

Apology and 'Eingedenken'

By Sophie Ernst

To apologise, some say it is a free ticket to forget. I argue, on the other hand, that an apology is a form of *Eingedenken*.

During the first LOSS workshop on the 22 of September 2018 at the University of Westminster I spoke about a public intervention in Wakefield, the *Silent Empress* (2012)¹. In my talk I summarised what motivated me to make the *Silent Empress*. I proposed that the work is a form of 'Eingedenken'. 'Eingedenken' is a productive process; remembering the past in its present-day meaning. During the discussion we touched on the subject of apology several times. Some pointed out apologies often are insincere, commodified, or otherwise flawed. I shall repeat my ideas on the *Silent Empress* here, and add a short note on the concept of apology.

Europe is still reluctant to apologise for its colonial wrongs. Failing to recognise past injuries seems to uphold an attitude of misplaced imperial nostalgia². The denial of the past actively feeds the narrative of the political right. Look at the politics of AfD and Pegida (an acronym for Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the Occident) in Germany, the Brexit movement in England, Fidesz in Hungary, and the Danish People's Party in Denmark, to name a few. In other words, if cultural institutions do not address this issue; then, in my view, they are complicit in the rise of the right in Europe. Silence is really not an option. ***Let Our Statues Speak*** not only addresses the causes of our current political climate but also suggests possibilities about what ought to be done. I think, it broadens and deepens the core concerns I had while making the *Silent Empress*.

Silent Empress was about political responsibility by way of the acknowledgement of a wrong. My intention was to create a space for greater cultural understanding in society. Why did I believe that an apology for a wrong, by a former colonial power, would entail greater cultural understanding? The principal reason was because: to apologise, we bring ourselves at eye-level to our victim. So, a sincere acknowledgement of a wrong removes hierarchies. As a result, it has the potential to diffuse a misguided notion of entitlement over resources.

Hannah Arendt links responsibility to belonging: "I must be held responsible for something I have not done, and the reason for my responsibility must be my membership in a group (a collective) which no voluntary act of mine can dissolve".³ This individual responsibility is political, and, as Annabel Herzog resumes in her analysis of Hannah Arendt's concept of responsibility "is distinguished from individual guilt, which corresponds to morally or legally reprehensible individual acts."⁴ So, we are talking of political responsibility not individual guilt.

¹ video link: <https://vimeo.com/289354487>

² According to a poll by data analytics firm YouGov almost 60% of the British public feel proud of the British Empire <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/lifestyle/articles-reports/2014/07/26/britain-proud-its-empire>

³ Herzog, Annabel, Hannah Arendt's Concept of Responsibility, *Studies in Social and Political Thought*, Vol. 10, 2004, pp. 39-52.

⁴ Ibid.

Awareness of one's own history is indispensable in order to change thinking and acting. Ernst Bloch tells us "the dead return".⁵ If we solemnly place the dead into a museum of the dejected or rehabilitated we end up trivialising past injustices.⁶ Let the dead return in the current fight. For this idea, Bloch, and in the same stance Walter Benjamin, use the word *Eingedenken*. *Eingedenken* is a form of remembering that does not understand the past as something complete, but emphasises its presence. For Benjamin *Eingedenken* is a productive process: remembering the past in its present-day meaning and in view of present action.⁷ Remembering creates a responsibility. "Every memory calls for an opinion, be it implicit, unconscious or critically aware."⁸ What do we remember, how do we remember, what do we forget?

The monologue of the *Silent Empress*, very consciously, is a quasi apology, an apology that is incomplete. Apologies may act as a licence to 'move on', and bad apologies are like "hiccups of etiquette".⁹ Apology originates from the Greek word *apologia* which means 'a speech in one's own defence'. However, the modern meaning of apology is an admission of wrongdoing.¹⁰ Nick Smith points at the influence Maimonides' *Hilchot Teshuvah* (The Laws of Repentance) had on the meaning of apology. The laws of repentance include: acknowledging the sin, worrying about the future consequences of the sin, acting and speaking with humility, correcting the sin however possible, and remembering the sin for the rest of one's life.¹¹

A valid apology admits a wrong, e.g. the historical fact of slavery, it tells the history of that wrong and points at its consequences, furthermore it will correct the wrong, in other words reparations are paid. Acknowledging a wrong consolidates a dark part of our history as part of our identity. Each generation will have to come to terms with the history of the community they are part of. Each generation will have to come to terms with the colonial wrongs again and again. Martha Minow, professor of law, has told us already "[t]here are no tidy endings following a mass atrocity".¹²

The *Silent Empress* is a form of *Eingedenken*. It tries to expose the rather heroic form of remembering which we see in the UK when it comes to public commemoration. Likewise LOSS has the potential to puncture the narrative of heroism and victimisation which the political right feeds on, because it will open difficult windows into our past. Public sculptures but also public buildings are perfect hosts for tags, projections, comments, or other interventions. I imagine intrusions that will make me trip and stumble and make unconscious opinions - conscious.

⁵ Marchesoni, Stefano, *Walter Benjamins Konzept des Eingedenkens, Über Genese, Stellung und Bedeutung eines ungebräuchlichen Begriffs in Benjamins Schriften*, Dissertation, Berlin: Technischen Universität Berlin, 2015.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Smith, Nick, *I was wrong: The Meanings of Apologies*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/911887/jewish/Teshuvah.htm

¹² Ibid.