

Sustaining what?: Sebald's herring and the ethics of survival

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The greater part must be content to be as though they had not been ... and time that grows old in itself, bids us hope no long duration (Browne 1658, p. 29)

A common position that can be drawn from the work of Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Thomas Browne and WG Sebald is that the very aspect that makes a culture susceptible to decline, the characteristic that leads to its potential or eventual ruin, testifies to its value from the perspective of 'the human'. That is to say, the fact that the various extinct cultures or their texts have not survived testifies to their redeemable qualities. It is their fragility in the face of natural destruction that separates them from the force of historical barbarism and gives us access to the sense of how a different world might have arisen. That which *could* not survive the horrors of this world is linked to that which *would* not survive the horrors of this world were it to arise (which is, in Adorno's words, *humanity redeemed*). In addition to this, Sebald channels Goethe's early perception that destruction is natural and whatever is natural to humanity is also destructive. In fact, this idea of nature bears a striking resemblance to Benjamin's understanding of the progress of history¹, which is, in turn, echoed and elaborated upon by Adorno in *Negative Dialectics* (1966, 1973). The position is as follows: to whatever extent humanity tends to be destructive toward nature, etc., it is, in fact, the 'nature' in humanity that is the cause. The notion of sustaining in relation to 'nature' thereby takes a troublesome turn. What is it that we do when we attempt to 'sustain' nature? Do we thereby sustain destruction? This paper will concern itself with examining the same question in relation to 'culture'.

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As Primo Levi recognises in *The Drowned and the Saved* (1989), in a hostile world it is always the best amongst us who perish.² They perish because they prefer not to save themselves at the expense of others. From the perspective of the human, survival is never the goal since, as Sebald attests, nothing but destruction endures. Citing Thomas Browne, Sebald's narrator in *The Rings of Saturn* (2002) says that, just as in nature, which busies itself with the 'continuous process of consuming and being consumed, nothing endures. On every new thing there lies already the shadow of annihilation'. Sebald continues:

To him [Browne] it seemed a miracle that we should last so much as a single day. There is no antidote, he writes, against the opium of time. The winter sun shows how soon the light fades from the ash, how soon night enfolds us. (pp. 23-24)³

Just as Adorno and Benjamin link the hope of redemption to fragility and the possibility of annihilation, Sebald here gives voice to Browne's sentiment that it is because we will die, because we *can* die, that our hope for the day of redemption is maintained. Indeed, beyond this notion we can discern a damning question rising to the surface: how many days have been tainted in the course of history by a perverse anxiety to endure? How many barbaric acts have been sanctioned in the name of political and cultural regimes' desire to be sustained, and sustainable?

How might we apply the lesson or rupture associated with such a question to scholarship? Following Thomas Browne, and clearly echoing the sentiments of Primo Levi, Sebald's narrator says,

To set one's name to a work gives no one a title to be remembered, for who knows how many of the best of men have gone without a trace? The



iniquity of oblivion blindly scatters her poppyseed and when wretchedness falls upon us one summer's day like snow, all we wish for is to be forgotten. (1658, p. 24)

First of all, we must not hope to be sustained since, in light of all that has been lost, forgotten, destroyed, it would be an aberration to be sustained, to sustain, to survive. It would be ignoble. Thomas Browne continues:

Who can but pity the founder of the pyramids? ... In vain we compute our felicities by the advantage of our good names, since bad have equal durations (p. 29)

If it turns out that scholarship as a whole, and cultural studies in particular, is indestructible, that it can be eternally sustained, then it may very easily be aligned with the all-consuming force of natural and historical destruction.

When referring to Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson*, and to the corpse of Aris Kindt that is featured in the painting, Sebald's narrator says:

it is debatable whether anyone ever really saw that body, since the art of anatomy, then in its infancy, was not least a way of making the reprobate body invisible. (2002, p. 13)

The art of anatomy is here presented as a method, typical of instrumental reason and its related sciences, of turning away, of not seeing the horror right in front of your eyes. It is also, of course, a form of scholarship. While Sebald credits Rembrandt with the desire to bring the profanity of what has been done to the victim's corpse to light, later in the narrative all European works of art are tainted by the blood sacrificed to the Belgian sugar industry, which funded major art galleries with the capital made from working countless



Congolese slaves to death. The 'document of culture', Rembrandt's painting, is revealed to be culpable on both sides. The question relating to its ethical status becomes whether or not, by existing, it functions as the redeemer of its own debt—that is to say, *against* culture.

Art and science are guilty. In the science that is cultural studies, and scholarship in general, we might be said to engage in the same tendency that Sebald recognises in the anatomists of Rembrandt's painting. Our endeavours cannot be shielded from what Adorno calls '[t]he guilt of a life which purely as a fact will strangle other life'. This guilt, Adorno continues, 'is irreconcilable with living (1973, p. 364).

