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Sustainable Nostalgia

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Abstract
The ecological ideal of 'sustainability' is defensible, but controversial. It valorises a certain way of inhabiting the world not by defining it directly, but by imagining its perpetual reproduction. I argue that what sustainability offers us is a way of being nostalgic for the future. The sustainable present will become our true home because it is the point to which the future will always recur; we look nostalgically to the future because it is there that the present will be inhabited as our home. Nostalgic imaginings are not, then, just a regulative ideal for ecological praxis. Nostalgia is called upon as an ethical principle, and the characteristics of this memory-work will affect the shape of our future.

Keywords
ecocriticism, intergenerational justice, sustainability

Since the 1970s, 'sustainability' – understood broadly in relation to environmental and social planning – has been transformed from a semi-technical term in forestry and agricultural science (Newton and Freyfogle, 2005: 24) into the most characteristic ethical imperative of the present moment. In the face of ecological crisis, to live in a morally responsible way has largely come to indicate: to live sustainably. The very widespread use of the word (and of 'sustainable development' or, increasingly, 'sustainable living') might be attributed to its vagueness, making it a conveniently empty term for co-option by mainstream capitalism. On the other hand, it might be regarded as articulating successfully a constellation of important environmental desiderata in a way that has broad intuitive appeal (Lélé, 1991; Jacobs, 1999). Sustainability appears somehow to be both a partisan ecological demand and an a priori good: it is striking that it is very often taken for granted that in any given field, a 'sustainable' approach is better than a non-sustainable one. Perhaps the concept can have this dual status not just because it is a meaningless branding tool nor just because it is innately morally compelling, but partly through a kind of category error. An argument or proposition needs to be sustainable in order to be right. If the available premises do not sustain the conclusion, then it is a failure. But to say that the same is true of ways of living or sets of social relations would be to presuppose the very connection between sustainability and rightness — moral rightness, in this case — that proponents of sustainable development try to prove. For ways of living, to be unsustainable or self-defeating in the final analysis is not necessarily the same thing as being erroneous. A certain lack of clarity in distinguishing between these two kinds of sustainability may be a partial cause of the word's political attractiveness.

We should be wary, then, of signing up to 'sustainability' without defining it more precisely. The central issue is often taken to be the problem of what exactly we should try to sustain: we must choose between preserving kinds or degrees of opportunities for personal fulfilment, aggregate or per capita utility, presently existing resources, and any number of alternative, sometimes incompatible, goods (Pearce, Markandya and Barbier, 1989). Yet perhaps a still more fundamental question concerns the nature of the act of sustaining as such. The most influential definition of sustainable development by far remains the one proposed by the so-called Brundtland report: 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987: 43). One striking feature of this undoubtedly valuable description is the sharp division that it implies between 'the present' and 'future generations'. For Gro Harlem Brundtland, and for many of those who have followed her, sustainability yokes together the needs for intragenerational and intergenerational justice. In order to do so, it must first distinguish one from the other, describing ourselves and our descendants as two clearly distinct moral communities. The ethical and political usefulness of sustainability has been said to turn on this ability to pick out our duty of care to an unborn other.

This is probably not the most natural way of understanding the term. What 'sustainability' implies most readily is not separation but continuity, the keeping of things as they are and the diminution of the otherness of the future. A sustainable way of life is one that is self-reinforcing, one that is able to reproduce its essential features indefinitely. It is not the case that sustainability is concerned only with the rights of the unborn. On the contrary:

> a significant part (to say the least) of the global environmental agenda is driven by the perceived requirements of large-scale transnational business sectors to secure necessary legal, socio-political and ecological conditions for continued capital accumulation. This is, for them, the core meaning of 'sustainable development'. (Benton, 1999: 220)

Sustainability seeks to enable us to predict and determine the future. It subordinates change to itself, saturating the future with the present. It does not require pure repetition: it is not essential to a sustainable transport programme, for instance, that today we rely exclusively on a transport system that could be used indefinitely far into the future. What it does require is that we put in place a programme of research into engine technology, and targets for progressive reductions in emissions, such that the means by which some notional final state can be achieved are already present and only need to be worked through according to their own rules.

