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Victorian Sages

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VICTORIAN
SAVAGES
Kathy Alexis Psomiades

Darwin and the Memory of the Human: Evolution, Savages, and South America by Cannon Schmitt. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. Pp. 260, 5 illustrations. \$90.00 cloth.

Darwin and the Memory of the Human: Evolution, Savages, and South America is a beautifully written, elegantly conceived contribution to the study of nineteenth-century evolutionary theory's cultural implications. Taking as its object four writers—the evolutionary thinkers Charles Darwin and Alfred Russell Wallace, the writer and clergyman Charles Kingsley, and the early-twentieth-century botanist and adventure novel writer W. H. Hudson—three of whom worked in biology and natural history, two of whom ventured into fiction, and all of whom wrote about or around South America, Cannon Schmitt's volume focuses on moments in these texts when savagery, South America, and memory converge. Although the texts he examines all detail experiences of South America (or in Kingsley's case, not quite getting to South America), and all fall loosely under the category of natural history, what interests Schmitt are the moments when natural history becomes memoir, when writing about life as defined by evolutionary biology intersects with what we call *life-writing*: autobiographical accounts of significant personal experiences. Personal memory of a personal past here intersects with communal historical and evolutionary memories of the vast pasts of the planet, of life, of humanity, of England. This intersection between individual and collective

pasts allows Schmitt to argue that evolutionary theory necessitated the invention of a new human subject with a new relation to memory, “a form of memory that redefines what it is to be human (as well as modern, civilized, and British) in relation to the past, and specifically those pasts—historical, cultural, personal, and, above all, evolutionary—conceived of as savage” (3). This form of memory, Schmitt calls “savage mnemonics.” And he sees it as part of the general modern crisis of memory described by Richard Terdiman in *Present Past: Modernity and the Memory Crisis*, which Schmitt describes thus:

Modernity came into being as a self-consciously distinct historical period by way of the distancing of the present from the past as well as from its inability to recall or make sense of that past. Modernity, on this representation, resembles an amnesiac who can remember only the necessity of recalling that which it might never have known or experienced in the first place. (24)¹

Whereas Terdiman, like other contemporary memory theorists, tends to focus on poets, novelists, and other practitioners of the arts, Schmitt asks about the role scientific ideas play in this crisis of memory.

In the first chapter, Schmitt’s focus is on the memory of Dar-

win’s encounter with the Fuegians in South America in 1832, a memory that reoccurs at key moments in his work from *The Voyage of the Beagle* (1839) to the *Autobiography* (1887, written in 1876). In the 1830s, Darwin writes, “Of individual objects, perhaps no one is more certain to create astonishment than the first sight in his native haunt of a real barbarian, of man in his lowest and most savage state.”² In the 1870s, he writes again, “The sight of a naked savage in his native land is an event which can never be forgotten.”³ These words of Darwin’s, quoted and requoted by Schmitt, resonate and gather meaning as the chapter progresses. They reappear, differently arranged, in other Darwin texts, as well—in particular the famous passage from the end of *Descent of Man*:

The astonishment I felt upon first seeing a party of Fuegians on a wild and broken shore will never be forgotten by me, for the reflection at once rushed into my mind—such were our ancestors. . . . He who has seen a savage in his native land will not feel much shame, if forced to acknowledge that the blood of some more humble creature flows in his veins.⁴

Schmitt contrasts the unforgettable memory of the savage in his native land with forgetting of the death and destruction behind “the

face of nature bright with gladness" that Darwin claims in *Origin* human beings are prone to.⁵ People forget or disavow death, but they cannot apparently forget the disturbing sight of the savage. Critics have written about the savage in Darwin before—focusing particularly on his appearance in *Descent* as the strange middle term in the continuity Darwin posits between the animal and the human. On the one hand, the savage is necessary to positing the evolution of humans out of animals: he stands in the place of the missing link. On the other, the savage is also remarkably the huge exception to that progression: unlike both animals and civilized people, and yet undoubtedly human, he is the bad example that incites readers to embrace their animal ancestry. In *Descent* to see oneself as descended from a monkey becomes palatable insofar as monkeys are more like civilized people than savages are. But what Schmitt adds to this discussion is a new sense of how the savage keeps open the gap between human and animal. In seeming to bridge that gap, savages in their exceptionality also maintain it: they stand outside the very continuity between human and animal that they make possible.

