
THREE KINDS OF RUIN:
HEIDEGGER,
BENJAMIN, SEBALD

Max Pensky*

(1) Stein und Zeit¹

There is a strange moment in the great French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs' unfinished, posthumously published work, *The Collective Memory*. The topic is, as ever, the social nature of memory or the sociological description of memory processes as irreducibly group-based. Social groups generate memory-processes as part of their internal solidarity and as the external expression of their shared identity, and Halbwachs, not unreasonably, suspected that for this reason all social groups maintained not just a temporal but a spatial memory-process, or better, a suite of memory routines that ramify through space and time, between individuals and groups, and further, between groups and material objects.

Halbwachs believed that a group's extension in physical space – where and how the group situated itself, in a non-supervenient manner from its various individual members – played a constitutive role in how its individual members would re-member. This extension is not simply a matter of physically occupying a given space or series of spaces but of transforming and creating space through organized activity: building. And this process, Halbwachs suggested, was dialectical: just as the endurance of the social group, its internal cohesion and external identity, was dependent on the stability of the groups spatiality, so too the physical space itself was in a real sense dependent on the enduring memories of the group that occupies it.

* State University of New York, Binghamton

¹ I borrow this play on words from Assmann, J. (1995), *Stein und Zeit: Mensch und Gesellschaft im alten Ägypten*. München: W. Fink Verlag.

This suggestive hypothesis led Halbwachs to suspect that urban groups may actually enact or be, rather than merely inhabit, the built urban environment. In other words, buildings are not expressions, symbols, or repositories of collective memory, but the latter's physical process. The "stones of the city," as Halbwachs writes, are therefore not allegories for the stability of an urban population's shared identity. In large measure, they simply are that identity.

This implies that buildings, as cases for memory, don't merely preserve collective memory for the series of organisms that are encased in them. Rather, the buildings are those memories, and for this reason their durability and stability through time both holds the urban collective together, literally, and at the same time places that collective in a peculiar concentration of time, a social time where the endurance of stone over time, and through time, is both nature and history at once.

Buildings enact a dialectic of natural history, a discourse that I here borrow from the suggestive and compact essay on "The Idea of Natural History" that Theodor W. Adorno published in 1932. There Adorno suggested that the idea of natural history is best understood as a dialectical way of seeing, a construction of concepts which like a chemical elective affinity become volatile in one another's presence and can, under suitable theoretical conditions, reverse polarity, such that nature, developed to the point of its most extreme significance, appears as the saturation of time – that is, as fully timely, hence historical being – where humanity as a historical phenomenon in turn appears under the sign of the historical repetition of catastrophe, and therefore as mythically recursive and static, that is, as nature.²

Nature, for the appearance of timelessness, or resistance to the encroachment of historical time, is always in a real sense illusion only; history, for the built landscape stands opposed to the materiality of nature and yet at the same time is nothing other than that same nature. In their stone buildings, the urban collective can experience a genuinely dialectical relationship to their own temporality, since, as Halbwachs writes, it

² See: Adorno, T.W. (1984), "The Idea of Natural History," (translated by Robert Hullot-Kentor). *Telos*, no. 60, (summer 1984), pp. 111–124. For a discussion see: Pinsky, M. (2004), "Natural History: The Life and Afterlife of a Concept in Adorno," *Critical Horizons* vol. 5, no.1 (2004), pp. 227–238.

has no impression of change so long as streets and buildings remain the same. Few social formations are at once more stable and better guaranteed permanence... The nation may be prone to the most violent upheavals. The citizen goes out, reads the news, and mingles with groups discussing what has happened. The young must hurriedly defend the frontier. The government levies heavy taxes that must be paid... But all these troubles take place in a familiar setting that appears totally unaffected. Might it not be the contrast between the impassive stones and such disturbances, which convinces people that, after all, nothing has been lost, for walls and homes remain standing?³

Walls and homes did not remain standing. Halbwachs himself did not experience the mass destruction of many of the cities of Europe during the Second World War: arrested by Vichy officials after protesting the arrest and internment of his elderly Jewish mother and father-in-law, he was himself deported to Buchenwald where he died shortly before the war's end. But his insight about the relationship between buildings, subjects, and collective memory is important for framing a range of questions concerning the ruin, rather than the stability, of buildings.

How does the ruined building come to articulate a distinctive mode of a dialectic relating nature and history – a natural history in which both terms depend upon, exacerbate, and ultimately interpenetrate one another? Is there a mode of memory that is appropriate to the ruined building, released by or mobilized by the experience of former sites of human dwelling that have been evacuated, that stand now as forms of experience? How does one think about the natural history of the ruin?

These questions can draw on a long and well-established tradition in which the ruined building stands for, bears, a burden of signification for the observer who reconstructs it, so to speak, as a site for something other than dwelling or shelter. In this sense one could say that the history of the ruin as a meaning-bearing location is the history of social and cultural modernity. In an admirably concise recent history, for instance, Brian Dillon traces the consistency in the history of attitudes toward ruined classical sites, which as early as the first origins of cultural modernity in the late 14th century were already being reconstructed as hieroglyphs, open signifiers whose age, partially destroyed state, and

³ Halbwachs, M. (1980), *The Collective Memory*. New York: Harper & Row, p. 131.

jagged and gapped history of transmission qualified them as shelters or cases for a wide range of indirect normative claims.⁴

A “secret language of gesture, line and ornament” could justify the dialectically subtle self-understanding and self-assertion of a newly confident age precisely by comparing itself (unfavorably) to the pomp and massive majesty of classical architecture, with the crucial proviso that the age that inhabited the latter is vanished. As the ruin symbolizes the transience and temporality of building and living, it both threatens and offers significance as a meditational object-lesson on the relation between social life and physical life. The ruin, to put it probably too preciously, is rune: a cipher or mark whose very enigmatic character qualifies it both for occult significance and as a sign of the constant threat of an insignificant social world threatened at all moments with the omnipresence of guaranteed oblivion.

