große Keller, die Schlafstelle und Warenlagen zugleich sind” (Benjamin and Lācis, “Neapel” 309).¹⁹

Not only can a Renaissance *Geist* be seen there, but the antique ruins of Pompeii are nearby. This throws light on the wonderful image of Naples we find in the Italian letters of Vladimir Yakovlev (Владимир Яковлев), a lesser known Russian poet, translator, traveller, and memoirist who lived in the nineteenth century:

Неаполь, покоящийся на скате зеленых холмов,—это ленивая нимфа, опускающая свои белые ноги в ярко-синие волны... (Яковлев 500)²⁰

This image can be compared with a paradigmatic impression of Riga. Asja Lācis was

not born in Riga and we can, of course, only speculate about her first impressions of the city at the age of seven when her family moved there. But if there is one image that could serve for a young working-class girl, which she was, it could be a fragment from the novel *Rīga*, by Latvian writer Augusts Deglavs, written at the beginning of the twentieth century. In Naples, lying on the seacoast hills, it is the view from the sea that creates the strongest impression of the city, as in Yakovlev's Italian letters. Likewise, in Riga, situated on the plain of the Daugava river, the skyline of the city is seen from the other bank. In his book, Deglavs describes the first impressions of the little peasant boy Pēteris Krauklītis as he approaches the city from the Pārdaugava side, from the left bank of the Daugava, where the old city with its medieval church spires is situated on the right bank:

22 "Rīga—vai tu neredzi," Pēteris rādīja ar pirkstu. [...] Vidū Pētera, Doma un Jēkaba torņi, stalti savas galvas pacēlušī vai līdz mākoņiem... Apkārt viņiem daudzi mazāki kā paklausīgi pavadoņi, garā Daugavmalas māju fronte, ar resno pili nobeidzot... Viss taisni tā, kā viņš uz pudeļu papīriem redzējis, tikai skats vēl daudz plašāks un lieliskāks, nekā uz pudeļu papīriem bija rūmes. (Deglavs 43)²¹

To be correct, we must know that Asja's place of birth is near Līgatne, on the right side of the Daugava, but Pēteris Krauklītis approached the city from the left bank; therefore, the impression Deglavs describes was not possible for her. We must also remember that Pēteris Krauklītis's first impression actually came from the "bottle papers" or labels, as we say today, and the characteristic Riga silhouette is still used today in advertising. It is possible to admit that the relations of "labels" to "silhouette" to "silhouette as nymph" (low and high, banal and culturally refined) are isomorphic to several aspects of the personal experiences of Asja Lācis and Benjamin, and to their understanding of cities.

The fragment quoted above from Yakovlev's Italian letters can be seen as a model for the descriptions of Naples, in which some present situation is connected with the past; for example, "Naples slumbering on the slopes" with a mythological "nymph" and "caves" as "in the hermit pictures of the *Trecento*." It is a parallel to Benjamin's later dialectical understanding of history with his emphasis on the present "interest" taken in a past object. The first impression of the young peasant boy Pēteris Krauklītis as he approaches Riga from the left bank of the river Daugava, where low culture ("the bottle papers") is a model for religious architecture, would also be a possible impression of Asja Lācis, and a paradigm for the beginning of "Naples," which recounts a story of a priest accused of "indecent offences."²² The story sounds like an anecdote, and this particular literary form already plays an important role in Benjamin's early reflections on method in *The Arcades Project*, dating from mid-1927 to early 1930.²³

We can find the same structure of low/high, present/past in the literary interests of Benjamin and Asja Lācis. For example, Asja Lācis remembered that Benjamin told her about current tendencies in French literature, in particular that he admired Proust's skill in depicting every detail, and she continued:

А когда я прочитала и перевела ему несколько отрывков из Андрея Упита, Беньямина покорило словарное богатство латышского языка, великолепный слог писателя. (Лāцис 85)²⁴

Latvian writer Andrejs Upītis was praised in Soviet times for his ideological position. He was perceived as a realistic writer, but nowadays, some of his novels are valued only for their heritage, not a place in the history of literature comparable to that of Proust. Similarly, in her memoirs written in Latvian, Asja Lācis remembered asking Benjamin why he was writing a habilitation thesis on “that dead German Baroque.” Benjamin answered that he had discovered in the Baroque “bonds with German Expressionism” (Lācis, “No piezīmju burtnīcas” 203). To conclude, the text of “Naples” shows the methodological principles that were earlier at work in Benjamin’s *Trauerspiel* and later, in a more elaborate form, in *The Arcades Project*, mostly written during his exile in Paris. Different cultural backgrounds and different personal experiences can be read back from these two descriptions of, or two views on, Naples and Riga, respectively.