Sustainable living often operates on a micrological scale of thermostats and recycling bins, but its orientation is utopian: it envisages the transcendence of time and an escape from history. It responds to the threat of environmental apocalypse by offering us the infinite postponement of loss. It appeals to the possibility of the sheer unlimited reproduction of social arrangements as a way of legitimating them. Whereas Nietzsche's demon of eternal recurrence confronts us with the demand to value a single life so highly that we could delight in its infinite repetition (Nietzsche, 2001: §341), sustainability's first instinct is to dissociate itself from that life to the point where its indefinite prolongation is required as a way of justifying it. Other rules can easily be bolted on to the primary structure, so that sustainable development can imply an obligation to meet the basic needs of the poor, for instance, but sustainability does not in itself describe any positive content that the present must have. It seeks only the victory of sameness over the illimitable newness of what is to come. The survival of species-being becomes an apotheosis. A stricter and less idealistic definition than Brundtland's might read: sustainable development is development that does not undermine its own conditions of possibility.

On these grounds and others, some within the environmental movement have levelled a broad and fierce attack against the rhetoric of sustainability, even to the extent of calling for the term to be abandoned altogether. It might imply a regressive, arrogant economism that regards humans as the world's sole agents, maximising the flow of 'resources' from nature (Newton and Freyfogle, 2005). Conversely, it might indicate an old-fashioned idea of enduring organic harmony, one that has been 'discredited by a "postmodern ecology" that emphasises flux and contingency' (Parham, 2008: 25; see Botkin, 1990). The pursuit of sustainability may be counterproductive in conservation work, leading us astray from cautious resource management and towards impractical grand solutions (Ludwig et al., 1993). For John O'Grady (2003: 3), 'its privileging of *duration* or *permanence* as a value' contradicts the ancient Heraclitean principle that everything in nature is in flux; '[c]onsidered in this light, there is no ecological justification for the idea of sustainability'. Despite all this, I do not share the conviction that sustainability is a misguided or unwelcome goal for the environmental movement. It is by no means clear that any alternative could match even the limited political efficacy that sustainability has proved to possess. Moreover, the admittedly curious idea that we should try to make the future in some way continuous with the present might have its own ethical advantages. The slippage between the two senses of the 'sustainable', logical consistency and physical endurance, might be productive rather than misleading. We might make it our goal to adopt a way of life that would avoid obvious self-contradiction or inevitable obsolescence even if it was adopted universally, and we might do so in the full knowledge that the more coherent our project, the more readily it will lend itself to radical revaluation and redefinition by future ages. In this way, sustainability might even become a way of reckoning with and welcoming the perpetual openness of complex chaotic systems to unexpected new judgments and configurations. There are good reasons for doubting that we can or should abandon the goal of sustainability; instead, we should try to reformulate it in a way that attends to the problematic implications of its desire for permanence.

Sustainability describes the search for a form of collective continuity at the level of popular culture and behaviour. As such, it is squarely within the field of inquiry that has been taken up by memory studies, and conceptualising the pursuit of sustainability as a kind of memory-work offers us a new way to think about it. The dream of sustainability, I want to argue, is a nostalgia for the future. Its fundamental desire is precisely that which the nostalgic yearns for: a stable home, free from the losses of time. Sustainability defines the present time and present way of life as a satisfactory home — satisfactory ethically, emotionally, culturally and politically — by positing it as the place to which the future will always recur. The future will be sustained by the systems that we have put in place, and its inhabitants will look back to the present era of newly sustainable living as the objective origin of their successful dwelling in the world. They will be nostalgic for the past, but their situation will be different from ours in that they will always be able to satisfy their nostalgia because nothing essential (no irreplaceable biological resources, in the jargon) will have been lost. For now, though, we in the present must look nostalgically to the future, because it is in the future that the present will be inhabited as our home. The sustainable present becomes the end-point of the future life that will validate our own by coinciding with it. Living sustainably, we will use our resources in a new way that will let us experience them as intuitively familiar and not compromised by the passing of time. The emotional appeal of sustainability is precisely that of coming home.

Nostalgia becomes a utopian environmental and social programme. *Nostos*, homecoming, describes the unlimited recuperation or layering of the present that will enable us to experience it as definitively our home; *algos*, suffering, describes the critical work and the material renunciation that are needed for that sustainable habitation to begin. If it is true that one of the characteristic qualities of postmodernity has been an elusive yet pervasive feeling of dislocation and anomie, such that Western culture in the late twentieth century was struck by a generalised and indefinable

feeling of nostalgia (Lowenthal, 1985; Jameson, 1991), then ecological crisis is the way in which this cultural malaise is experienced as a material problem by the 21st century. Our universal homelessness is no longer transcendent, but produced by the corruption of our habitat. The threat of a nostalgia that cannot be satisfied now stems from the danger that we will permanently obliterate our dwellings, and leave ourselves with an impossible longing for clean land, air and water. The solution is not just a re-imagining of the cultural experience of home, but a preservation and restoration of its physical characteristics. Thus, ecology transforms nostalgia, and nostalgia is offered as the only basis for ecologically sound living, albeit with an unnerving lack of awareness that that is what is being done. The intimate connection between the two is no surprise, because it is present in the words themselves. The *oikos*, the dwelling-place, functions here as the home to which the *nostos* is a return.