It was a short step from this renaissance fixation on the ruin as visible mark of a dialectic of meaning and meaninglessness to the baroque allegorical construction of the ruin as the physical embodiment of human vanity and the godforsakenness of earthly life. In both theater and the graphic arts, the moral-religious catechism of human vanity is set against the background of the ruins of pompous classical culture. Architectural stone, marble and granite, and the repertoire of decorative styles that embellish stone, disclose their true significance only once they are weathered, cracked, partial. And subsequent transformations of the semiotics of the architectural ruin kept, *mutatis mutandis*, this core function: the physical ruin is cleared, so to speak, by the intention of the subjective observer, the destroyed or unbuilt building is re-built, reconstructed, as a blank screen on which the various normative ambitions of the observer can be projected.

While the status of the ruin as an allegorical site for moral catechism is most evident in the baroque preoccupation with human vanity and pride and its attendant relapse back into the godforsaken or abandoned scene of unredeemed nature, even the Enlightenment continued, in a secularized manner, the allegorization of ruin. The ruin’s plasticity could allegorize both natural or man-made disasters and the omnipres-

⁴ Dillon, B. (2005), “Fragments from a History of Ruin,” *Cabinet*, vol. 20 (Winter 2005).

ent threat of the evacuation of meaning from the landscape of human existence that such disasters threaten. Sublime violence, again either human and historical (war, pestilence, famine) or natural (earthquake, volcano) are processes of creative destruction that offer ruins as sites of ambivalence, whose collective memory requires ongoing philosophical interpretation.

Hence a dialectic of natural history constructs the image of the ruin as the “chronotope” in Bakhtin’s sense, a spatio-temporal singularity which serves as a generative point for narrative construction and for the narrative work of collective memory. If, for instance, the narrative of guaranteed historical progress through the gradual historical victory of human technological control is vitiated through the repetition of disaster – a common enough trope in the Enlightenment *philosophes*, just as much as in their splenetic critic, Voltaire – then the image of the ruined city (Lisbon, Pompeii, Smyrna) destroyed by some sublime spasm of overwhelming violence, continues under changed terms to serve as the familiar catechism of human vanity and the return of nature to take revenge for the injuries done to it. But at the same time the ruin can also, without contradiction, operate as the mnemonic device that reminds Enlightenment culture of the proximity of natural disaster or human folly, reminding it of the autonomous and contingent nature of its technical and moral progress, or serving as a concrete visual cue of the difference between European rationality, with its internal resources for control and stabilization of social antagonisms, and the calamities of vanished empires and their smashed cities, which had no such *ratio* to save them.⁵

In what follows I would like to trace three intertwined discourses that emerge when this narrative of ruin as cipher of moral catechism, or the ruin as manipulable allegory of natural history, is further transformed by the anticipation, and then the memory, of the disastrous “urbicide” of the European city in World War II.⁶ In the first, Hei-

⁵ For a fuller discussion see: Pensky, M. (2010), “Contributions to a Theory of Storms: Historical Knowing and Historical Progress in Kant and Benjamin,” *The Philosophical Forum*, vol. XLI, nos. 1 and 2 (Spring/Summer 2010), pp. 149–174.

⁶ I borrow this term from Mendieta, E. (2007), “The Literature of Urbicide: Friedrich, Nossack, Sebald, and Vonnegut,” *Theory & Event*, Vol. 10, no. 2 (2007).

degger's essay "Building Dwelling Thinking" evokes a world without ruin and, for Heidegger, without a specific kind of (urban) memory: Heidegger's postwar project, the re-pastoralization of Germany's shattered cities, seeks an exit from the dialectic of natural history by enveloping both poles of this dialectic within a space of thinking that is, in effect, "unruinable." In Benjamin's notes and sketches for the Arcades Project, the ruin as the concrete image that emerges at the site of nature and history at their moment of maximum dialectical interpenetration is allowed or encouraged to present itself once the subjective intentionality of the magisterial subject, the sovereign observer, is erased so far as possible from the site of ruin: this complex and frankly somewhat unhinged experimental methodology, so close ultimately to the intoxicating operations of surrealism, attempts to wrest the power of the image of the ruin from the experience of the big city – Paris, paradigmatically – even where or perhaps especially where no ruin is to be found. Finally, the prose works of the German writer W.S. Sebald present a version of the natural history of the ruin which, despite Sebald's extraordinary prose, in fact seeks to recuperate a discourse of the ruin as site of moral catechism that dates back well before the experiences, and concrete remainders of experiences, he describes.

(2) Totenbaum

When she returned to Germany in 1950, Hannah Arendt witnessed a peculiar behavior amongst the German citizens, coping with their shattered cities a half decade after the war's end. Picking their way through these peculiar urban areas where ruins and inhabited buildings coexisted together with a great number of constructions that were an odd combination of both, the inhabitants, Arendt noticed, had taken to sending one another postcards of "churches and market squares, public buildings and bridges that no longer existed,"⁷ as though the cards and their images of an intact city could rectify or supplant the reality of the landscape that they had to occupy. For Arendt, what was even more noteworthy

⁷ Safransky, R. (1998), *Martin Heidegger: Between Good and Evil* (translated by Ewald Osers). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, p. 362.

than this practice was the specific constellation of affects that seemed to accompany it: “The reality of destruction that surrounds every German,” she later wrote of her visit, “is resolved in a brooding, though not very deeply rooted self-pity, which, however, vanishes rapidly when in some wide thoroughfares ugly little flat buildings, originating in some main street in America, are erected.”⁸

Even sixty years later the ubiquitous *Fussgaengerzonen* lined so often with “ugly little flat buildings” is a common enough sight in most German downtowns, and Arendt understandably sees the proliferating architecture of the new American dominium as another kind of loss, another infliction of a technological solution to a human catastrophe. On the other hand, though, her scorn at the satisfied reactions of Germans to the rapid Americanization of their destroyed cities itself feeds from the kind of discourse of resentment and victimhood she also despises.