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PARIS

Benjamin’s interest in French culture resulted in more than one hundred pages on Baudelaire in the *Passagen-Werk* (*The Arcades Project*, convolute “J”) and in other texts on the French poet which Benjamin himself translated into German. In his various writings on Baudelaire, which also constitute material for an unwritten book, as in the case of Kafka, Benjamin described an important figure for the understanding of modernity: the *flâneur*, “der auf dem Asphalt botanisieren geht” (Benjamin, “Das Paris des Second Empire bei Baudelaire: Der Flaneur” 538), a man who goes “botanizing on the asphalt,” as in the English translation (qtd. in Pollock 67).²⁵ Benjamin’s phrase could seem as paradoxical as his other remarks on the city or architecture, for example: “Die Straßenerweiterungen, sagte man, seien wegen der Krinoline durchgeführt worden” (Benjamin, *Passagen-Werk* 194; E5a,8).²⁶ We can trace the origin of such paradoxical remarks or, to be more precise, such a course of thought back to the little article on Naples written by Asja Lācis and Benjamin, which is also partly built on seemingly incompatible things, such as the city planning of Baron Haussmann and fashion.

The notion of fashion itself is contradictory. It draws our attention to the actuality of the past, as Benjamin made clear in quoting from Paul Valéry’s important article on painter Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot, “Autour de Corot”:

Enfin, la Mode, qui est le changement à haute fréquence du goût d’une clientèle, substitua sa mobilité essentielle aux lentes formations des styles, des écoles, des grandes renommées. Mais dire que la Mode se charge du destin des Beaux-Arts, c’est assez dire que le commerce s’en mêle. (Benjamin, *Passagen-Werk* 128; B8,2)²⁷

The French *mode*, as well as the same word in German and Latvian (from Latin *modus*—“a measure,” “manner”), expresses Benjamin’s interest better than the English word *fashion*. This interest is even called “burning” (“das brennendste Interesse der Mode”) because of its “extraordinary anticipations.”²⁸ But Benjamin lacked this ability of anticipation in regard to himself.

BERLIN

Asja Lācis and Benjamin were not *flâneurs* themselves. Their passage from one city to another had the character of, at least on some occasions, existential necessity. For Benjamin’s fate we have the symbolic figure of the hunchback (*der Bucklige*), which he described himself as in the last fragment of *Berliner Kindheit um 1900* (*Berlin Childhood around 1900*), and which at the same time is the central figure in his interpretation of Kafka’s works. Hannah Arendt also uses it as a key figure for understanding Benjamin. In the introduction to *Illuminations*, she quotes the lines from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*, also quoted in *Berliner Kindheit*, with the English translation (Arendt 6):

Will ich in mein’ Keller gehn,
Will mein Weinlein zapfen;
Steht ein bucklicht Männlein da,
Tät mir’n Krug wegschnappen.

Will ich in mein Küchel gehn,
Will mein Süpplein kochen;
Steht ein bucklicht Männlein da,
Hat mein Töpflein brochen.

When I go down to the cellar
There to draw some wine,
A little hunchback who’s in there
Grabs that jug of mine.

When I go into my kitchen,
There my soup to make,
A little hunchback who’s in there
My little pot did break.

We can imagine that the slightly comical incident in Capri that Asja Lācis describes in her memoirs occurred due to a hunchback who made Benjamin lose his footing (and then “die Pakete fielen ihm aus der Hand”), but in 1940, after crossing the French-Spanish border, something similar to the hunchback’s joke provoked Benjamin’s suicide.

