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# Walter Benjamin

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SELECTED WRITINGS

VOLUME 2

1927–1934

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Translated by Rodney Livingstone  
and Others

Edited by Michael W. Jennings,  
Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith

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has no need of a far distance shrouded in mist. It is at home within the four walls of praxis, and it stands on the threshold of the moment to speak the closing words of the play: "And 'Never' becomes, 'Before the day is out!'"

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Translated by Anna Bostock.

## The Railway Disaster at the Firth of Tay

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When people first attempted to smelt iron and build steam engines at the beginning of the nineteenth century, that was a very different matter from what happens today when scientists and engineers go about developing a new airplane or even a space rocket or some other new machine. Today we know what technology is. Such scientists and engineers have the attention of the whole world; newspapers inform us of their achievements, and great industrial concerns provide them with money for their research. But as for the men who made those inventions at the turn of the past century and who transformed the face of the earth—the inventors of the mechanical loom or gaslighting, iron smelting or the steam engine—basically the average person had no idea what they were doing, and even they could form no conception of the implications of their own work. It is difficult to call any one of these major discoveries more important than the others. For people in our day, they can scarcely be thought of independently of their applications. Even so, we may say that the most striking alterations to the globe in the course of the previous century were all in some way or other connected with the railway. I am going to tell you today about a railway disaster. Not so much to recount a horrifying story, but rather to put the event in the context of the history of technology and more particularly of railway construction. A bridge plays a role in this story. The bridge collapsed. This was without doubt a catastrophe for the two hundred people who lost their lives, for their relatives, and for many others. Nevertheless, I wish to portray this disaster as no more than a minor episode in a great struggle from which human beings have emerged victorious and shall remain victorious unless they themselves destroy the work of their own hands once more.

As I was thinking about what to say to you today, I went back to one of

my favorite books. It is a thick book, with illustrations, dating from around 1840, and is actually full of jokes and fanciful stories.<sup>1</sup> But we can acquire all sorts of curious knowledge from reading about what people in olden times found amusing and entertaining. For example, this book tells the adventures of a fantastic little imp who is trying to find his way about in the cosmos. When he arrives at the planets, he comes across a cast-iron bridge that links the countless heavenly bodies to one another. "A bridge whose two ends could not be glimpsed at the same time and whose piers rested on the various planets led, on a marvelously smooth asphalt surface, from one heavenly body to the next. The 333,000th pillar rested on Saturn. Then our imp noticed that the famous ring around this planet was nothing other than a balcony running entirely around the planet and on which the inhabitants of Saturn strolled in the evening to get a breath of fresh air." Do you see what I mean when I said that, at the time, people did not really know how they should react to technological advances? The latter were not without a comic side in their eyes. In particular, they thought it very funny that when iron buildings were constructed, only questions of form and matters of calculation should be taken into account. It was fitting, therefore, that there should have been a playful dimension in the first buildings of this kind to be built. Building in iron thus began with winter gardens and arcades—that is to say, with luxury buildings. But suitable technical applications were soon discovered, and this gave rise to buildings of a completely new type—constructions that had no precedent in the past. It was not just that they were founded on the new technology; they also satisfied quite new needs. It was at this time that the first exhibition palaces were built, the first covered markets, and above all the first train stations. They were still known then as "iron-railway stations" and they called up the strangest images in people's minds. Around the middle of the century a particularly audacious Belgian painter, Antoine Wiertz,<sup>2</sup> even put in an application to be allowed to paint the walls of these first stations with huge ceremonial pictures.

Before we take a look at the Firth of Tay—the vast, 3,000-meter-wide mouth of the River Tay in central Scotland—let's cast our minds back a little further into the past. In 1814 Stephenson built his first locomotive.<sup>3</sup> But it was not until 1820, when it became possible to manufacture the rails, that the first railway became a possibility. You should not imagine, however, that all this was achieved systematically, step by step. On the contrary, a violent quarrel at once broke out on the subject of the rails. Under no circumstances, so it was claimed, would it ever be possible to provide enough iron for the English rail network—and at this time people thought in terms of a tiny network by today's standards. It would be necessary, according to many experts, to make the "steam carriages" run on granite tracks. Then, in 1825, the first railway line was opened, and even today