Her trip in 1950 had been to visit Martin Heidegger. The city of Freiburg (where Benjamin and Sebald both trained as university students) had been attacked by more than 300 Lancaster heavy bombers on the night of November 27, 1944, and had much of its old city center damaged in the attack. Arendt certainly would have seen downtown rubble piles there, as she passed through on her way to Heidegger’s hut at Todtnauberg. And whatever else might have transpired at that encounter, we can speculate that the two might have had occasion to talk about houses.

Heidegger’s essay on “Bauen Wohnen Denken” was not published until 1954, but Heidegger notes there that the essay had first been given as a lecture on August 5 1951, for a Darmstadt colloquium on “Man and Space.”⁹ Perhaps not surprisingly, Heidegger’s lecture offers a philosophical example of the sort of erasure of memory of destruction that Sebald would condemn in postwar German literature. There appears to be no special urgency in the text to register the fact of physical destruction or its aftermath, which is simply absent; instead Heidegger notes as a social fact requiring no further explanation the “current housing shortage,”

⁸ Arendt, H. “Besuch in Deutschland,” in: *Zur Zeit, Politische Essays*, 46. Quoted in: Safran-sky, R. (1998), p. 364.

⁹ Heidegger, H. (1971), “Building Dwelling Thinking,” in: *Poetry, Language, Thought* (translated by Albert Hofstadter). New York: Harper & Row.

the technically adept response to which has generated housing but not dwelling. It is this humdrum set of social needs that Heidegger addresses with his own more high-blown worries about the inhuman and alienating aspect of the cheap and Americanized housing architecture that West Germany, at least, was providing to address the shortage.

“On all sides we hear talk about the housing shortage, and with good reason. Nor is there just talk: there is action too. We try to fill the need by providing houses, by promoting the building of houses, planning the whole architectural enterprise. However hard and bitter, however hampering and threatening the lack of houses remains, the *real plight of dwelling* does not lie merely in a lack of houses. The real plight of dwelling is indeed older also than the increase of the earth’s population and the condition of the industrial workers. The real dwelling plight lies in this, that mortals ever search anew for the nature of dwelling, that they *must ever learn to dwell*.” [142]

Such new construction, Heidegger noted, certainly provided much-needed shelter. But they were also houses impossible to dwell in: “today’s houses may even be well-planned, easy to keep, attractively cheap, open to air, light, and sun, but – do the houses in themselves hold any guarantee that *dwelling* occurs in them?” [145–6]

It’s not entirely clear from “Building Dwelling Thinking” why postwar residential urban architecture was undwellable for Heidegger, though it seems plausible to suppose that much of the problem is simply the location in an urban center, rather than any specific features of design and construction. But it’s also true that the very newness and sameness, the detachment from the historicity of a population in its landscape, made the *Neubau* inhabitable but undwellable, the latter implying for Heidegger a specifically pastoral-agrarian mode of existence where the mode and means of residential construction exhibits manifest connections to the nurturing and cultivating work of a primary economy.

Building cultivates the intertwinement of human being with its manifold surroundings. Hence there is an implied antinomy, for Heidegger, between building and construction – building is less about imposing human technical prowess through the medium of stone, wood or fabricated material than it is the continual preserving, nurturing subsistence within a landscape that has always been there. Building in this sense may imply a desistance from the will to construction. Building is dwelling;

and dwelling is ‘the manner in which mortals are on the earth.’ “Building as dwelling,” Heidegger concludes, “unfolds into the building that cultivates growing things and the building that erects buildings.” [148]

This antinomy between building and constructing certainly implies a peculiar relationship to the phenomenon of the ruin. In one sense, certainly, “Building Dwelling Thinking” reacts to the urban ruin less by forgetting it than by enforcing a kind of mental hygiene where the ruin cannot be registered at all, though life in Freiburg in 1950 would certainly have made this mental hygiene difficult to practice.

Structural stone was of course out of the question for new construction. As an economic fact stone building would be reserved for the reconstruction of historically significant cathedrals, churches and other public buildings, in cases where structural stones could be recovered and reassembled. In other cases the massive use of brick masonry for housing in German cities provided a kind of basic pattern of reconstructive labor for decades to come: the picking, sorting, and stacking of the millions of bricks left behind once the fires ignited by dropped incendiary ordnance had superheated mortar and caused the ubiquitous multistory masonry apartment blocks to collapse. (In *The Rings of Saturn*, W.G. Sebald ascribes this particular childhood memory, the postwar city landscape as an endless plain of stack after stack of recovered and sorted brick, to Michael Hamburger, but it must have been extraordinarily widespread for urban childhoods in both Germanies in the 1950s.¹⁰)

How can the erection of *Neubau* satisfy this duality of building, such that it is both cultivation and construction in a single act? Heidegger offers no hints on this subject, but implicit in his pastoralism is the principle that *there must be no ruins*. One simple way to achieve this organic building principle is to avoid urban building entirely; another compatible principle would be to eschew all manufactured building materials and construct principally from trees, that is, from wood. (Heidegger’s example of a rural stone bridge that “gathers” the banks of the stream through the pastoral meadow is interesting here just because one cannot of course dwell in (or under) it.) And in fact Heidegger’s pastoral ideal of the form of human habitation that satisfies all his positive criteria for

¹⁰ Sebald, W.G., *The Rings of Saturn*, p. 177.

dwelling in “Building Dwelling Thinking” is the Schwabian farmhouse, roughly 200 years old in Heidegger’s own description, with wooden timbers as the principle structural element, and plasterwork, stone, masonry and metal present if at all as (limited) design elements necessary for reinforcement or insulation or, one imagines, in a very limited sense, as ornament. “Here,” Heidegger writes, “the self-sufficiency of the power to let earth and heaven, divinities and mortals enter *in simple oneness* into things, ordered the house.”