In 1940, Berlin was not the best city to live in, although it was recorded as such in

Benjamin's *Moscow Diary* on January 28, 1927:

Wir küßten uns wieder und sprachen davon, in Berlin zusammen zu leben, zu heiraten, mit einander wenigstens einmal zu fahren. Asja sagte, es sei ihr noch von keiner Stadt der Abschied so schwer geworden wie von Berlin, ob das mit mir zusammenhänge? (Benjamin, *Moskauer Tagebuch*)²⁹

Already, several days after returning to Berlin, Benjamin continued his notes on Moscow: "Berlin ist für den, der aus Moskau kommt, eine tote Stadt" (Benjamin, *Moskauer Tagebuch*, 30 Januar).³⁰ These seemingly contradictory "verdicts" given by Asja Lācis and Benjamin of "difficult to leave" (Berlin) and "a dead city" (Berlin after Moscow) are in fact complementary. Asja Lācis spoke about Berlin from her situation in Moscow, the city of a coming terror; Benjamin, from Berlin, which had already been exposed to danger in 1923.³¹ For both Asja Lācis and Benjamin, the foreign, lesser-known city was like a utopian refuge. Their thoughts (merely a few sentences in Benjamin's diary) were like slips of the tongue, which revealed a tragic future: deportation, exile, and death.

25

UTOPIAN CITY

An interpretation of the sentence in my epigraph from Elena Ferrante's novel *My Brilliant Friend* is given by the novel's protagonist several chapters later:

"What does 'a city without love' mean to you?"

"A people deprived of happiness."

"Give me an example."

[...]

"Italy under Fascism, Germany under Nazism, all of us human beings in the world today." (188)

In 1938, Asja Lācis was arrested and deported to the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic; only in 1948 did she return to Latvia, at that time occupied and also called a "Soviet Socialist Republic." Taking Asja Lācis and millions of others who suffered from Stalin's regime into account, we can add to Ferrante's listing "the Soviet Union under Stalinism." The phrase "in the world today" can be interpreted in two different ways: the novel describes events in the late 1950s, but it was written in 2011 and can be indirectly related to the present. Asja Lācis and Benjamin did not reach their ideal city except, perhaps, as a Neapolitan moment, but their story is in some way isomorphic to the story of the utopian city of Atlantis.³²

It is an unprovable hypothesis that the personal relations between Asja Lācis and Walter Benjamin, and her influence on him as seen in the style of their article on Naples, sharpened his attention to the languages of the cities in which they travelled and lived, his remarks sometimes even being prophetic. "Translating different cities" in this context is thought that directs attention to the particular fragments of "city

language”—descriptions or events, situations, personal relations, and urban realities including political and economic aspects, which are all united as positions on the map of Asja Lācis’s and Benjamin’s lives. For example, the lovely island of Capri was the place (in Italy) in which they became acquainted by means of a foreign language (German) and where a comical incident happened, after which they both began to laugh—maybe the laughter was the cause of their closer relationship—later retold only in another language foreign for both (Russian). From such a point of view, the Capri event is a paradigmatic event in which this double linguistic estrangement can be interpreted as a model for Benjamin’s later dialectical method of history (anecdote as method of making things present). Different cities and different languages, as they are presented in the texts under discussion, are not to be treated as disconnected spatial and linguistic elements which could be reconnected easily by simple travel and verbatim translation. Instead, even a glimpse at reality is rooted in personal experience. In Capri, Asja Lācis and Benjamin were in a kind of “soft exile” (a pleasant and desired relaxation), but which formed different situations. The later trajectories of their lives show the growing uneasiness that reached its climax in different places and different languages.

26

In other words, in the 1940s, Berlin, Moscow, Naples, Paris, and Riga were cities “without love.” But where is the city with love to be found “in the world of today”? The question is open and implies an answer broader than any urban or literary theory can give us. We can only try to use the method of Benjamin’s writings: fragmentary, paradoxical, connecting the most distant, strange, and heterogeneous elements necessary to understand something we call reality.

