

## Walter Benjamin's Angel of History and the Work of Ethical Remembrance in W.G. Sebald

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David Hansen provides us with an excellent example of how to foster a moral relation with the collective past, something that requires ethical work. Although Hansen highlights Ludwig Wittgenstein and Franz Kafka as W.G. Sebald's intellectual guides, Walter Benjamin also has a central place.<sup>1</sup> I will attempt to deepen Hansen's argument by grounding Sebald's work of ethical remembrance in Benjamin's figure of the angel of history.

In his description of the ethical work done by Sebald's text, Hansen relates its powerful effect on his students. He illustrates how it led them to trust Sebald: giving themselves over to the text, feeling saddened and shaken by the human portraits, becoming speechless and questioning, being moved to tears, having their consciousness awakened, feeling called to speak again, being drawn to bear witness to the past. Sebald's texts, he says, induce a moral response in his students, constituting the work of ethical remembrance.

I will argue that this work is grounded in Walter Benjamin's notion of the angel of history. Hansen himself introduces the angel, quoting Benjamin's commentary on Paul Klee's painting, *Angelus Novus*, where Benjamin depicts the angel of history, wings outspread, looking backwards, seeing a catastrophe of multiple wreckages, wanting to fix things, but not being able to stay because a brewing storm propels him forward. Benjamin ends the passage by saying, "This storm is what we call progress."<sup>2</sup> He suggests that history is *typically* viewed as a continuous flow of time, one that gets filled with a linked chain of events that can be recounted in a single comprehensive narrative involving progress. But progress has also given us rational efficiency applied by administrative states for unspeakable ends, including the Holocaust.<sup>3</sup> For Benjamin progress is thus actually a violent storm, one that creates debris that is invariably left behind in its cumulative story. Progress is an ideology producing inconvenient victims and wreckages while simultaneously excluding them from its optimistic metanarrative. The view of the angel — in looking backwards — involves abandoning the idea of history as a cumulative string of events, seeing it rather as a non-cumulative juxtaposition of qualitatively different moments.<sup>4</sup> For any single account there are always events and persons that do not fit the comprehensive story. These do productive work by resisting incorporation, interrupting the comprehensive framework.<sup>5</sup> The angel is fixated on the *debris* left along the side of the road of history, forgotten and unclaimed, threatening its triumphant story. The angel embodies the unsettling of the triumphant arch of history by a wall of lamentation.<sup>6</sup>

Sebald's novels portray lives that have been wrecked by the Nazis' administrative state. In *Austerlitz*,<sup>7</sup> the protagonist futilely tries to recall his own life, but cannot eradicate the fifty years of not remembering, driving him to increasing despair.<sup>8</sup> In

*The Emigrants*,<sup>9</sup> three of the four main characters commit suicide. These accounts and more portray wreckage caused by the storm that unfolded in pre–World War II Germany. Sebald’s narrator, looking backwards, sees detritus everywhere, caused by that brewing storm. In this, Sebald’s narratives form a disturbing wall of lamentation that disquiets the reader, making visible traces that constantly threaten readers’ singular view of history. Sebald makes creative use of Benjamin’s angel of history.<sup>10</sup>

The view of the angel grounds the work of remembrance. Benjamin states that “history is not simply a science but also and not least a form of remembrance.”<sup>11</sup> By this he means an experience that brings the past into presence while keeping the two in tension.<sup>12</sup> The tension occurs because the point of remembrance is to make forgotten events in the past register in the present through disruption.<sup>13</sup> As such, remembrance is an experience that blocks us from seeing history as a cumulative narrative, not only forcing its invincible story to fragment, but also refashioning our very *existence* as *responses* to the suffering in the past. Sebald’s stories do this: for example, *The Emigrants*’ stories interrupt the flow of history by portraying the protagonists’ attempted homecomings, only to find mere ruins of their personal histories. The reader is inserted into remembered events of ruined lives, thereby forbidding us to see history as progress without wreckage, calling into question our own tranquility. This is in effect a felt obligation if not an accusation: “you should not try to escape the pain that inevitably arises when you engage the horrors of the past; instead, you must fully face and investigate the meanings of those traces of pain.”<sup>14</sup> This is the opposite of mere recollection, which inserts the past into the flow of history. Instead, in remembrance, the ethical breaks through history’s flow, as if the text were obligating us, making an ethical claim we cannot escape.