Sustainability offers us a nostalgia for the future, but this is not the most obvious connection between nostalgia and environmentalism. Nostalgic appeals to what we have lost can be one of the most potent rhetorical tools for green politics. Conversely, one of the most wounding attacks that can be made upon ecological advocacy is that it is merely nostalgic, in the sense of being anti-technological, resistant to progress and to civilization. It is wounding, of course, because it is sometimes true. In recent years, ecological cultural criticism has developed partly through a process of identifying and repudiating its own nostalgic assumptions. Indeed, this might well be regarded as the principal impetus behind the ongoing 'second wave' in ecocriticism, which claims to identify a debilitating essentialism in the way earlier criticism sought to record and recover an experience of truly human 'placehood', supposedly endangered by the encroachment of abstract modern 'space' (Buell, 2005). The 'constant elegy for a lost unalienated state' offered by an analysis that has not freed itself from nostalgia, writes Timothy Morton (2007: 23), 'is like scratching an itch that doesn't exist — thereby bringing it into existence'. In a different tradition, Jonathan Bate proposes an environmentalist or light green ecopoetics that he distinguishes from biocentric deep ecology with the interesting claim that environmentalists value nostalgia as a technique of allegory, whereas deep ecologists make the mistake of taking it literally. The desire of the latter to get away from anthropocentrism is doomed to failure, but environmentalists share their fantasy of the non-instrumental use of reason. Indeed, 'our survival as a species' may depend upon 'thought-experiments and language-experiments which imagine a return to nature, a reintegration of the human and the Other'. The difference is that for Bate, this must remain 'a dream': a space of representation, allegory and play from which our lucid selves maintain a critical distance (Bate, 2001: 36-8).

In short, environmental criticism characteristically desires to keep nostalgia at arm's length. The only nostalgia that can have a place in ecocriticism is the rigorously critical and rational kind: 'a nostalgia conscious of itself, a lucid and remorseless dissatisfaction with the present on the grounds of some remembered plenitude' (Jameson, 1971: 82), or, at best, a '"productive nostalgia"' that is 'embodied and enacted in practice', in an actual return to a defined earlier state (Blunt, 2003: 722). In either case, immersion in nostalgic imaginings must be fended off. The use of nostalgia, on this mindset, is as a resource for argument rather than as a mode of thought, and being exposed as a nostalgist is something to be feared. But I have suggested that ecocriticism cannot and does not keep nostalgia at a safe distance in this way. If it describes its preferred future in terms of sustainability, as apparently it must, then environmentalism enters into nostalgia, and the characteristics of nostalgic thinking will affect the shape of that future. The question is not 'how can ecological writing exploit nostalgia?' but 'how must ecotheory reflect upon and negotiate its own ineliminable, motivating desire for the coincidence of self and dwelling-place?'

In working towards an answer to this question, we might begin by seeing what materials we can draw from the already existing tradition of theorising about nostalgia. The single most influential

recent intervention in nostalgia studies has been made by Svetlana Boym, but the brilliantly articulated distinction between 'reflective' and 'restorative' nostalgia that underpins her work proves to break down under conditions of ecological crisis. Reflective nostalgia is an émigré aesthetic that 'dwells in *algia*, in longing and loss, the imperfect process of remembrance'; it is a savouring of shattered fragments, 'ironic, inconclusive and fragmentary' (Boym, 2001: 41, 50). But that irony presupposes implicitly an enduring groundwork of natural beauty and plenitude against which the transience of human artefacts can be measured and found absurd. If the fragmentation and decay is environmental, and extends to the realm of biological substance from which the self too is formed, then there are no more detached perspectives from which to view the comedy of the world. 'Restorative' nostalgia is for Boym something paranoid and reactionary, a literal-minded attempt to preserve an illusory wholeness just as it slips away from view. Its adherents do not realise that they are being nostalgic, any more than do the environmentalists who defend sustainability on unsentimental humanitarian grounds. Full-spectrum ecological crisis, though, turns the literalism that Boym condemns into the means by which civilization protects itself, and elementary moral commitment demands something closer to 'restorative' nostalgia than to arch 'reflection'.