NOTES

1. The translation of this sentence from the second chapter of *The Skin* by David Moore is: “This crowd of women sitting on the steps, which resembled the ladder of the Angels in Jacob’s dream, seemed to have come together for some celebration, or for some play in which they were at once actresses and spectators.”
2. The term “forms of life” in this article means not only the rootedness of language in the ways of living (as in the later thought of Ludwig Wittgenstein), but also the understanding of particular places (or political and economic situations) as exposed in the texts about those places important for Lācis and Benjamin.
3. “Naples” is important for Benjamin’s philosophy of history, especially as formulated in fragment K2,3 from *Das Passage-Werk (The Arcades Project)*: “It is said that the dialectical method consists in doing justice each time to the concrete historical situation of its object. But it is not enough. For it is just as much a matter of doing justice to the concrete historical situation of the *interest* taken in the object” (391).
4. In a way, this is in line with Benjamin’s thoughts on translation in his “Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers” (“The Task of the Translator”) as the “Fortleben” of the original (11). The phrase “das Stadium ihres Fortlebens” is translated into English as “their stage of continued life” (254), but the original German term means not only continuity but also changes in the meaning of artwork.

5. “The coast line which softly runs away to the boskets of Sorrento, the subtle silhouette of Capri and Ischia will awaken in his soul memories, old as a world, about earthly paradise. What a devoted companion of the Neapolitan life this distant silhouette of Capri becomes! Awaken and stand near the window; you see it as a melting blue cloud on the skyline. It disappears at noon in the dazzling air and in the evening it appears again to burn purplish at sunset and to unite with the night becoming violet.” (All translations are mine except where indicated.)

6. See *Знаменитые русские о Неаполе*.

7. “One day in Capri—where I was in the spring of 1924 so that my daughter Daga could be treated medically—I went with her to a shop to buy almonds. We entered the shop, but suddenly I forgot the Italian name for almonds. The shopkeeper didn’t understand my mimes and gestures. Suddenly, a voice was heard: ‘My gracious lady, let me help you!’ I turned. Nearby stood a gentleman wearing glasses with thick lenses. I answered: ‘Please.’ When I received the pack of almonds and other purchases, he said: ‘Allow me to introduce myself—Doctor Walter Benjamin. May I accompany you?’”

8. “I said my name, and he offered to bring the packages to my home, but at once they fell out of his hands. We both began to laugh.”

9. “I often went shopping with Daga to the piazza. In a shop I wanted to buy almonds. I didn’t know the word for almonds in Italian, and the shopkeeper didn’t understand what I wanted from him. Nearby stood a man who said: ‘My gracious lady, may I help you?’ ‘Please,’ I said. I took my almonds and went out of the shop with the packages—the gentleman followed me and asked: ‘May I accompany you and carry the packages?’ I looked at him—he continued: ‘Allow me to introduce myself—Doctor Walter Benjamin.’—I said my name.

My first impression: glasses, throwing the light as little projectors, thick dense hair, small nose, clumsy hands—the packages fell out of his hands. In sum—a respectable intellectual, one of the prosperous ones.”

10. Therefore, both are translated as “my gracious lady.”

11. “Here at the market, the architectonic function of merchandise becomes clear: cloth and fabric form buttresses and columns, shoes and valenki hanging in a row on a string above the counter become the roof of the booth, large garmoshkias [accordions] create walls of sound, Memnon walls as it were.” (Benjamin, *Moscow Diary* 68)

12. “This would seem to be an expression of the infinite misery of these beggars, but it may also be the result of clever organization, for of all the Moscow institutions they alone are reliable, they alone refuse to be budged.” (Benjamin, *Moscow Diary* 36)

13. “Everything else here takes place under the banner of the remont. Every week the furniture in the bare rooms gets rearranged—this is the sole domestic luxury in which one can indulge, and at the same time it provides a radical means of ridding the home of “coziness” and the attendant melancholia that is its price. Government offices, museums, and institutes are forever changing location, and even the street vendors, who in other cities have their fixed spots, turn up in different places every day.” (Benjamin, *Moscow Diary* 36)

14. “But I have no idea whether I could even now bear living with her, given her astonishing hardness and, despite all her sweetness, her lovelessness.” (Benjamin, *Moscow Diary* 35)

15. The correct translation of this sentence should be: “I don’t know whether, even today, I would be up a life with her given its astounding harshness and, even with her sweetness, her lovelessness.” I owe this corrected translation to Susan Ingram (personal correspondence).