It placed the farm on the wind-sheltered mountain slope looking south, among the meadows close to the spring. It gave the wide overhanging shingle roof whose proper slope bears up under the burden of snow, and which, reaching deep down, shields the chambers against the storms of the long winter nights. It did not forget the altar corner behind the communal table; it made room in its chamber for the hallowed places of childbed and the ‘tree of the dead’ – for that that is what is called a coffin there: the *Totenbaum* – and in this way it designed for the different generations under one roof the character of their journey through time.” [160]

This is, one imagines, a house that cannot, will not be ruined or, in a sense, ever destroyed, since in its very essence it is no longer perceptible as an artificial object or imposition of technical expertise inserted into a landscape. Each cozy farmhouse, like a nodule growing in and through its geological setting, is a site where – to use the terms of our subject-matter – natural history has performed yet another of its inversions, extruding a building that is neither exactly built in a conventional sense nor precisely “natural” in the way that, say, the geological features of its landscape are: the farmhouse combines – or ‘gathers’ — the polarity of nature and history into one focal point.

This natural history of the farmhouse threatens at every moment to lapse into sentimentality and kitsch, as Heidegger himself understands. It is not and cannot be the answer to the social problem, the shortage of decent, affordable housing, but stands as a continuing rebuke to the framing of the question of the house as a technological question, since building more does not correlate to dwelling better. And perhaps it’s Heidegger’s very willed blindness to the tidy rubble piles, the sorted stacks of blasted brick, or the empty facades of Freiburg’s old downtown

that permits him this older and broader view of the indifference point of a history of building and the traces of a fugitive call to live differently.

But that *Totenbaum* still bothers.

One takes Heidegger's point, of course, that wooden houses in which one dwells, in which one invites the unity of the Fourfold, of mortals and divinities, earth and sky, is also a site for the unification of organic life and the social enactment of death, a holism under one roof that expresses the full range of integrative dimensions of pastoral existence that urban life, so susceptible to ruin, cannot make possible. It is nevertheless unnerving to envision Heidegger's un-ruinable farmhouse containing within itself its own *Totenbaum*, indeed being itself just such a *Totenbaum*, an organic growth, a wooden capsule, consisting of an indefinite series of *Totenbaueme*, like nested dolls or a series of nested cases or etuis enclosing or encapsulating the indefinite, indeed indifferentiated lives of the inhabitants, who surrender their individuality in this fantasy of pastoral fulfillment as readily, and as completely, as any Odyssean sailor threatened at every cove with the overwhelming mythical power of unmastered nature.

The strangeness of the word itself needs to be registered, certainly, as well, since Heidegger is careful to make its regionalism a point of pride. "Tree of the dead" is what a coffin is known as, in these parts. This is peculiar. Certainly an archaeologist of early central and northern European prehistory would be familiar with the relatively rare and brief but scientifically interesting practice of tree burial, in which the trunk of a large tree, usually an oak, was carefully hollowed to fashion a neat capsule for the burial of a chieftain, princess, or other high-ranking corpse. Decorative burial objects tend to be found in the rare cases (pun intended) where tree burials are discovered more or less intact; moreover, the tannins of the oak can have a powerful preservative effect on the body, especially on the skin, which is gradually stained to a striking, glossy obsidian black.

Why this bronze-age burial practice should have been etymologically preserved in the Swabian dialect, where elsewhere the word, like

the practice, was long since lost, is yet another natural-historical nodule growing, benignly one supposes, in or on the farmhouse floor.¹¹

But why Heidegger's entire essay seems to me at least to come to revolve precisely around this focal point, this single word *Totenbaum*, is less a matter of etymological contingency and has to do with the heart of the matter of natural history. Words are natural history, certainly, in that moment where their otherwise contingent genealogies disclose a glimpse into a mode of human memory that otherwise remains occluded. Heidegger's essay teases the words *Bauen*, *Wohnen*, *Denken* to generate a glimpse of an alternative history of the natural stuff of buildings from out of the heart of a ruined present.

I choose instead to tease at his unwitting candidate for the "way of seeing" or way of remembering that is natural history: *Totenbaum*, whose cracks offer a glimpse of a human history older by far than all three of these newcomer words. The will to encapsulate and to make of the world one's own *etui*, the capacity to see the tree as at once the source of life and the material for the ebbing and denial of life: isn't there in this glimpse also a faint memory of that first tree of life, from which the divinities, lice-infested and hooting with alarm and lust, Heidegger's own African ancestors, first descended, and from where they began their long, long walk, each band no doubt believing itself autochthonous but nevertheless proceeding at a stately fifty kilometers per generation both East and West, until they had covered the distance from Turkana to Pelau, Olduvai to Tierra del Fuego, leaving in their wake nothing at all, except perhaps the midden cairns of empty shells of whelks, mussels and clams in their thousands, marker piles of calciferous *etuis* stationed with such inadvertent precision that archaeologists can predict with confidence where the next one will be found on the archaic route along vanished coastlines.

¹¹ On this dialectical fact I thank Dennis J. Schmidt for his incomparable expertise: see: Kluge (2002), *Etymologisches Woerterbuch des deutschen Spraches*. Berlin: Gruyter, p. 625: "Neben ihm [Sarg] haelt sich im suedwesten Totenbaum als heimisches Volkswort, daneben Totenruhe."

(4) La Vie dans l'Etui

In a way far more manifest than Heidegger, Walter Benjamin certainly devoted a good deal of his later thought to the question of buildings and their quiddity – of empty and abandoned buildings, of buildings as capsules and mausoleums, time machines, and unwitting or involuntary vessels for a host of human remembering, dreaming, hoping and fearing.