Susan Stewart's formulations might be more helpful under these conditions, because for her nostalgic desire is always both sceptical or critical *and* naïve or utopian. The nostalgic denies the gap between sign and signified that is the very condition of narrative, and seeks to imagine an alternative kind of narrative in which desire is not marked by the necessity of absence. In the same way, the narrative of human progress that is kept within the bounds of sustainable development will free itself from the threat of irreversible loss, guaranteeing for itself the constant presence of its own material basis. 'The prevailing motif of nostalgia', Stewart writes (1993: 23), 'is the erasure of the gap between nature and culture, and hence a return to the utopia of biology and symbol reunited within the walled city of the maternal'. This reunification of culture with biology is precisely what is promised by sustainability when it tells us that fundamental biological reality, the planet's 'carrying capacity', will be taken up consciously as the frame or presupposition within which all human projects will be pursued. Culture will allow itself to be determined by the demands of nature. The implication of Stewart's thought for our understanding of sustainability is to encourage us to tolerate it as an ideal even as we recognise it to be a form of nostalgia. On her analysis the nostalgic suffers acutely from the desire for an authenticity of origin that is common in some degree to us all. In effect, sustainability articulates a universal longing that we cannot abandon, even though we will never be able to fulfil it completely.

Or perhaps we should look back much earlier. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, nostalgia was principally a medical pathology, a specific physical illness that affected people displaced from their homes and that was the province of doctors rather than cultural theorists. Then, as now in the case of sustainability, it was a matter of life and death, rooted in the question of how rightly to inhabit the land and connected closely to the progress of technology (improvements in transportation might spread the disease, or alleviate it). Moreover, the medical history of nostalgia tells us that it has always been political. As a condition notorious for causing the desertion of soldiers, it could reveal national weakness and incapacity (Starobinski, 1966; O'Sullivan 2006), but it could also justify pride in one's homeland, for a country that could provoke nostalgia was proved to command patriotic feeling. 'Political nostalgia', writes Michael Roth, 'was an expression of the refusal to feel at home in an unjust political regime', and as an illness caused directly by the loss of liberty it could manifest itself as a violent, instinctive refusal of the existing order. '[T]he disease of nostalgia is rooted in facets of our humanity whose "cure" would leave us deeply impoverished, even horribly mutilated' (Roth, 1991: 15, 19). Yet Roth also describes the pathological docility of nostalgic patients, their quiescent retreat from the world to nurse in secret the sorrow that destroyed them.

This passivity can stand as a warning that the sustainable life too might become a hermetic withdrawal or even a form of nihilism, transforming life into a deathly stasis. To identify sustainability as a form of nostalgia is not to dismiss its relevance, but to indicate that it can take up any one of a number of vividly contrasting positions on the need for social change.

For Johannes Hofer, whose celebrated 1688 dissertation coined the word, the disease of nostalgia took the form of a neurotic concentration on the material and the bodily. He described it as a 'continuous quasi-ecstasy of the mind' whereby the idea of the fatherland imprints itself at the centre of the brain and overpowers the flow of animal spirits. Nostalgia occurs '[w]hen, in truth, the mind is able to fancy nothing except of the flesh, and it turns itself to the body by imagination and it observes the image of the physical object' (Hofer, 1934[1688]: 387, 384). Since its very emergence, then, the greatest danger posed by the condition has been the way it immerses its victims too deeply in bodily experience and a single desire, at the cost of the balanced attention to a variety of ends that is needed for functioning existence.

The risk for sustainability is that it too, if not adequately formulated, will find itself able to fancy nothing except of the flesh. Without a pragmatic insistence that we can to some extent predict and indeed influence the physical and moral demands of future generations (we must believe that they will still care about rainforests, for instance), sustainability becomes indistinguishable from the business-as-usual pursuit of economic growth (Norton, 2005: 317-40). Yet this necessary pragmatism is extremely hard to separate in practice from the assumption that the desires of our descendants will be determined by just the same forms of bodily want as we have ourselves. The history of nostalgia warns us that this search for a framing commonality of felt experience can very rapidly become an overpowering and obsessive focus on fundamental physical needs to the exclusion of other goals. Nostalgia can be above all else the erasure of value pluralism, and the problem faced by sustainability is to give an account of its ethical project that cannot be confined to its own first principles in this way. Sustainable living needs to become a means of allowing complex bundles of potentially incompatible goals to emerge and be pursued freely through time; any explicit focus on preserving life as it is lived now might even be directly self-defeating. The transformation of nostalgia from a life-threatening illness into a global ethical programme is itself an example of the kind of radical shifts in outlook that sustainability must constantly make sure it does not disavow.

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