At a moment when other humans have been completely assimilated to the natural world, when the line between human and non-human has

been revealed to be a consolatory fiction, Fuegians preserve human separateness. . . . Darwin's memory of "savages" on a wild and desolate shore should be understood as, among other things, a memory of the last fully human being on earth. (56)

Whereas the memory of savages allows Darwin to posit a continuity between the animal and the human by constituting the savage as both link and exception, Alfred Russel Wallace's "memories of South American and Southeast Asian indigenes lead to the conclusion that not they alone but rather humans as such constitute an exception" (86). Focusing on Wallace's descriptions of his first encounters with "the Aborigines of the Amazon," encounters Wallace paradoxically sees as both the fulfillment of his expectations and as striking and new, Schmitt shows how, for Wallace, the exceptional nature of savages eventually extends to all human beings, exempting humanity from natural selection. Unlike Darwin, Wallace experiences surprise and delight at his first encounter, admiring the bodies, minds, and culture of a people uncontaminated by "European supervision."⁶ Schmitt describes Wallace's experiences this way:

So startling that they required he relearn to see, forgetting all he thought he knew about

them, savages were also so familiar as to confirm the existence of a world wholly distinct from that of “civilized” Europe—a world whose enviable harmonious social arrangements Wallace was, for a time, able to share. (81)

This admiration would lead Wallace to claim, in an 1868 review of Lyell’s *Principles of Geology*, that savage brains and bodies exceed their survival needs and so could not have been produced by natural selection without some supernatural help. Because savage humanity can be remembered as so delightful, so much in excess of necessity, so much less animalistic than corrupt civilized modernity, it restores the very category of a humanity separate from the animal kingdom. It also operates as a critique of the inhumanity of European civilization and conquest. If for Darwin the savage is paradoxically more debased than the animals from whom civilized man has sprung, for Wallace the savage is paradoxically more magnificently human than the degenerated products of civilization. Thus, Schmitt claims, “[T]o remember the savage is also to remember what the human once was and thus what it might still become” (90).

The Kingsley chapter is where the book intersects with the study of Victorian imperialism. It is centered on Kingsley’s travel narrative, *At Last: A Christmas in*

the West Indies (1871), which chiefly charts his travel on and around the island of Trinidad. For Kingsley, the West Indies are a gateway to a South America he longs to visit but cannot. Although his narrative is full of natural historical detail, the memory of the human that he encounters in his journeys is not the savage, but the ghosts of the “seadogs” of whom he wrote in his historical novel *Westward Ho!* (1855), as well as the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century naturalists who have journeyed before him. It is not the species past, but the national-imperial past, that figures largely in this chapter, a past that can be revived only in memory. Kingsley connects his own return to the West Indies of his childhood with a return in memory to the Elizabethan childhood of empire, the age of exploration of the New World, making possible, Schmitt argues, “a reading of the ‘at last’ of his title as a personal expression of longing fulfilled that is, at the same time, a national-corporate expression of destiny accomplished” (108).

Kingsley’s framing of South America as a place to remember the Elizabethan past, the moments of empire’s youth, as well as a place that may hold the perpetually deferred imperial future, makes him very much the exception among the four figures Schmitt discusses. But it does give Schmitt a chance to touch upon the unique relation of South America to British impe-

rialism: the way the collapsed empires of Spain and Portugal functioned both as negative images of tyranny against which the English measured themselves and as admonitions about the fate of empire. While not under British rule, South America was still subject to British economic imperialism. And in an era in which the story of empire was rearticulated to center on the New World (see John R. Seeley's reframing in 1881 of the importance of the New World in *The Expansion of England*), South America stands out as the part of the New World the British didn't acquire, but to which they might now aspire.