"Locomotive No. 1" can still be seen at one of the terminals—and if you were ever to go see it, you would undoubtedly be tempted to think it was a steamroller for smoothing pavement rather than a genuine locomotive. In Europe, on the Continent, they began with quite short stretches of line, over distances that could have been covered just as well by mail coach, or even on foot. You may have heard that the first two German towns to be linked by rail were Nuremberg and Fürth; they were followed by Berlin and Potsdam, and so on. But on balance these developments were regarded largely as a curiosity. When the Medical Faculty of Erlangen University was asked for an expert opinion about the proposed Nuremberg railway, they replied that it should not be permitted under any circumstances. The passengers' brains would be affected by the speed, and even the mere sight of these roaring trains might well cause people to faint. At the very least, it would be necessary to build fences three meters high on either side of the tracks. The second German railway, between Leipzig and Dresden, was the subject of legal proceedings brought by a miller who alleged it diverted the wind from his mill; and when it turned out that a tunnel would be required, physicians again protested on the grounds that elderly people might suffer a stroke as a result of the sudden change in air pressure. What people thought of the railroad in those days can best be seen from the comment of an English scholar, who in other respects was anything but a fool. He said that he could not regard going by rail as a form of travel; in reality, you were just being sent from one place to another, as if you were a package.

In addition to these arguments about the benefits or drawbacks of the railroad, there were also struggles associated with the building process itself. We find it difficult today to imagine the stamina required of these early engineers, or the huge timespans with which they were forced to reckon. In 1858, when they were constructing the twelve-kilometer-long tunnel through Mont Cenis, they calculated that the work would last seven years. It was similar with the bridge over the Tay. In the latter case, there was a further factor to be considered. They had to take into account not just the loads that the bridge had to bear, but also the terrible storms that rage around the Scottish coast, above all in autumn and spring. During the building of the bridge, which lasted from 1872 to 1878, there were whole months when the storms hardly ever ceased, and there were times when work could be done only five or six days in a month. In 1877, when the bridge was almost complete, a gale of unprecedented violence tore two iron girders, each forty-five meters in length, from their stone piers and at one fell swoop destroyed several years' worth of work. All the greater was the triumph, then, in May 1878, when the bridge was opened amid great celebration. Only one warning voice was to be heard, although that was the voice of J. Towler, one of the greatest of English bridge builders.<sup>4</sup> He

expressed the view that it would be unable to withstand the storms for long and that people would soon be hearing of the Tay bridge once again.

A year and a half later, on December 28, 1879, at 4:00 in the afternoon, the regular passenger train left Edinburgh for Dundee, crowded with people. It was Sunday, and the six cars contained 200 passengers. Once again, it was one of those stormy Scottish days. The train was due to arrive in Dundee at 7:15 in the evening, but the time was already 7:14 when the signal box on the south side of the bridge announced its approach. I shall recount what happened next in the words of Theodor Fontane,<sup>5</sup> who describes the last that was heard of the train after that final signal. This is a passage from his poem "The Bridge over the Tay":

It was the train. It chugs past  
the South Tower, the storm in its face,  
And Johnny says, "There's only the bridge!  
But it won't stop us—we'll win the race.  
A stout boiler, a great head of steam  
will carry the prize off in this fight.  
And though it may rage and batter and scream,  
We'll conquer the elements this very night.

The bridge o'er the Tay is our pride and joy.  
It makes me laugh when I think of the past,  
with all of the trouble, the grief, and the woe  
the old ferryboat gave us right up to the last.  
Many and many a dear Christmas Eve  
Have I spent in the ferryman's cottage  
And gazed at our windows, lights burning so bright,  
And couldn't cross over there, wish though I might."

On the northern shore, the bridge watchman's house,  
All the windows gaze out to the south,  
And the watchman's people full of alarm  
Anxiously gaze out through the storm.  
For the wind in furious play seemed to grow  
and down from the skies flames did glow,  
Bursting in glory as they descended  
to the water beneath . . . and all was ended.

There were no witnesses to the events of that night. Of those who were in the train, none was rescued. So to this very day no one knows what happened—perhaps the storm had blown away the middle of the bridge even before the train arrived, and the train simply plunged into the void. At all events, the storm is said to have raged so furiously that it drowned out all other sounds. But other engineers, especially those who actually built the bridge, maintained that the storm had blown the train off its tracks and

hurled it against the parapet. It was this that caused a breach in the protective wall, and the bridge collapsed only much later.—So the first sign of the disaster was not the noise made by the falling train, but the flames that three fishermen noticed at the time, without suspecting that they came from the locomotive as it went hurtling down. These three men alerted the station on the south side, but when the latter tried to establish contact with the north station they received no response. The cables had been severed. They then contacted the stationmaster in Tay, who set out at once with a locomotive. He reached the spot a quarter of an hour later. Cautiously he inched the locomotive onto the bridge. He had barely reached the first central pier, about a kilometer out, when the driver applied the brakes so fiercely that the train almost leaped from the track. The moonlight had enabled him to see a gaping hole in the line. The central section of the bridge was gone.