Walter Benjamin's *Passagenwerk* is of course a primary site for reflections of this kind. Like Halbwachs, Benjamin did not live to see the industrial demolition of entire urban centers through aerial bombardment, though one can speculate that the experience of air war against a civilian population in Spain was sufficient grounds for the inference that the coming war would entail such large-scale destruction; one moving entry in Benjamin's Parisian notes is a citation from a 1938 work by the French philosopher Pierre-Maxime Schuhl, who wrote of the use of air attacks in the Spanish Civil War in his 1938 topical work, *Machinisme et philosophie*. "The bombers remind us of what Leonardo da Vinci expected of man in flight: that he was to ascend to the skies 'in order to seek snow on the mountaintops and bring it back to the city to spread on the sweltering streets in summer.'"¹²

Mining the collective memory for visions of a Paris that evoke both the uncanny reminder of the archaic in its architecture as well as the presentiment of destruction is a central theme of the Arcades Project, a core part of the revelation of the dominion of myth in urban design and building practices. Visions of Paris abandoned, depopulated, *menschenleer*, run through the notes for the *Passagenwerk* like a kind of reverse Ariadne's thread, describing another form of ruination that forms the counterpoint to that of threatened, impending devastation. Unruined, Paris appears as unlikely, even as an impossible object – how could such a mass of delicate stone and glass have failed to be weathered to nothing or blown to bits?

This very glimpse of the unruined city provokes the same train of reflections as the brooding contemplation of ruin itself: the city, encod-

¹² Benjamin, W. (1999), *The Arcades Project* (translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, p. 486.

ing human history, lapses into a vision of nature instead, its close streets turning to a maze of warrens, capillary passages with no rational taxonomy, medieval and renaissance buildings, with their crusts of stone embellishment, appear as fossils of impossible antediluvian beasts, the city in its very built complexity loses the look of the human altogether and begins to appear hive-like, an excrescence of cells, housing for a writhing mass of creatures.

For Benjamin some cities, most notably Naples, have preserved this abjectly fascinating tension in which the experience of the big city is indistinguishable from the glimpse of human beings in their stone cases reverting back to animal life.¹³ In Naples [the ‘new city’] archaicisms are literally the architectural basis for a specific mode of deeply physical existence – the fusion of archaic and capitalist modes forces its citizens into a range of creative, parasitic and parodic adaptations to proximity and scarcity, a sort of continuous virtuoso improvisation that he surely could have observed in virtually any post-colonial world city as well. Above all the remarkable publicity of material existence struck Benjamin, that quintessential child of the hermetically sealed bourgeois *interieur*, as fascinating, both compelling and repelling.

The porosity of physical life – here I am thinking of Julia Kristeva’s observations of the closeness of abjection and love – is the threat of the loss of individuation through the disclosure of the permeability of the membrane separating self and other, self and not-self. In Naples Benjamin observes that this porosity is not a metaphor. It is also a feature of urban architecture where the inadequacy of regular maintenance over a long period of time results in a honeycomb of cells, each with unplanned and uncontrollable openings and passages to one another, that simultaneously make each cell in at least potential communication with all others, and also opens all cells to the exterior that their interconnectedness first creates, to the street as public sphere, as ongoing political theater.

This is not the labyrinth demystified by the destruction of urban blocks and the creation of broad avenues, as Benjamin meticulously records the Hausmannization of Paris. Instead, Naples – dirty, danger-

¹³ See Benjamin, W. (2004) “Naples,” in: *Selected Writings Volume I, 1913-1926*, (ed. by Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, pp. 414-421.

ous, diseased, poor, and in a kind of stasis of ongoing ruination – stays precisely the same, evokes the specter of natural timelessness, precisely by remaining poised precisely at the tipping point of irrecoverable social and physical dysfunction. It is physically composed neither of interior nor of exterior, but entirely – thrillingly, revoltingly – of the spaces between. (In this sense Naples becomes one polar extremity of the architecture of urban social life; the other pole, Moscow, is therefore exactly the anti-labyrinth, where the violent imposition of willed history on the old city yields up the huge public square, devoid of life, like the reclamation of the human habitation by a kind of political taiga, a public sphere with nothing in it.)

When it comes to Benjamin's true urban fascination, however, the distance separating Paris from all other cities becomes apparent. Unlike Naples, certainly, is Paris's remarkable, indeed staggering wealth, and the sheer span of centuries in which regional and national wealth has concentrated in one tightly delimited physical space. This has concentrated spirit and stone as well, a very great deal of both, and explains in part why it is that Paris can appear at once so profoundly fragile and indestructible.

Unlike planned capitals like Washington D.C. and Berlin, whose rectilinear grids and rational architecture emanated from a specific set of convictions regarding urban life, urban services and amenities, and urban politics, Paris was an ancient city that had received wave after wave of new initiatives for social policy and social control. The result, Benjamin perceives, is a remarkable and remarkably tense synthesis of rational agency, of historical self-confidence, and at the same time a suppressed but constantly perceptible substrate of mythic nature whose incessant breaches through the membrane that separates nature and history result in the kinds of disturbances, of unlikely objects, both political and material, that the Arcades Project took as its primary object of study.

The processes of architectural transformation, the ruins of Paris, are both fantastic and expressions of the historical domination of nature, which has been exiled to a determinate number of strictly delimited quarters and precincts, most of them vertically rather than horizontally mapped. The Paris of the triumph of human reason sits snugly like a cap upon a massive and pressurized reservoir of exiled, disciplined, and

deeply unruly nature, which, if it could, would erupt and geyser through every porous opening in every Parisian street and boulevard it could. Below the streets lie literally miles of passages, tunnels, crypts, catacombs, dripping caverns, cul-de-sacs filled with ossuaries and secret burials.