The writer with whom Schmitt most clearly identifies, however, is not Kingsley, but W. H. Hudson, who is, in a way, the hero of this book, and whose beautiful and evocative descriptions of lost lands are often echoed by the cadences of Schmitt's own prose. Born in South America (Buenos Aires), and writing in London about the faraway land of his childhood, Hudson is obsessed with loss. Loss comes not merely with the passage of time or with geographic distance, but also in the form of the destruction of the animal, plant, and human life of South America. Schmitt calls Hudson, after Andreas Huyssen, a "memorian," someone who recollects the past through memory, and he argues that Hudson's use of memory should resonate for us with twentieth-century memory

studies, with their focus on trauma and destruction.⁷

This is the keynote of Hudson's work: the solemn invocation of a lost world as a form of testimony, protest, and lament. His memories of that world often provide glimpses of plenitude, realizing in imagination and on the page images of wild beauty. But they cannot do so without simultaneously insisting on past, present, and future catastrophe. This among other things distinguishes the structure of feeling in Hudson's corpus from what might appear to be unmitigated or self-indulgent nostalgia. (124)

Schmitt makes his argument through readings of three of Hudson's major works: *The Naturalist in La Plata* (1892), *Idle Days in Patagonia* (1893), and *A Hind in Richmond Park* (1922). He argues that, for Hudson, the central dilemma of evolution is not the problem of man's connection to his animal ancestors, but the other problem, the problem that Darwin says we forget when we behold "the face of nature bright with gladness": the problem of destruction and extinction. When a species is gone, it is gone forever, never to be repeated. The only consolation for this loss is that evolution postulates a relation between what lives now and everything that has ever lived: the lost

past lives on in every living organism. In particular, vanishing savages live on in present-day humans, which is on the one hand “transparently self-serving, rendering the extermination of indigenous people’s bearable” and, on the other, enlists the savage past “in the service of the recollection of a public, collective memory of wildness and savagery harnessed to political ends.” (127)

Ultimately, Schmitt argues, Hudson proposes a theory of memory and sense perception that is both Proustian and evolutionary: that is, Hudson understands human sense perception as both natural and historical, changing over time. Latent in modern humans are the more intense senses of sight, smell, sound, and direction enjoyed by their savage ancestors:

Changes in the human sensorium as well as changes in the world to be sensed, Hudson maintains, always amount to loss. Species are passing away into oblivion, and with them sights, sounds, scents; at the same time and partly as a result, human perceptual capacities, already much reduced in relation to what they once were, face continued atrophy. The intimate interdependence of human perception and that which exists to be perceived means that to destroy the latter is, inevitably, to diminish the former. By the

same token, however, such interdependence also holds out the promise of a return to the lost past. The sound of Beethoven’s music, the scent of an evening primrose, the landscape of Patagonia: all take one back. By way of the memories they evoke they effect a return, and a return not to any distant time but specifically to that of human prehistory. (150)

By making his readers remember their savage past, Hudson reminds them that “to destroy wilderness is to destroy themselves” (151).

The Hudson chapter is full of references to modernism—to Proust on the one hand, and to modernist primitivism on the other, a primitivism made possible by various biological and psychological theories about the inner savage. Schmitt acknowledges the complicity of primitivism with imperialism, but also wants to argue for a Hudson who is not merely nostalgic, but actively engaged in an ecological political project that makes vanishing beauty live for its readers as a way of encouraging them to take action to preserve the living things, including people, that civilization destroys.