Benjamin argues that “what science [history] has ‘determined,’ remembrance can modify.”<sup>15</sup> Remembrance means, for him, that the *completeness* of past suffering can be made *incomplete*, precisely through our mindfulness. Sebald evokes such mindfulness, often through the trope of repetition. His layers of framing in *Austerlitz* provides a good example: the Polish neighbor Vera’s first-person account of his mother Agáta’s life is told to the protagonist Austerlitz, embedded for us in his first-person story to the narrator, which is embedded in his first-person narrative to us. Such layering interrupts our mere recollection of the past as a cumulative story. The *completeness* of Austerlitz’s suffering is made *incomplete* by its retelling — modifying history because the narrative forms a commemoration. As commemorative, an ethical trace breaks through history’s flow, becoming testimony, bearing witness that repeats, breaking the past’s finality.<sup>16</sup> The layered witness breaks the tyranny and determinism of history, deferring the suffering’s finality through its being brought into presence. The work of ethical remembrance in Sebald not only refashions our *understanding* of history, but modifies history *itself* through such commemoration.

The work of remembrance is largely something we *undergo*. The verbs Hansen used to describe his students’ reactions to Sebald’s text are mostly passive — something happened *to* Hansen’s students. In particular, their *centeredness* was

interrupted, displaced, obligated. The text broke through as something foreign, a strangeness that profoundly unsettled them, bringing them to tears, speechless, deeply moved. The decentering work of Sebald's narrative constitutes an ethical remembrance that *calls* the reader for a moral response. Ignasi Ribó makes explicit its ethical character: "it is because the other *appeals* to me; not as an abstract being, but *face-to-face*. I am asked to give and to receive, to engage in what is the fundamental ethical relationship of *justice*."<sup>17</sup> As readers, we come face-to-face with Austerlitz, Vera, Max Ferber, Henry Selwyn; their first-person accounts *appeal* to us, engage us in an ethical relation with the past. The protagonists cry out that it is "often wrong to expect justice from history."<sup>18</sup> The ethical work of remembrance in Sebald's text is an interruption of triumphalist history by obligations arising from the protagonists' first-person narratives, evoking a personal responsibility that cannot be evaded — the call of *justice*.

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1. Ben Hutchinson, "The Shadow of Resistance: W.G. Sebald and the Frankfurt School," *Journal of European Studies* 41, no. 3/4 (2011): 267–284; Ignasi Ribó, "The One-Winged Angel: History and Memory in the Literary Discourse of W.G. Sebald," *Orbis Litterarum* 64, no. 3 (2009): 222–262; Ritchie Robertson, "W.G. Sebald as a Critic of Austrian Literature," *Journal of European Studies* 41, no. 3/4 (2011): 305–322; Simon Ward, "Ruins and Poetics in the Works of W.G. Sebald," in *W.G. Sebald: A Critical Companion*, eds. Jonathan James Long and Anne Whitehead (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004), 58–71.
  2. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), 257–258.
  3. Robertson, "W.G. Sebald as a Critic of Austrian Literature," 308.
  4. Stéphane Mosès, *The Angel of History: Rosenzweig, Benjamin, Scholem* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 11.
  5. Howard Caygill, "Walter Benjamin's Concept of Cultural History," in *Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin*, ed. David S. Ferris (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 94.
  6. Rainer Nägele, *Benjamin's Ground: New Readings of Walter Benjamin* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1986), 11.
  7. Winfried Georg Sebald, *Austerlitz*, trans. Anthea Bell (New York: Random House, 2001).
  8. Russell Kilbourn, "Architecture and Cinema: The Representation of Memory in W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*," in *W.G. Sebald: A Critical Companion*, eds. Long and Whitehead, 153.
  9. Winfried Georg Sebald, *The Emigrants*, trans. Michael Hulse (New York: New Directions, 1996).
  10. Ribó, "The One-Winged Angel."
  11. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 471.
  12. Robert Gibbs, "Messianic Epistemology: Thesis XV," in *Walter Benjamin and History*, ed. Andrew E. Benjamin (New York: Continuum, 2005), 208.
  13. Robert Gibbs, *Why Ethics? Signs of Responsibilities* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 355.
  14. Hutchinson, "The Shadow of Resistance," 273.
  15. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 471.
  16. Jan Ceuppens, "Seeing Things: Spectres and Angels in W.G. Sebald's Prose Fiction," in *W.G. Sebald: A Critical Companion*, eds. Long and Whitehead, 191.

17. Ribó, "The One-Winged Angel," 237.
18. Emmanuel Levinas, "The Meaning of History," in *Difficult Freedoms: Essays on Judaism*, trans. Sean Hand (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 227.