Natural history appears as the image of the city poised at a delicate equilibrium point, balancing forces that could at any moment blow it to smithereens. Benjamin of course draws here on the longer Enlightenment discourse that sees the looming threat of urban destruction by uncontrollable natural processes as indistinguishable from, indeed merging with, the uncontrollable force of the urban mob. And just as the Enlightenment *philosophes* had settled on a small number of paradigmatic cases to illustrate this dialectic – Pompeii, Lisbon – so Benjamin describes the fantastic and largely hidden pressure that form Paris's lapidary buildings as a kind of *Indifferenzpunkt* between nature and history: seismic, volcanic, uncontrollable, deeply angry, beyond argument. As Benjamin puts it,

“Paris is a counterpart in the social order to what Vesuvius is in the geographic order: a menacing, hazardous massif, an ever-active hotbed of revolution. But just as the slopes of Vesuvius, thanks to the layers of lava that cover them, have been transformed into paradisaic orchards, so the lava of revolution provides uniquely fertile ground for the blossoming of art, festivity, fashion.”¹⁴

The arcades trace their way across the unstable surface of this three-dimensional seismic field. At the moment in which they are poised to vanish as victims of the next wave of architectural reform, the arcades appear simultaneously as history and nature. As history, certainly, since the arcades are expressions of the rational, progressive will to take control of an oppressive built urban environment, cutting through buttes of medieval buildings to open new routes through the urban labyrinth; lined with fashionable shops, and covered from inclement weather by large glass panes, they are a new technology of the conscious provision of urban porosity, a kind of controlled destruction.

But they are nature too, since the latest and most up-to-date urban architectural and commercial design discloses the emergence of the ar-

¹⁴ *The Arcades Project*, p. 83.

chaic, as various unplanned consequences of its design, or the relation of the design to larger social and economic forces, reverse to form the grounds for the design's obsolescence. In the case of the arcades, the earliest use of cast iron and glass as structural elements created new urban spaces at mid-century, commercial venues that quickly became intensely popular gathering places for the display of new industrial commodities, new fashion and couture, and the self-presentation of new social classes. (At one point Benjamin records the brief craze during the 1840s for pet tortoises, on a lead of velvet ribbon, whose – very stately – walks in the arcades allowed their owners a slow-motion display of their own fashionable dress.)

But the same use of new design and construction methods and materials inadvertently creates something else: a space which, with its flickering gas lighting, dim filtered sunlight seeping in desultorily from the thick glass panes suspended above, its murmuring crowds of over-stimulated pedestrian shoppers strolling its lengths, uncannily replicates something archaic, even aquatic, poised at the brink of reversion to a pre-human form of conscious life. The arcades replicate a very primal *etui*, in other words, both womb and cave. They both promise and threaten the mythical loss of self that lies at the heart of all urban memory, and therefore both entice and terrify. Their destruction during the second half of the 19th century, even in Benjamin's own observations, comes as something of a relief, even if the ruler-straight boulevards and wide-open, over-large squares of Baron Haussmann betray the core of violence in the rational dream of urban planning.

The Parisian arcades make visible the image of Paris as ruined even in its uncanny survival. They are perhaps the ultimate and richest example of the *etui*, the human case, and in this sense Benjamin's fascination with *etuis* of all kinds, and in particular with the imprint of the vanished inhabitant of the *etui* that survives in ghostly imprint on its plush inner lining, becomes less peculiar, and more moving. Empty cases are the true ruins.

(4) Kartenspiel

W.G. Sebald seems to have taken the sentiment that Halbwachs expressed very much to heart: if the stones of the city in their enduring forms provide containers or cases for the collective memory of groups, then the ruins of these containers – buildings that have had the living contents expelled from them, or which have been blown to smithereens by high-explosive ordnance and incendiary sticks, dropped with industrial efficiency from miles above in the atmosphere – do not simply accomplish the opposite of social memory. Ruins do not correspond to the withdrawal of memory but to its utter transformation. Much of Sebald's prose, written in notable haste and urgency in the space of a decade, attempts to mobilize the tools of minute observation, microlgy, to register the varieties of alchemical transformations of memory that can be produced by smashed stone. In this effort, he places himself – whether consciously or not, I cannot tell – at the precise dialectical tension point between Heidegger's effort to erase the very possibility of ruin from the material practice of building, and Benjamin's attempt to develop a form of seeing that is exquisitely sensitive to the ruin everywhere, even in (especially in) urban milieux that have survived the process of physical destruction.

Let me begin with a passage from a short address that Sebald delivered very shortly before his death, a childhood memory that, like many others, may be playful and misleading, but provides for us a beginning point. Speaking at the opening ceremony of the Stuttgart *Literaturhaus*, Sebald recounts how, as a child growing up in the late 1940s and 1950s in the remote and deeply rural Allgau region, he had no firsthand knowledge of the destruction of Germany's cities. The provincial village of his childhood seemed, in a Halbwachsian manner, eternal. But the village was reachable by post, and as Heidegger was writing "Bauen Wohnen Denken," the fractured and largely silent Sebald family acquired a swapping card game called Cities Quartet.

"Have you got Oldenburg, we asked, have you got Wuppertal, have you got Worms? I learned to read from these names, which I had never heard before. I remember that it was a very long time before I could imagine anything about these cities, so different did they sound from the local place-names of

Kranzegg, Jungholz, and Unterjoch, except the places shown on the cards in the game: the giant Roland, the Porta Nigra, Cologne Cathedral, the Crane Gate in Danzig, the fine houses around a large square in Breslau.”¹⁵

Card images of a Germany both physically intact and politically undivided: the game, Sebald claims, “marked not only the beginning of my career as a reader but the start of my passion for geography, which emerged soon after I began at school: a delight in topography that became increasingly compulsive as my life went on and to which I have devoted endless hours bending over atlases and brochures of every kind.”