Might it be argued that the life that is being opened up via cultural studies, the field that is maintained in order to provide for so many careers, is reliant upon the violence of the world, a violence that scholarship has ceased to pay attention to amidst the throes of its own rapid growth and, most particularly, in its desperation to keep itself afloat? Have we attended to our own status as subjects, as revealed to us, says Adorno, by Samuel Beckett in *Endgame*—that is, 'merely existing, and thereby already committing an outrage'? (Adorno 1973, p. 251)

For Adorno, the ethical desirability of survival is more ambiguous than might at first appear. While, for him, Auschwitz demonstrated irrefutably that culture has failed (1966, p. 366), to abandon culture and, by implication cultural studies, would represent an equally horrific failure. 'Whoever pleads for the maintenance of this radically culpable and shabby culture becomes its accomplice', says Adorno, 'while the man who says no to culture is directly furthering the barbarism which culture showed itself to be (1966, p. 367).

What Adorno calls for, beyond anything else, is 'the self-reflection of thinking', which extends to the self-questioning of criticism. '[I]f thinking is to be true', says Adorno,



It must also be a thinking against itself. If thought is not measured by the extremity that eludes the concept, it is from the outset in the nature of the musical accompaniment with which the SS liked to drown out the screams of its victims. (1966, p. 365)

Any mode of scholarship that does not constantly think against itself, that fails to persistently risk its own existence, takes on the aspect of such an accompaniment to barbarism. Adorno is not advocating suicide here, but *risk*, and with it an ethics of thinking forged in, and by, uncertainty and precariousness. Such thinking does not concern itself chiefly with its own survival.

In *The Rings of Saturn*, Sebald's narrator provides some information regarding the extraordinary numbers of herring spawned in the North Sea. He tells us that

each female herring lays seventy thousand eggs, which ... would shortly produce a volume of fish twenty times the size of the earth, if they were all to develop unhindered. (p. 54)

The narrator continues:

It is even said that vast shoals of herring were brought in towards the beaches by the wind and the tides and cast ashore, covering miles of the coast to a depth of two feet and more.

And further, that their rotting corpses afforded 'the terrible sight of nature suffocating on its own surfeit' (p. 54). Surely the field of cultural studies, with its extraordinary propensity to populate the globe, can recognise itself in this image. When scholarship and its scholars take on the aspect of Sebald's silkworm moth, for which '[t]he only purpose it has is to propagate' (p. 275), in combination with evolution's compulsive and destructive



experiments in reproduction, they lurch into ethical and existential difficulties. The fact of decline is, from the perspective of scholarship, ethically neutral. It is inevitable, and even desirable, for the numbers in the field to dwindle, and if we were to die off completely we *might* finally take on the aspect of ethical integrity.

In Sebald's charge, the herring provide another lesson. His narrator reminds us that herring have a remarkable capacity for survival, to the extent that an inspector of the Rouen fish market

one day saw to his astonishment that a pair of herring that had already been out of the water between two and three hours were still moving, a circumstance that prompted him to investigate more closely the fishes' capacity to survive, which he did by cutting off their fins and mutilating them in other ways. (p. 56-57)

Such is the fate of survivors in the face of barbarism. Indeed, we might relate it to the dissection and mutilation of scholarship in university humanities faculties over the last few decades, a mutilation that is described as 'pretty shameful' by JM Coetzee's narrator in *Diary of a Bad Year*. In the same text, 'JC' suggests that, 'If the spirit of the university is to survive'—by which he seems to mean a scholarly sovereignty and freedom that is completely at odds with the universities' current status as business enterprises—it may need to resort to the sort of unofficial private existence historically reserved for dissidents. 'In other words', he says,

the real university may have to move into people's homes and grant degrees for which the sole backing will be the names of the scholars who sign the certificates. (p. 31-32)



In referring to the survival of the university in terms of *spirit*, Coetzee's narrator reveals the underlying suspicion that the university as we know it—as an institution—is dead or 'on its last legs'. What JC comes close to advocating is a radical departure from the form of scholarship with which we are familiar. If it were to occur, and if scholars were to take the final step in abandoning the universities, it might represent the killing off of a culture that has been reduced, in any case, to its death throes. That is to say, it might be the act of mercy that brings with it the possibility of redemption. It may be that there is no real choice in the matter since the alternative, it would seem, is the scholarly equivalent to a style of existence along the lines of what Adorno discovers in *Endgame*. In Beckett's play, he says,

Everything waits to be carted off to the dump. This stratum is not a symbolic one but rather the stratum characteristic of a post-psychological condition such as one finds in old people and in those who have been tortured. (1991, p. 252)

For Sebald, the anguish and indignities inflicted upon the herring are finally related to the fate of those who were put inside concentration camps in the name of Hitler's Germany. The sixty billion herring that are killed are a reflection of six million. Sebald damningly invokes the sensibility that it was okay to kill Jews because they were subhuman when he refers to the

presumption that the peculiar physiology of the fish left them free of the fear and pains that rack the bodies and souls of other animals in their death throes. But the truth is that we do not know what the herring feels. All we know is that its internal structure is extremely intricate and consists of more than two hundred different bones and cartilages. (p. 57)

Just as industry and consumers are prepared to ignore or delude themselves with regard to the barbaric treatment of animals, the Nazis were equally compelled to turn away from the



unthinkable reality of their victim's suffering in order to survive in, participate in, and *sustain*, the Third Reich.

