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Anne Cuneo

About Lausanne, Basle and other Railway Stations

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Lausanne railway station is just a hundred yards from the house I lived in as a child. I was sung to sleep at night by the squealing of wheels, and the short whistles of the locomotives, by the voices coming over the loudspeakers which evoked in numerous languages places familiar or unknown. It was not uncommon for me, after falling asleep, to dream of distant cities: Munich, Vienna, Venice, Zagreb, Belgrade, Valencia, Madrid, Paris, Dieppe or London, Cologne or Frankfurt. During the daytime, I would sometimes go down to the station to study the timetables, or linger on the platforms, or gaze at tardy sleeping carriages. One day, I used to think, I too would leave for one of those fabulous cities hidden at the far end of the railway line – cities in which everything remained to be discovered. The station was the place where dreams of the future came together. Still today, I would exchange all the airplanes in the world for just one train. I have always had a particular affection for Lausanne, because it is a station open from east to west (or vice versa), and one can contemplate the horizon at both ends.

I have always preferred such open stations to those that finish in a cul-de-sac, even if such rail-heads have frequently served as a pretext for the construction of splendid edifices of steel and glass and cabled columns. Just think of the Gare de Lyon or the Gare du Nord in Paris, for example, with their incomparably harmonious Art Nouveau spaces. Or think of Paddington in London whose immense hall is criss-crossed by tens of thousands every day. Or think of Grand Central Station in New York. Think of all those great stations in which so many stories have been made and unmade. Geneva still retains something of its end-of-the-line ambiance, even if the trains have, for many years now, gone on as far as the airport, and even if its architecture has little that is exalting to recommend it. One still has the impression that the locomotive is leaning up against the end of the platform, catching its breath against the buffers.

There is nothing like that in a station like Lausanne. When a train comes to a halt, it is as though the locomotive is suspended beneath the canopy – hanging between arrival and departure, creating, more than ever, a sense of time. Trains arriving bring with them our past; those leaving travel by definition towards the future.

And stations, like life, are complicated affairs.

This is all the more apparent when, having travelled along the foot of the Jura Mountains, we find ourselves in – say – Basle. To be or not to be in a cul-de-sac – that is the first question. Here the trains arrive and then, sometimes on the same track, leave again in the same direction, turning their backs on whence they came. Not a cul-de-sac then? Nothing is as certain as it seems, for on other occasions, the traveller is displaced in a complex dance of manoeuvring, with continual comings and goings of carriages and locomotives, so that though one has the impression of moving forward, actually the direction has changed. There exists another station like that in the region: Delemont. At first sight, there's nothing of the cul-de-sac about Delemont; yet that is exactly what it is. At Basle, at least at Swiss Basle, things are not so clear-cut. For another particularity of the place is that it stands on the border. In fact there are two stations here placed back-to-back. In one, you are in Switzerland, in the other, France. If I had spent my childhood sleeping a hundred metres from that station, the trains would doubtless have whistled several different tunes because – butting up against the SBB (Swiss) station – there is the SNCF

(French) station, and that one is definitely a cul-de-sac in every possible way. In the great hall of the Swiss station, a signpost shows the way to «Basle SNCF» – the French station. It is at the end of the corridor, after the newspapers, the large shop and the restaurant that you cross an invisible line: the border.

And so it ends, or rather so begins the cul-de-sac.

The lights of the Swiss station have faded; you arrive in a rundown fiefdom of obsolescence. In the hall, a solitary poster proposes a «getaway pass» for eighty French francs – nobody has thought it necessary to adapt it for the advent of the Euro. That which was once the ticket counter of the SNCF, the French railways, is now the lost property office of the Swiss SBB.

One continues through a gateway over which an inscription announces «FRANCE» in white letters. Behind this, there is nothing, just faded colours and silence. Sometimes your passport is checked. The waiting room walls are magnificently panelled in dark wood. Even this late nineteenth century panelling, however, can do nothing to dispel the dejected air of the place. You want to go to the bar? There it is, but it has been closed for years. It would have been pleasant enough with its 1930's counter of the kind that has come back into fashion nowadays.

If you want to travel to Strasbourg or to Mulhouse, there is a ticket machine – up to date this, it takes Euros. It only accepts coins, however. It dispenses tickets for the region and for Paris. You will have to feed in one coin after another – a few dozen Euros for Strasbourg, about a hundred for Paris. And you had better hope that the machine does not jam just before you put in the last coin, because there is absolutely nobody here to help you. The French railway workers are resigned, «we've told them about it, but things get decided at Paris, not Basle.» Nobody can explain why Basle SNCF, international railhead station with its half-a-dozen platforms, has been left to decline like this.

All one can do is hope that Basle SNCF will not perish completely. For nothing is sadder than a railway station that dies, and, over the last few years, that particular sadness has been repeated all over the place. Large and, especially, small stations dry up and disappear. Perhaps, it is a problem of economic viability, but that does little for the comfort or pleasure of the traveller. Even when they do not disappear entirely, a station reduced to a few automatic ticket machines – without ticket counters or restaurant – is a body without a soul. For us aficionados, those little stations – replete with the life of the place in which they are rooted – are to the great ones what vegetables are to the meat in your plate: they bring out the flavour. If these small stations are lost, part of what is unexpected about travelling, and, as a result, part of the desire to travel for the sheer pleasure of it, will be lost with them.

Great or small, stations that remain alive with activity are meeting places where, between past and future, time is for an instant suspended and moments of unique significance can be savoured.

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