If Arendt’s fragmentary reminiscence is to be trusted, then Sebald’s inauguration into literacy by cards of intact cities was part of a far larger, more general reaction, even as the kind of legibility – such a central term for Benjamin too, of course – he derived from this early exposure different in method and morals so profoundly from the displaced population of Germany’s ruined cities, mailing one another their postcards of the city that had once stood on the very spot. But natural history, among other things, is a viewpoint that disdains the stability of the distinction between memory and forgetting. If the postwar worthies that both Arendt and later Sebald castigate for their self-administered general anesthesia paper over the reality of their ruined cities with postcards real and metaphysical, then Sebald, too, develops a kind of lifelong reading that will also depend on them.

In fact reading the series of works that comprise the remarkable productive flowering of Sebald’s hurried decade of writing – *Vertigo*, *The Emigrants*, *The Rings of Saturn*, *Austerlitz* – it’s impossible to avoid the sense that those Cities Quartet cards never left his famous knapsack; that he ‘learned to read’ in a more powerful, pervasive, and involved sense than the familiar boundaries of what counts as *Prosa*.

Open any of these books, of course, and you will find ruined buildings: abandoned towns being reclaimed inexorably by the sea; forgotten grand country estates which have not so much withstood or defeated time and age but have been forgotten by time entirely, preserving material remnants of lost historical epochs to no clear purpose; dreary for-

¹⁵ Sebald, W.G. (2005), “An Attempt at Restitution,” in: *Campo Santo* (translated by Anthea Bell). New York: Random House, p.198.

tifications saturated with the memory of human malice and pain; depopulated and pointless clumps and clots of houses. All these structures are both drained of human life and filled to bursting with melancholy significance. Each of them *means* – and in this way Sebald both observes the process in which nature takes its slow revenge against humans’ will to impose lasting significance on their landscape, while simultaneously undoing this very observation, reversing it, in the very act of deriving meaning from abject and abandoned encasements by seeing them as, by transforming them as, ciphers for a specific form of moral catechism.

The utopian cards of intact cities guide the way as surely as any Borgeian map would, directing Sebald’s rambles with an unerring magnetic north: walk until you find that structure which, its life and purpose having ebbed and withdrawn, now conforms to a predetermined suite of cognitive and affective correspondences which permit the imposition of the legible signs of a larger story of the futility of human efforts to live decently with one another, to please ourselves without becoming monsters.

Many of the abandoned structures that seem to draw Sebald so powerfully, and whose stages of decay are so carefully, even lovingly catalogued, are clearly only capable of generating the melancholic effects that Sebald himself brings to his planned encounter with them. This allegoresis of the evacuated and crumbling building, in its repetition, can in many of Sebald’s works evoke the suspicion of a kind of penny-in-the-slot. Where Heidegger consciously effaces the ruin through the evocation of an alternative historicity, and where Benjamin is fascinated by the uncontrollable productivity of the ruin in its proximity to creaturely nature, Sebald’s emotional repertoire – see ruin, become ruminative and sad – evinces a rote simplicity that is often disguised by the pellucid elegance of his prose.

As Simon Ward has observed, many ruin-stories in Sebald’s prose evoke the familiar specter of a depopulated world, not just a world in which physical objects radiate unintended and undesired meanings once their human contents have ebbed.¹⁶ The *constructed* nature of the ruin

¹⁶ Ward, S. (2004), “Ruins and Poetics in the Works of W.G. Sebald”, in: Long, J.J. and Whitehead, A. (eds.), *W.G. Sebald – A Critical Companion*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.

– its status as the outcome of a specific epistemic process with a series of discrete steps – involves not only the recording of the physical status of a built object, but also its careful preparation: the ruin is invariably abandoned and empty, object-like, which rules out in advance the porosity of the relation between observed structure and observing narrator, assuring the stability and predictability of the cognitive and affective valences that the narrator attaches to the weathered stone or shattered façade. This fixity of meaning is the true legibility, the true *Ruinenwert*, of Sebald's gloomy insights, which revert back to the familiar precincts of a longer historical discourse of the mirror-like and open signification structure of the ruin as an empty vessel to contain and reflect the intentions of the self-reflecting subject.

The descriptions of cities like Jerusalem in *The Emigrants*, or the soon-to-be-abandoned seaside villages of East Anglia such as Dunwich, Lowestoft and Orfordness in *The Rings of Saturn*, describe a process of natural history in which the city slowly succumbs to entropic processes that draw life and meaning from the dead stone, leaving empty husks in the way of the pilgrim that serve as hieroglyphs, ciphers prepared to take on the projection of subjective meaning. This is the return, in pastoral terms, of the 'antinomy of the allegorical' that Benjamin had already described in the *Origin of the German Play of Mourning*, where the very meaninglessness of godforsaken nature is rescued, resignified in its very lack of significance by the subjective intention of the allegorist, who can take no satisfaction in this legibility of ruin, since it only discloses what he knew he would find there.

But in a way profoundly unlike Benjamin's urban flanerierie, which was an aesthetic of willed self-loss, Sebald's wandering narrators are trying, with a desperation so horrible they are no longer able even to name or speak it, to go home. Each creased card of intact cities offers a model of legibility that the world's landscape can never live up to, and which offer no rest and no stopping place; these narrators are driven by something entirely distinct from the cartographic obsession Sebald describes as a young child, a memory that is surely on some level intentionally untrustworthy.

This specific appropriation – or interruption, as I believe – of the dialectic of natural history is most vivid if we think of some of the more

extended treatments of ruin in Sebald's masterpiece, *Austerlitz*, where Sebald encounters his model ruin: the fortress-concentration camp-memorial site of Breendonk, where the story effectively both begins and ends.