Two pages after the extent of the slaughter of herring is described in Sebald's novel, we see a double page picture of bodies strewn amidst the trees of what seems like a forest. The image comes after the liberation of the camp at Bergen-Belsen is mentioned in the text. This is no coincidence. We are to see in our action or inaction with regard to the herring the same thing that we see in relation to the bodies of what we can only presume to be the camp's victims.

In *Rings*, Major George Wyndham Le Strange, who served in the regiment that liberated Bergen-Belsen, is said to have chosen a reclusive life of 'absolute silence' upon his return after the war. He is strange in the same way Beckett's characters, novels and plays, in their similar search for silence, are strange. In his essay on *Endgame*, Adorno says,

The violence of the unspeakable is mirrored in the fear of mentioning it. Beckett keeps it nebulous. About what is incommensurable with experience as such one can speak only in euphemisms, the way one speaks in Germany of the murder of the Jews. (1973, p. 245)

Thus Beckett's play, with its final Act of silence, is seen as the doomed attempt to speak in light of incommensurable disaster. For Adorno,

The words in *Endgame* sound like stopgap measures because that state of muteness has not yet been satisfactorily achieved; they are like an accompaniment to the silence they disturb.
(p. 260)



Thus the strangeness of the silence is the strangeness that it has not occurred all along. In a like sense, the strangeness of Sebald's *Major Le Strange* is the strangeness that there are not more Le Stranges in the world. It is the strange fact that, after Auschwitz, so much of the world continued to speak, continued to go on, with a ridiculousness reserved for tragicomedy, *just as before*—that is to say, as if that which is incommensurable with experience never occurred. Adorno goes on:

Irritated at the degenerate clumsiness of the impulse of life in his parents' trashcan conversation and nervous because 'it doesn't end,' Hamm asks, 'What do they have to talk about? What does anyone still have to talk about?' The play lives up to that question. It is built on the foundation of a prohibition of language, and it expresses that taboo in its own structure. (1973, p. 261)

Again, in a like manner we can see Sebald's novel in light of the same prohibition. What is it that gives Sebald to speak when Le Strange has chosen to be silent? Is Sebald's novel structured as a deferral of silence? Indeed, at the end, when the spiralling narrative has finally located the source of its horror, when the whole pattern is revealed to have been woven around the penetration of Nazism into the very *fabric* of the narrative's existence (via the silk trade), the narrator does go silent. And the silence does not constitute an end, since one gets the impression that *The Rings of Saturn* could go on circling endlessly. The end of the narrative constitutes, rather, the choice to be silent, the narrator's desire to end his part in the deferral, and the hope that somehow, against all of the odds, the *real* end might finally come.

But what sort of end? If we follow the allegory of the herring a little further, we come to a light at the end of the tunnel. As always, the light occurs *after* death. Sebald's narrator informs us that,



Once the life has fled the herring, its colours change. Its back turns blue, its cheeks and gills red, suffused with blood. An idiosyncrasy peculiar to the herring is that, when dead, it begins to glow... (p. 58)

While this after-death glow verges on pastiche, its quiet humbleness, related to the fact that it dies out after just a short while, lends it an air of redemptive solemnity.⁴ And perhaps, if we are lucky, scholarship itself will end with this glow, after the last survivors have been mutilated by *their* anatomists. And that glow will bear testament to fact that it *cannot* partake in the barbarism any longer, that the force of historical progress has slipped through its fingers, that it will ultimately share in the fragility associated with being human. And that at the last, although it is dead, there might at least be this light, if only for a moment, before its entire world is reduced, as everything in Sebald's, Browne's and Beckett's worlds, into ash.

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Notes

1. According to Eric Santer, 'Sebald shows himself to be the modern master of Benjaminian poetics ...' (2006, p. xix).
2. Browne asks a question, with regard to the survivors of history, that bears some similarity to Levi's position: 'Who knows whether the best of men be known, or whether there be not more remarkable persons forgot, than any that stand remembered in the known account of time?' (1658, p. 29).
3. In a related passage, Browne posits immortality (which is to say, survival and sustainability) as the only immortal thing: 'There is nothing strictly immortal, but immortality. Whatever hath no beginning, may be confident of no end;—all others have a dependent being and within the reach of destruction;—which is the peculiar of that necessary essence that cannot destroy itself;—and the highest strain of omnipotency, to be so powerfully constituted as not to suffer even from the power of itself' (30). Thus the link between survival/sustainability and destruction/barbarism in Sebald's work are strengthened.
4. I am disagreeing here with the notion, expressed by Santer and commonly held, that 'the idea of redemption seems generally quite foreign to Sebald's natural historical vision of the world' (2006, p. 102).



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