In a brief (seven page) coda, Schmitt sketches out some of the implications of his argument linking it to twentieth-century memory studies that center on trauma and to contemporary animal stud-

ies. For Darwin, Wallace, Kingsley and Hudson, evolutionary theory is “both the discovery of and the response to disaster” (157)—so their work can be profitably compared, as Schmitt does, to W. G. Sebald’s *Austerlitz* (2001). These Victorian writers can also be compared to “thinkers as diverse as Giorgio Agamben, Donna Harraway, and Cary Wolfe” (162), who, Schmitt argues, pose the question of the animal in ways that focus on the animal as human or the human as animal and forget what for the Victorians comes between:

Of Darwin, and of Wallace, Kingsley, and Hudson, we might say instead that they depict people as though they were the animals haunted by the loss of what they imagine comes between them and other animals—“savages”—and as though the only way to free themselves from such haunting were to remember that that loss makes them who they are. (162)

Darwin and the Memory of the Human is part of a movement in cultural criticism about Victorian colonialism and imperialism to shift the focus away from indicting the Victorians and towards an understanding of how this experience restructured England and English people on every level. Recent work by John Plotz, James Buzard, and Christopher Herbert has looked

beyond the “find the tyranny” model for other ways of thinking about culture and imperialism. Plotz’s *Portable Property: Victorian Culture on the Move* (2009) detached the circulation of objects from the critique of global commodity culture in order to talk about the different kinds of meanings objects accrue. In Buzard’s *Disorienting Fiction: The Autoethnographic Work of Nineteenth-Century British Novels* (2005), the ethnographic gaze that describes, categorizes, and objectifies the non-European is supplanted by the autoethnographic gaze that novels turn on their own culture. Chris Herbert’s *War of No Pity: The Indian Mutiny and Victorian Trauma* (2007) is interested less in how representations of the Indian Mutiny fomented racist hysteria in Britain in support of tyranny than he is in how the mutiny prompted a dissident, critical, antipatriotic kind of writing highly critical of British actions in India. Similarly, rather than charting the ways in which evolutionary science’s ideas about the savage acted in support of imperialist expansion, Schmitt here looks at a different side of knowledge production and the impact of that production on the producer. On the one hand, this kind of work provides an important supplement to our existing accounts of empire in the Victorian period. All of these scholars are highly critical of imperialism, and the turn in their own work to the impact of imperialism

on the British is not meant in the least to deny its horrors. Yet, on the other hand, there is and ought to be something disturbing about the reimagination of empire as a mode of self-development for British people. Read unsympathetically, not as a supplement to the critique of the dynamics of domination but as substitute for it, this work can seem as though it's suggesting that world conquest makes you a better person.

Schmitt addresses this difficulty in two ways in the book. He provides constant reminders of the violence of imperialism—even in relation to South America, where British imperialism was primarily financial rather than a matter of direct rule. But his other way of addressing the problem is through the formal structure of the book itself, which operates as a kind of self-critique. The Kingsley chapter is the center of this critique. Unlike Darwin, Wallace, and Hudson, Kingsley never reaches South America. Savages therefore do not occupy the same place in his imaginary: for Kingsley, the human object of memory is historical rather than natural historical. Kingsley, in other words, sees savages as utterly distinct from his modern civilized self, and he doesn't see them very often. So, in many ways this chapter is an anomaly in Schmitt's book, a disruption in the general argumentative pull, a pause between Wallace and Hudson when the book moves away from savages

and history and into the problems of empire itself. And yet it is also the essential chapter of the book, for in his memory of England's historical past, of the explorers whose narratives he has read, Kingsley turns out to be most like Schmitt himself. Like Kingsley remembering the savage Elizabethans, Schmitt remembers the savage Victorians, who, like Kingsley's Elizabethan sea dogs, constitute a past that must be remembered, is always slipping away, and is, strangely, memorialized. This is why Kingsley is both anomalous and also central to this book. He is the writer most involved in furthering the project of imperialism, and the vanished past he remembers is not a savage past, but an imperial one. He is absolutely necessary to Schmitt's critique of imperialism, but like Darwin's savage, he is also a figure of great ambivalence. Without him, there wouldn't be sufficient reminder that empire isn't pretty. But with him comes the problematic of which savage ancestors Schmitt wishes to claim and which to deny. He would like to be Hudson, calling up precious lost savage Victorians in ways that restore valuable absent things to a world that needs them. But there is always the danger that, because after all Victorians are a lot more like Elizabethan sea dogs than innocent savages, he might be calling up lost empire in a less productive mode he himself would call nostalgia.