Breendonk is a building of extravagant, in fact of virtually sublime ugliness, a kind of comprehensive hideousness that the narrator (presumably Sebald) describes in lavish detail. Its ugliness is transcendent: Breendonk is a physically repulsive object whose appearance – one might say pathetically – mirrors the concentration of a century of human cruelty and suffering that saturate its walls, which take on the uncanny aspect of some long-repressed collective nightmare. These walls, to the narrator, seem to transmogrify into an ur-ancient, impossible survivor of the pre-human era, “a low concrete mass, rounded at all its outer edges and giving the gruesome impression of something hunched and misshapen: the broad back of a monster, I thought, risen from this Flemish soil like a whale from the deep.”¹⁷

For the cartographo-maniacal narrator, the sheer planlessness of Breendonk, its confused mass of half-finished or over-built walls, bastions, and ramparts, blurs the boundary between nature and history: once again, the building as ruin evokes the specter of an unstable and hence abject consignment of human history to natural disaster:

“I found myself unable to connect [Breendonk] with anything shaped by human civilization, or even with the silent relics of our prehistory and early history. And the longer I looked at it, the more often it forced me, I felt, to lower my eyes, the less comprehensible it seemed to become. Covered in places by open ulcers with the raw crushed stone erupting from them, encrusted by guano-like droppings and calciferous streaks, the fort was a monolithic, monstrous incarnation of ugliness and blind violence.” [21]

Studying its confusing architectural plan later, the narrator is even more struck by the building's resemblance to a horrible living or formerly living thing, with weeping malevolent eyes and attenuated limbs, gazing back at him evilly from the printed plan, which appeared to him as “the anatomical blueprint of some alien and crab-like creature.” [23]

¹⁷ Sebald, W.G. (2001), *Austerlitz* (translated by Anthea Bell). New York: Random House, p. 20.

Breendonk fortress, as Sebald's narrator notes, was reopened in 1947 as a national memorial and museum of the Belgian resistance; it has been left unchanged as far as feasible from its wartime condition, including the implements used by the wartime inmates – the narrator is particularly struck by the fleet of crudely made, disturbingly large wooden wheelbarrows, with which the prisoners were obliged to move uncounted thousands of tons of earth and rock. Glancing through the rest of the exhibits, the narrator contemplates the mess hall of the SS guards: "I could well imagine the sight of these good fathers and dutiful sons from Vilsbiburg and Fuhlsbuettel, from the Black Forest and the Bavarian Alps, sitting here when they came off duty to play cards or write letters to their loved ones at home. After all, I had lived among them until my twentieth year." [23]

Passages like this one would require far more unpacking than I can offer here. A few remarks will be enough: what Sebald encounters at Breendonk is certainly a ruin that conforms in every particular to a mode of experience in which the distrusted utopia of intact existence – the cards, again – serves to predetermine that, and how, the landscape of human history, in its decrepitude, will present itself in a kind of pre-established harmony with the subjective intention to endow it with meaning in the form of a moral catechism. What Breendonk as ruin signifies is in other words itself the subject of a not especially disguised triumph of intention, in which the force-field of natural history is defused, and ruin itself is, in a deeply curious but unmistakable way, rehabilitated, just as Breendonk is transformed from what it was to what it was not precisely by doing as little to it as possible in its changed status as memorial site.

The historical narrative that forms the genealogical core of Breendonk's abject ugliness cannot be explained solely in terms of its history as a prison, since it was designed as a part of a chain of fortifications to protect the Belgian frontier, requiring the use of building materials and design – poured concrete, heaped earth – that all but guaranteed its close resemblance to an enormous natural growth, an architectural tumor. This form of military architecture, like the larger comprehensive vision of defensive strategy of which it was one part, had been rendered strategically obsolete and technically useless even before the fortress had

been completed shortly after the turn of the 20th century, serving only to concentrate and immobilize large numbers of men and quantities of military materiel and supplies precisely where open terrain and rail travel had already put a strategic and tactical premium on maximum mobility. It is as though the fortress, useless from its inception, had been decreed from its birth to be used for the wrong purpose – as a prison and torture chamber for Belgian resistors to the German occupying forces, as well as for remnants of Belgium’s Jewish community.

Eric Santner notes the continuity between this story – the fortress builders trapped by their own fortification – and that of Dunwich on the East Anglian coast, where the extensive fortifications the inhabitants of the town erected to protect it from the encroaching sea ended up generating the very inundation that their imposition of technological power was meant to ward off. Santner calls this the “essential paradox of natural history” in Sebald’s work: nature, implacably and with a divine and righteous violence, takes its revenge on the vanity of humanity’s enframing, its technological hubris.¹⁸

Well, yes and perhaps also no. What Santner sees as an essential paradox is also a prime candidate for the specific mechanism whereby Sebald artificially – that is, by the legerdemain of authorial, subjective intention on the otherwise mute materiel – interrupts a dialectic of natural history in which both elements, as Adorno had put it, developed to their point of maximum dialectical tension, reverse polarity and go over into their other.

But Breendonk is not a dialectical image where nature and history are developed to their indifference point. It is a visual, indeed an overpoweringly over-determined and unmissable moral allegory for human *vanitas*, and it is only by prematurely arresting the movement of paradox that Sebald’s narrator forbids himself the melancholy reflection that would, in what I’d be tempted to call the natural order of things, follow: the hideousness of the museum as museum, the vanity of making museums at all, that is, the futility of memory, its fugitive, traitorous,

¹⁸ Santner, E.L. (2006), *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p. 108.

exhausting refusal to stay on message, to conform its ceaseless productivity to a consistent acceptable moral conclusion.

But this next step – one Benjamin seems to have taken with terrifying ease, like breathing or walking down a street, is one that Sebald, with his own cargo of historical grief and his own powerful albeit occluded epistemology, cannot, or will not, take. I blame those cards.