16. German *begreifen* would be a better term due to its connection with *der Begriff* (“concept”).

17. “The diary recorded only the first symptoms, watermarks of this catastrophe which appear in what are, meanwhile, relatively heterogeneous surroundings.”

18. “What is enacted on the staircases is a high school of stage management” (Benjamin and Lācis,

“Naples” 167). Also quoted in Asja Lācis’s German memoirs (Lācis, *Revolutionär im Beruf* 47).

19. “As in the hermit pictures of the *Trecento*, a door is seen here and there in the rock. If it is open one can see into large cellars, which are at the same time sleeping places and storehouses” (Lācis, *Revolutionär im Beruf* 46; Benjamin and Lācis, “Naples” 165). It is worth mentioning that the theatrical aspect of the street life of Naples, especially on its stairs, captured by Asja Lācis and Benjamin was developed at length more than twenty years later by Malaparte in the fragment from *The Skin* describing the Chiaia steps in Naples. The quotation at the beginning of my article is taken from this fragment. Malaparte’s description proves that Asja Lācis’s and Benjamin’s foreign gaze was very precise.
20. “Naples slumbering on the slopes of green hills—it is a lazy nymph who lowers her white legs into the blue waves...”
21. “‘Riga—can’t you see,’ said Pēteris pointing with his finger. [...] In the middle were the towers of St. Peter’s, the Dome and St. Jacob’s, heads raised proudly, almost into the clouds... Around them, far smaller, like obedient attendants, was the long Daugava riverfront row of houses ending with the stout castle... It was just like what he had seen on the bottle papers, except the view was far wider and grander than there was room for on the bottle papers.” This English translation is from my article “The Language of Riga,” translated from Latvian by Andris Mellakauls (Taurens 43).
22. “He [a priest—J.T.] was followed by a crowd hurling maledictions. At a corner a wedding procession appeared. The priest stands up and makes the sign of a blessing, and the cart’s pursuers fall on their knees” (Benjamin and Lācis, “Naples” 163).
23. See, for example, I^o2: “The anecdote brings things near to us spatially, lets them enter our life. [...] The true method of making things present is: to represent them in our space (not to represent ourselves in their space). Only anecdotes can do this for us” (846). There are clear parallels with the fragment quoted from K2,3.
24. “But when I read and translated for him some fragments from Andrejs Ūpītis, Benjamin was fascinated by the rich vocabulary of the Latvian language and the brilliant style of the writer.”
25. In her article “Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity,” Griselda Pollock gives a powerful account of how this masculine “impassive stroller,” the *flâneur*, “embod[ies] the novel forms of public experience” on which Modernist painting is based (Pollock 67, 70-75).
26. “The widening of the streets, it was said, was necessitated by the crinoline” (Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* 133).
27. “Finally, that switching—at high frequency—of the tastes of a given public, which is called Fashion, replaced with its essential changeableness the old habit of slowly forming styles, schools, and reputations. To say that Fashion took over the destinies of the fine arts is as much as to say that commercial interests were creeping in” (Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* 78).
28. In the English translation, this “burning” aspect of his interest in fashion—the first sentence from fragment “B 1a,1” (*Passagen-Werk* 112; *The Arcades Project* 63)—is lost: “For the philosopher, the most interesting thing about fashion is its extraordinary anticipations.”
29. “We kissed again and spoke of living together in Berlin, of getting married, of taking at least one trip together. Asja said that there had never been another city as difficult for her to leave as Berlin, did this have something to do with me?” (Benjamin, *Moscow Diary* 110).
30. “For someone who has arrived from Moscow, Berlin is a dead city” (Benjamin, *Moscow Diary* 112).
31. “In Berlin on November 5, anti-Semitic gangs roughed up Jewish citizens and plundered homes and businesses. And just three days later, on the evening of November 8, Adolf Hitler led some 600 brownshirts from the Bürgerbräukeller toward Odeonsplatz in Munich, hoping first to overthrow the Bavarian government and then to lead a march on Berlin” (Eiland and Jennings 195).

32. As we know from Plato's *Κριτίας* (*Critias*), the foundation of Atlantis was a result of love: Poseidon, "smitten with desire" for Cleito (daughter of Evenor and Leucippe), made the fortress on the hill surrounded by the circular (the ideal form for Plato) belts of sea (Plato 113d).

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