If you look up the *Funkstunde* [Radio Times], you will find a picture of the damaged bridge that appeared at the time in the *Leipziger Illustrierte*. Even though the iron construction is evident at a glance, this bridge still had much in common with wooden bridges. Building in iron was in its infancy, and had not yet become fully confident of its own strengths. Of course, you are all familiar—from pictures, if from nowhere else—with the building in which iron first displayed itself with pride and utter self-confidence, a building which was also a monument to engineering calculation. I am referring to the tower that Eiffel completed for the World's Fair in Paris just ten years after the collapse of the Tay bridge. When the Eiffel Tower was built, it served no practical purpose of any kind; it was simply a landmark—a wonder of the world, as people say. But it was followed by the invention of radio telegraphy, and, at a stroke, the huge construction suddenly acquired a meaning. Today the Eiffel Tower is a Paris radio transmitter. Eiffel and his engineers had built the tower in seventeen months. Every rivet-hole had been precisely positioned in the workshops to within a tenth of a millimeter. Each of the twelve thousand metal fittings, each of the two and a half million rivets, had been machined to the millimeter. There was no sound of chisels on the work site; in the open air as much as in the builders' workshops, thought reigned over sheer muscle power, which it was able to transmit via cranes and secure scaffolding.<sup>6</sup>

Radio talk broadcast by Berliner Rundfunk, February 1932. *Gesammelte Schriften*, VII, 232–237. Translated by Rodney Livingstone.

## Notes

1. The book in question is *Un Autre Monde* (Another World), first published in 1844, with satirical-oneiric drawings by the great illustrator Jean Ignace Isidore Gérard, known as Grandville (1803–1847).
2. Antoine Wiertz (1806–1865), a Belgian painter of colossal historical scenes, was lampooned by Baudelaire. See also Benjamin's comments in his *Passagen-Werk* (Arcades Project).
3. George Stephenson (1781–1848), English inventor and railroad pioneer, built and successfully demonstrated the first locomotive, at Killingworth, in 1814. He went on to invent a number of other locomotives and cofounded the locomotive works at Newcastle in 1823.
4. Benjamin surely means Sir John Fowler (1817–1898), English civil engineer, who designed the Pimlico Railway Bridge (1860) and, with Sir Benjamin Baker, the Forth Railway Bridge (1882–1890). He was also consulting engineer to Ismail Pasha, Khedive of Egypt.
5. Theodor Fontane (1819–1898), novelist, poet, and essayist, was Germany's greatest realist writer. He wrote his first novel when he was fifty-six. He is best-known in the English-language world for *Effi Briest* (1895).
6. The last two sentences are quoted without attribution from Alfred Gotthold Meyer, *Eisenbauten: Ihre Geschichte und Aesthetik* [Iron Constructions: Their History and Aesthetics] (Esslingen, 1907), p. 93. See Benjamin's *Passagen-Werk* (Arcades Project), F4a,2.

## P

# Privileged Thinking

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### On Theodor Haecker's *Virgil*

*Virgil: Father of the West*<sup>1</sup> is the title of a book in which Theodor Haecker presents us with the truths, teachings, and warnings from the works of Virgil that seem most relevant to him after the passing of two thousand years. The author, although a Catholic, is a disciple of Kierkegaard, not merely as a theologian but also as a polemicist. And his book must be considered in the light of its polemical intent. Haecker has two chief concerns: the overthrow of the traditional evaluation, which places Virgil in the shadow of Homer; and the demolition of every untheological—or, more exactly, un-Catholic—interpretation of the poet. This dual focus makes the book quite distinctive among the mass of commemorative writing, but it shares with other important works the goal of ascertaining Virgil's proper place beyond Homer, beyond Greek culture in general, and even beyond the realm of pure poetry. The radical nature of the change, undoubtedly the first for several hundred years, can be seen from a glance at any of the literary histories published around the turn of the century. "Virgil," we are told there quite baldly, "was no great poet." In contrast, the various writings that have appeared for the bimillennial celebration bespeak a very positive assessment of the poet, and also emphasize that his greatness is rooted in the religious. Vyacheslav Ivanov writes, for example,

So what we have in Virgil's narrative of the wanderings and wartime toils of his *pater Aeneas* is not an old-style heroic saga, with tales of fame and suffering that amount to a mythological corroboration of the cult of the hero concerned, but a kind of hagiography reminiscent of Bible stories, inaugurating an endless series of deeds accomplished not by himself but by his successors, and serving as the launching pad for a vast destiny in the light of which the hero sees himself not so much as the enactor of those deeds but as the forerunner of the promised