What I am doing here, in reading an argument that Schmitt's book makes through its form rather than through its content, points to what is truly astonishing and unique about this book, and what makes it radically different from any other scholarly work I know. It gives new meaning to the term "literary criticism" by making its literariness part of its critical method. The incantatory beauty of Schmitt's prose is not an incidental feature, a decorative belle-lettrism. Rather it is designed to rerepresent the lost savage Victorians, to make them alive in us again, as we read Schmitt who, like Hudson, calls forth the ways of dwelling in the lost past that makes such continuing presence possible. What Kingsley and Schmitt have in common is a past memorialized in words; what Hudson and Schmitt have in common is the production in words of an affective relation to a past that you do not even know you have missed until you read them. And those words act by producing affect. This is what makes this book *literary criticism* and not conventional cultural studies or history of science. Schmitt's book is about the intersection of ideas and affect in the works of all four men, and it embodies and enacts that intersection in the very texture of its language. Scientists (and humanists) have feelings about thoughts, as well as thoughts about feeling—and, in a way, this book works to re-create or create affect in the

reader about these ideas. Evidence here is not just the textual evidence of scholarly literary criticism, but also the successful production in the reader of affect that is also knowledge. Kingsley points up the dangers of this enterprise; Hudson its possibilities.

A recent special issue of *Representations* on "The Way We Read Now" poses the question of the fate of symptomatic reading and speculates about what other reading practices are taking its place—surface reading, the archive, cognitive theory, media studies.⁸ What for me holds all these modes together is a longing for the solidity of the visible, the actual, the material: taking refuge in the actual words of the text, the vast number of texts in the archive, thinking as an activity of an embodied brain, the physical medium of the book or newspaper. The immateriality of interpretation, thought, and critique seems to render these modes of thought dangerously flighty, ungrounded, and insubstantial in a twenty-first century in which everything is mediated. Historicism can recover for us a world of actualities, and description is a central mode of critical access to that world. Schmitt's descriptive prose, his sympathetic readings of these texts that seek not to expose their unconscious motivations but to reveal the fullness of their accomplishment, are part of this. But Schmitt's answer to the problem of immateriality is, like

that of his subjects, what we might call “memoricist” rather than historicist. Not the materiality of Victorian things, but the strange persistence of Victorian words and their affective charge in the bodies of modern readers, is at issue. So alongside the scholarly argument of this book about memory and evolution runs another mode of conveying ideas entirely, one that uses literary techniques to produce in the reader the very structures of memory and emotion that it claims in its argument are characteristic of modernity. The memory of the memory of the human.

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NOTES

1. Richard Terdiman, *Present Past: Modernity and the Memory Crisis* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993).
2. Charles Darwin, *Journal of Researches into the Natural History and Geology of the Various Countries Visited by H. M. S. Beagle, under the Command of Captain Fitzroy, R. N., from 1832 to 1836* (1839), vols. 2 and 3, *The Works of Charles Darwin*, 29 vols. (London: Pickering, 1986–89), 3:474.
3. Charles Darwin, *The Autobiography of Charles Darwin, 1809–1882*, ed. Nora Barlow (New York: W. W. Norton, 1969), 80 (originally published 1887).
4. Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), 2:404 (originally published 1871).
5. Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1964), 62 (originally published 1859).
6. Alfred Russel Wallace, *My Life: A Record of Events and Opinions*, 2 vols. (London: Chapman and Hall, 1905), 1:288.
7. Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).
8. *Representations* 108, no. 1 (2009).